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Author: Arthur Hornblow

Author: Eugene Walter

Illustrator: Joseph Byron

Illustrator: Archie Gunn

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PICKING UP A HAT, LAURA LOOKED AT HERSELF IN THE MIRROR.

The
EASIEST WAY
A Story of Metropolitan Life

By
EUGENE WALTER
AND
ARTHUR HORNBLOW

Illustrations By
ARCHIE GUNN AND JOSEPH BYRON

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The Easiest Way.

A FOREWORD

In presenting this story of a *déclassée* who attempts to redeem her scarlet past by a disinterested, honest attachment only to meet with dire, miserable failure, the authors wish to make it plain that their heroine and her associates are in no way to be identified with the dramatic profession. Laura Murdock represents the type of woman of easy virtue who is sometimes seen behind the footlights and helps to give the theatre a bad name. Although destitute of the slightest histrionic talent, she styles herself an "actress" in order to better conceal her true vocation. As a class, the earnest, hardworking men and women who devote their lives to the dramatic art are entitled to the highest regard and respect. No profession counts in its ranks more virtuous women, more honorable men than the artists who give lustre to the American stage. If such women as Laura Murdock succeed in gaining a foothold on the boards it must be looked upon merely as an unfortunate accident. The better element in the theatre shuns them and their theatrical aspirations are not encouraged by reputable managers.

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THE EASIEST WAY

CHAPTER I.

The hour was late and the theatres were emptying. The crowds, coming from every direction at once, were soon a confused, bewildered mass of elbowing humanity. In the proximity of Broadway and Forty-second Street, a mob of smartly-dressed people pushed unceremoniously this way and that. They swept the sidewalks like a resistless torrent, recklessly attempting to force a path across the carriage blocked road, darting in and out under restive horses' heads, barely rescued by stalwart traffic policemen from the murderous wheels of onrushing automobiles. They scrambled into taxicabs, trains and trolleys, all impelled by a furious, yet not unreasonable, desire to reach home with the least possible delay. These were the wise ones. Others lingered, struggling feebly in the whirling vortex. Not yet surfeited with the evening's amusement, they now craved *recherché* gastronomical joys. With appetites keen for the succulent, if always indigestible, dainties of after-theatre suppers, they sought the hospitable portals of Gotham's splendidly appointed lobster palaces which, scattered in amazing profusion along the Great White Way, their pretentious facades flamboyantly ablaze with light, seemed so many oases of luxurious comfort set down in the nocturnal desert of closed shops.

"Move on there!" thundered an irate policeman. "What the h—ll are you blocking the way for? I've half a mind to lock you fellows up!"

This to two grasping jehus, who, while quarrelling over a prospective fare, had so well succeeded in interlocking their respective wheels that a quarter-of-a-mile-long block resulted instantly. The officer, exasperated beyond endurance, was apoplectic in the face from the too sudden strain upon his temper. Starting angrily forward he seemed as if about to carry out his threat, and the effect of this was magic. The offending cabbies quickly disentangled themselves, and once more the long string of vehicles began to move. Women screamed shrilly, as with their escorts they dodged the horses' hoofs, the trolleys clanged their gongs, electric-signs blinked their pictorial designs, noisy boys yelled hoarsely "final extras!" The din was nerve racking. One had to shout to be heard, yet no one seemed to object. Everybody was happy. New York was merely enjoying itself.

The rush was at its height, when two young men, perhaps weary of being buffeted by the throngs that still pushed up Broadway, turned sharply to the right and entered a fashionable all-night café. Halting for a moment in the richly-carpeted and mirrored vestibule to divest themselves of their outer garments, they pocketed the brass checks handed out by a dapper page and passing on into the restaurant, quietly took seats in an out-of-the-way corner.

The place was already well filled. Nearly all of the small, round tables, crowded too close for comfort, were taken, and the loud chatter of men and women, the handling of dishes, the going and coming of waiters, the more or less labored efforts of a *tzigane* orchestra—all this made a hubbub as loud as that in the busy street without. The people eating and drinking were of the kind usually to be found in Broadway's pleasure resorts—rich men-about-town spending their money freely, hard-faced, square-jawed gamblers touting for business, callow youths having their first fling in metropolitan vice, motor-car parties taking in the sights, old roués seeking new sensations, faultlessly dressed wine agents promoting the sale of their particular brands, a few actors, a sprinkling of actresses of secondary importance, a bevy of chorus girls of the "broiler" type, a number of self-styled "grass widows" living quietly, but luxuriously on the generosity of discreet male admirers, and others still prettier, who made no secret of their calling, but insolently boasted of their profession being the most ancient in the world.

Sartorially at least, the company was eminently respectable. The men, for the most part, wore evening dress and the women were visions of feminine loveliness, in the latest creations of Paris modistes—gowns a duchess might envy, hats that would tempt the virtue of a saint. All were talking loudly, and laughing hilariously as they ate and drank, while pale-faced, perspiring waiters ran here and there with steaming chafing dishes and silver buckets

of frozen "wine." Here champagne was king! The frothy, golden, bubbling, hissing stuff seemed to be the only beverage called for. No one counted the cost. Supplied with fat purses, all flung themselves into a reckless orgy of high living and ordered without reckoning. It was the gay rendezvous of the girls and the Johnnies, the sporting men and the roués—in a word, the nightly bacchanal of New York *qui s'amuse*. In the atmosphere, heavily charged with tobacco smoke, floated a strange, undefinable perfume—an odor in which the vulgar smell of cooking struggled for the mastery with the subtle essences used by voluptuous women. Instantly, animalism was aroused, the passions were inflamed. The mouth watered for luscious *mets* concocted by expensive *chefs*, the eye was dazzled by snowy linen, glistening crystal and the significant smiles of red-lipped wantons, the ear was entranced by the dulcet strains of sensuous music. In short, a dangerous resort for any man, young or old.

It was the Flesh Market, the public mart, to which the frail sisterhood came in droves to sell their beauty. The sirens of Manhattan, lineal descendants of the legendary sisters who, with their songs, lured the ancient mariners to their doom, were there by the hundred, decked out in all the expensive finery that individual taste could suggest and their purses pay for. They were of all types—blonde and brunette, tall and petite, stout and slender—to meet every demand. Mostly young they were; some still in their teens. That was the tragedy of it. Older women had no place there.

Fresh arrivals poured in from the Broadway entrance. Everybody appeared to be acquainted with everyone else; familiar greetings were exchanged right and left. "Hello, Jack!" "Howdy, May!" "Sit down here, Grace!" The waiters rushed away to fill orders for more wine, the orchestra struck up another lively air, the whole establishment vibrated with bustle and excitement.

The two young men watched the animated scene. To one of them at least, it was all novel and strange, a phase of life to which, heretofore, he had been a stranger. John Madison had seen little of gilded vice in the big cities. Although he had knocked about the world a great deal and taken active part in many a stirring scene he had always been a clean man. Born and bred on a Dakota farm, he was still the typical country boy, big and vigorous in physique, with a sane, wholesome outlook on things.

When his mother—a penniless widow—died he was adopted by a tyrannical uncle, a miserly farmer, who made him do chores around the homestead in return for his keep. But the boy detested farming. His young soul yearned for a glimpse of the great outside world, of which he had read and knew nothing, and his desperation grew, until one day he summoned up enough courage to run away.

On foot, with nothing to eat, and only an occasional hitch behind a friendly teamster's wagon, he bravely made his way to Bismarck, fifty miles distant where, after nearly starving to death, he enlisted the sympathies of a kindly grocer, who gave him two dollars a week and his board to run errands. This was not much better than what he had escaped from, but John did not care. At least it was the dawn of independence. Industrious and faithful, he was rewarded in due time by promotion and eventually he might have become a partner and married the grocer's daughter, but unfortunately, or fortunately, as may be, his restless spirit made this programme impossible of realization.

Twenty years of age, and six feet tall in his stockings, he had muscles like steel and nerves of iron. A tall, finely-built type of Western manhood, he had a frank, open face, with clean-cut features, a strong mouth, and alert, flashing eyes, that denoted a quick, nervous energy. In repose his face was serious; when he smiled, revealing fine strong teeth, it was prepossessing. He wore his hair rather long, and with his loose corduroy jacket, top boots, and cowboy hat, suggested the Western ranchman. The girls of Bismarck were all in love with him, and his mere presence doubled the business of the store, but the young man resisted all feminine blandishments. He was ambitious, dissatisfied and restless, A voice within him told him that Nature intended him for something better than selling potatoes; so, taking affectionate leave of the grocer, he went away.

Ten years passed. He prospered and saw a good deal of the world. He traveled East and West, North and South. He was in Canada and down in Mexico; he visited London, Berlin, Paris, New York and San Francisco. His money all gone, he drifted for a time, trying his versatile hand at everything that offered itself. He went to sea and sailed around the Horn before the mast, he enlisted in the army and saw active service in the Philippines. He was cowboy for a Western cattle king, and there he learned to break wild bronchos without a saddle and split apples with a revolver bullet at a hundred yards. He was among the pioneers in the gold rush to Alaska and played faro in all the tough mining towns. Sworn in as sheriff, he one day apprehended single-handed, a gang of desperate outlaws, who attempted to hold up a train.

It was a rough and dangerous life. He was thrown in with all sorts of men, most of them with criminal records. He loved the excitement, yet he never allowed his tough associates to drag him down to their own level. He drank with them, gambled with them, but he never made a beast of himself, as did some of the others. He always managed to keep his own hands clean, he never lost his own self regard. He was quick on the trigger and in time of

overheated argument could go some distance with his fists. Utterly fearless, powerful in physique, he was at all times able to command respect. Above all, he was a respecter of women. He never forgot what his mother once said to him. He was only a lad at the time, but her words had never faded from his memory: "Sonny," she said, "never forget that your mother was a woman." And he never had. In all his relations with women in later life, he had remembered the injunction of the mother he loved. When other men spoke lightly of women in his presence he showed disapproval, if their character was attacked he championed their cause, if confronted with proofs, he flatly refused to consider them. Yet he was neither a prig nor a prude. He enjoyed a joke as well as any one, but at the same time he did not let his mind run in only one channel, as some men do. He pitied rather than blamed the wretched females who frequented the miners' camps. More sinned against than sinning, was his humane judgment of these unhappy outcasts, and when he could, he helped them. Many a besotted creature had him to thank when the end came and short shrift little better than that accorded a dead dog awaited her—that at least she got a decent burial. The boys knew his attitude on the woman question, and it was a tribute to the regard in which they held him that, in his hearing at least, they were decent.

Meantime, John Madison was educating himself. There was no limit to his ambition. With the one idea of studying law and going into politics, he attended night schools and lectures and burned the midnight oil devouring good books. He sent to an enterprising journal of Denver a vividly written account of his exploit with the train robbers. With the newspaper's cheque came an offer to join its staff. That was how John Madison became a reporter, and incidentally explained why, on this particular evening, he happened to be in New York. Sent East in connection with a big political story, he had run across an old acquaintance, Glenn Warner, a young New York lawyer, and accepted his invitation to theatre and supper.

"I'll take you to a swell joint," he laughed. "It'll amuse you. It's the swiftest place in town."

In personal appearance, the young attorney presented a sharp contrast to his stalwart companion. Slight in physique, with sandy hair scrupulously parted in the middle and nattily dressed, he was of the conventional type of men colloquially described as "well groomed." That the restaurant, and its people, were an old story to him, was apparent by the nods he exchanged and the familiar greeting he gave the waiter. After he had decided on the order, he proceeded to give John thumb-nail biographies of some of the most conspicuous of those present.

"See that fat, coarse-looking hog over there? Look—he's flashing a bank roll thick enough to choke a horse. That's Berny Bernheim, the bookmaker. His gambling house on West Forty-fourth Street is one of the show places of the town. It's raided from time to time, but he always manages to get off scot free. He has a pull with the police."

Pointing in another direction, where a stately blonde in a big Gainsborough hat, trimmed with white plumes, sat languidly sipping champagne in company of a gray-haired man old enough to be her grandfather, he went on:

"That girl with the white feathers is Lucy Graves. Don't you remember—five years ago—a Lucy Graves shot and killed a man, and then hypnotised the jury into acquitting her. That's the girl. Since then she's been on the stage—a vaudeville act—\$1,000 a week they say. A month ago she was again in trouble with the police—caught playing the badger game. I don't know who the old chap is—a new 'sucker' I imagine."

There was a slight commotion at the main entrance as a fat, bald-headed, red-faced man entered, followed by several women, all beautifully gowned. Warner, who had caught sight of the party, whispered *sotto voce*:

"That's Sam Solomon, the famous criminal lawyer. He's just been indicted by the Grand Jury. Only a miracle can save him from a long prison term. He's had a box party at the theatre. He usually has a string of women after him. That's where his money goes—women and wine. The girls call him a good thing."

Madison looked amused.

"Where are the respectable folk?" he laughed. "Have all the people here got a police record?"

"Most all," was the laconic rejoinder. "Hello, Elfie—when did you come in?"

This last exclamation was addressed to a tall, attractive brunette, who was just pushing past their table in a crowd. She was young and vivacious looking, and her voluptuous figure was set off to advantage in an expensive gown. Evidently she knew the lawyer well, for she greeted him familiarly:

"Hello, Glenn—I didn't see you."

"Alone?" he asked quickly.

"Yes—for a while," she answered airily.

He made a place for her on the bench.

"Sit down here and have something."

"I don't mind if I do," she smiled amiably.

Slipping past the two men into the seat she looked inquiringly at Madison. The lawyer made introductions.

"This is a friend of mine—John Madison—Miss Elfie St. Clair." Jocularly he added: "Well known on the metropolitan stage."

Madison smiled and nodded. The girl eyed him with interest. He was a type of man not often seen in the gay resorts of Manhattan. Impulsively she burst out:

"Say, Glenn—your friend's a good looker, do you know it? Better take care, or he'll cut you out with the girls." Turning to Madison, she demanded: "From the West?"

He nodded.

"Yes—Denver."

"Seeing New York, eh? Great fun, ain't it?"

He shrugged his massive shoulders and made no reply, finding more amusement in watching the crowd than in gratifying the curiosity of this chatterbox. She turned to Warner.

"Got a grouch, ain't he?"

Warner laughed.

"Oh—that's his manner. Don't mind him." Turning the conversation, he demanded: "What's new?"

The girl glanced all around the restaurant, as she answered:

"Oh, the same old thing! In feather one week—broke the next. You know how it is."

"I thought you were playing."

"So I was, but the show busted. It was a bully part, and I spent \$150 on dresses. All I got was two weeks' salary. When the dresses will be paid for, the Lord only knows."

Elfie St. Clair was a typical Tenderloin grafter. A woman absolutely devoid of moral conscience, she styled herself an actress, yet was one only by courtesy. By dint of pulling all kinds of wires she contrived from time to time to get a part to play, but her stage activities were really only a blind to conceal her true vocation. A cold-blooded courtesan of the most brazen and unscrupulous type, she was, notwithstanding, one of the most popular women in the upper Tenderloin. She dressed with more taste than most women of her class, and her naturally happy disposition, her robust spirits and spontaneous gaiety had won her many friends. For all that she was an unscrupulous grafter, the kind of woman who deliberately sets out to lure men to destruction. She knew she was bad, yet found plenty of excuses for herself. She often declared that she hated and despised men for the wrong they had done her. Imposed upon, deceived, mistreated in her early girlhood by the type of men who prey on women, at last she turned the tables, and armed only with her dangerous charm and beauty, started out to make the same slaughter of the other sex as she herself had suffered, together with many of her sisters.

While still in her teens she came to Broadway and entering the chorus of one of the local theatres, soon became famous for her beauty. On every hand, stage-door vultures were ready to give her anything that a woman's heart can desire, from fine clothes to horses, carriages, jewels, money, and what not. But at that time there was still some decency left in her, the final sparks of sentiment and honest attachment were not yet altogether extinguished. She fell in love with an actor connected with the company, and during all the time that she might have profited and become a rich woman by the attention of outside admirers, she remained true to her love, until finally her fame as the premier beauty of the city had begun to wane. The years told on her, there were others coming up as young as she had been, and as good to look at, and she soon found that, through her faithfulness to her lover, the automobile of the millionaire, which once waited at the stage door for her, was now there for some one else. Yet she was contented and happy in her day dream, until one day the actor jilted her, and left her alone.

That was the end of her virtuous resolves. From then on, she steeled her heart against all men. What she had lost of her beauty had been replaced by a keen knowledge of human nature. She determined to give herself up entirely to a life of gain, and she went about it coldly, methodically. She knew just how much champagne could be drunk without injuring the health; she knew just what physical exercise was necessary to preserve what remained of her beauty. There was no trick of the hairdresser, the modiste, the manicurist, or any one

of the legion of queer people who devote their talents to aiding the outward fascinations of women, with which she was not familiar. She knew exactly what perfumes to use, what stockings to wear, how she should live, how far she should indulge in any dissipation, and all this she determined to devote to profit.

She had no self delusions. She knew that as an actress she had no future; that the time of a woman's beauty is limited. Conscious that she had already lost the youthful litheness of figure which had made her so fascinating in the past, she laid aside every decent sentiment and chose for her companion the man who had the biggest bank roll. His age, his position in life, whether she liked or disliked him, did not enter into her calculations at all. She figured out that she had been made a fool of by men, and that there was only one revenge, the accumulation of a fortune to make her independent of them once and for all. She had, of course, certain likes and dislikes, and in a measure, she indulged them. There were men whose company she preferred to that of others, but in the case of these, their association was practically sexless, and had come down to a point of mere good fellowship.

"Seen Laura lately?" asked the lawyer suddenly, after Elfie had given the waiter her order.

"No—not for some days."

Warner looked surprised.

"I thought you and she were inseparable. You haven't quarreled, have you?"

The girl laughed.

"Quarreled—no. Laura's too sweet a girl to quarrel with. Only you know how it is. We're both so busy, with our eye on the main chance, that there isn't much time for anything else. Besides, she's been playing more or less ever since the season opened. I didn't see her in that last piece, but they say she was fine. Of course, it was Brockton's influence that got her the part. I expect to see her here to-night."

"So she's still stuck on Willard Brockton, eh?"

With a light laugh, she replied quickly:

"Laura's not the kind of girl to be 'stuck' on anybody—at least I hope she isn't. She used to be inclined to get sentimental at times—she thought she was in love and all that sort of thing. I soon knocked that nonsense out of her head. 'Laura' I said—'you've no time to fool. You won't be fresh and pretty all your life. Make hay while the sun shines. It's time to fall in love when you get old and faded and wrinkled. Business before pleasure every time.' You know, Brockton has been very good to her. She was lucky to find such a steady. She has money to burn, a luxurious apartment, automobiles, influence with the managers. What more could she want? She'd be a fool to give up all that." Raising her glass to her lips, she looked with a smile towards Madison.

"Here's how!" she said with mock courtesy.

But the big Westerner was paying no attention to them. Silent, engrossed, he was intent watching the gay crowd around him, studying with deep interest the faces of these painted courtesans, who brazenly came to this place to offer themselves. He wondered what their childhood had been, to what disastrous home influences they had been subjected to bring them to such degradation as this. Most of them were coarse and vulgar-looking wantons, with rouged cheeks and pencilled eyebrows, but others seemed to be modest girls, refined and well bred. These were plainly in their novitiate. Surely, he pondered, such a shameless calling must be revolting to them; the better instincts of their womanhood must rebel at the very shame of it. He believed that here and there, behind the rouge and forced hilarity, he could detect signs of an aching heart, a woman secretly filled with anguish. It gave him a sickening feeling of repulsion. Others saw only the outward gaiety of the scene; but he saw still deeper. He realized its tragic significance and it filled him with disgust and horror.

Suddenly his attention was attracted to a young girl who had just entered the restaurant. She was gowned magnificently enough even to be conspicuous among that crowd of well-dressed women, and she wore a large picture hat, crowned by expensive plumes. Close behind was her escort, a middle-aged, stockily built man, with iron-gray hair, also immaculately dressed. As the couple passed, the people at the tables turned and whispered. When the newcomer drew nearer, Madison could see that she was very young, and he was struck by her laughing, dimpled beauty. She appeared little more than a child, and the manner in which she was dressed—girlish fashion, with her wealth of blonde hair caught back by a ribbon band—carried out the illusion completely. Her complexion was so fair and fresh, her sensitive lips so red and full, and delicately chiseled, such a look of childish innocence was in her light blue eyes, that he wondered what she could be doing among such questionable company. He concluded that the couple had wandered in by mistake, not knowing the true character of the place. Turning to Warner, he said in an undertone.

"Look at that young girl—the blonde with white plumes—coming this way escorted by the man with the smooth face and gray hair! Surely she is not an habitu  of this joint!"

The lawyer laughed as he quickly drew Elfie's attention to the new arrivals.

"Really, old chap—you're so green you're funny! Don't you know who she is? Why—that's Laura Murdock—the cleverest of them all!"

CHAPTER II.

If Laura Murdock was not quite so young as she looked, she was far from appearing her real age, which was twenty-five. A casual observer at most, would have accorded her twenty. In her case Nature had been unusually kind. Her skin was soft as a new-born infant's, her complexion fresh as the unplucked rose, her expression innocent and unsophisticated. A priest unhesitatingly would have given her absolution without confession. Her baby face, her childish prettiness and air of unaffected ingenuousness, her good taste in dress, her natural refinement, and cleverness in keeping men guessing had been, indeed, the chief keystones of her success. And, most remarkable of all, perhaps, was that she had been able to retain this prettiness and girlishness after what she had gone through, for, at the time this narrative opens, Laura Murdock had already lived a career which would have made a wreck of most women.

Born in Melbourne, of English parents, she came at an early age from Australia to San Francisco. Her father was connected in a business capacity with one of the local theatrical companies, and the young girl naturally drifted to the stage. She had only a mediocre histrionic talent, but what was perhaps more important, she had uncommon good looks, and she soon found that beauty was not only a valuable asset, but a sure lever to success. The critics praised her, not because she acted well, but because she dressed exquisitely, and pleased the eye. Managers and authors flattered her. Soon she found, to her amazement, that she was the success of the hour. Stage Johnnies raved about her; sent her flowers and invited her to supper; women envied her, and said spiteful things. Portraits of her in various attitudes appeared in the newspapers and magazines. In a single night she was carried high on the top wave of sensational popularity.

The outcome was only logical. Even a virtuous woman could not stand the strain, and Laura was not virtuous. Of neurotic temperament, inherently weak, if not actually vicious in character, with the spirit of the courtesan strong within her from an early age, fond of luxury and personal adornment she could not legitimately afford, it was not surprising that she listened to the flatterers and went to the devil quicker than any woman before her in the whole history of gallantry. At the end of her first season, her reputation was completely in tatters. Accepting the situation philosophically, she did not pretend to be better than she was, but she was clever enough not to cheapen herself by entangling herself too promiscuously. She had lovers by the score, yet none could boast of having really won her heart. A woman of superficial emotions, she was entirely without depth, yet so long as it suited her purpose, she was able to conceal this shallowness and profess for the admirer of the moment the greatest affection and devotion. This is an art and she was an adept at it. Sensually she quickly attracted men, and it was not long before she became a prime favorite in the select circles that made such resorts as "The Yellow Poodle" and "Moreland's" famous, yet in her dissipations she was always careful not in any way to indulge in excesses which would jeopardize her physical attractiveness, or for one moment diminish her keen sense of worldly calculation.

One day, obeying a foolish impulse, she married. The venture was, of course, a failure. Her selfish vacillating nature was such that she could not remain true to the poor fool who had given her his name. To provide the luxuries she incessantly demanded, he embezzled the funds of the bank where he was employed, and when exposure came, and he was confronted with a jail sentence, she was horrified to see him kill himself in front of her. There was a momentary spasm of grief, a tidal wave of remorse, followed in a few brief weeks by the peculiar recuperation of spirits, beauty and attractiveness that so marks this type of woman. Gradually she became hardened and indifferent. She began to view life as a hunting field, in which the trophy went to the hardest rider. Deceived herself by men, she finally arrived at that stage of life known in theatrical circles as "wised up."

Coming to New York, she attracted the attention of a prominent theatrical manager, and was given a part, in which she happened to make a hit. This was enough to immediately establish her reputation on the metropolitan stage. The fact that before reaching the age of womanhood, she had had more escapades than most women have in their entire lives, was not generally known in Manhattan, nor was there a mark upon her face or a single coarse mannerism to betray it. She was soft voiced, very pretty, very girlish, yet she was no fool. Her success did not turn her head or blind her to her shortcomings as an actress. She realized that in order to maintain her position she must have some influence outside of her own ability, so she laid plans to entangle in her net a hard-headed, blunt and supposedly soubrette-proof theatre manager. He fell victim to her charms, and in his cold, stolid way,

gave her what love there was in him. Still not satisfied, she played two ends against the middle, and finding a young man of wealth and position, who could give her in his youth an exuberance of joy utterly apart from the character of the theatrical manager, she allowed him to shower her with presents. When his money was gone, she cast him aside and demurely resumed her relations with the unsuspecting theatre manager. The jilted lover became crazed, and one night at a restaurant, attempted to murder them both.

From that time on, her career was a succession of brilliant coups in gaining the confidence and love, not to say the money, of men of all ages, and all walks of life. Her powers of fascination were as potent as her professions of reform were insincere. She never made an honest effort to be an honest woman, she never tried to do the square thing. Yet, like other women of her type, she found all sorts of excuses for her wrongdoing. She pretended that she was persecuted, a victim of circumstances, and was ever ready to explain away the viciousness of character, which was really responsible for her troubles.

In spite of her success on the stage, she was an indifferent actress. Her lack of true feeling, her abuse of the dramatic temperament in her private affairs, had been such as to make it impossible for her sincerely to impress audiences with genuine emotional power, and therefore, despite the influences which she always had at hand, she remained a mediocre artist.

Her meeting with Willard Brockton was, from her point of view, the best possible thing that could have happened. Brockton was a New York stock broker, and like many men of his tastes and means, was a good deal of a sensualist. Of morals he frankly confessed he had none, yet he was an honest sensualist for he played the game fair. He never forgot that he was a gentleman. He was perfectly candid about his *amours* and never expected more from a woman than he could give to her. He was honest in this, that he detested any man who sought to take advantage of a pure woman. He abhorred any man who deceived a woman. The same in love as in business, he believed that there was only one way to go through life, and that was to be straight with those with whom one deals. A master hand in stock manipulation and other questionable practices of Wall Street, he realized that he had to pit his cunning against the craft of others. He was not at all in sympathy with present-day business methods, but he did not see any particular reason why he should constitute himself a reformer. Although still in the prime of life, he cared nothing for society and held aloof from it. If he went to the trouble to keep in touch at all with people of his own set, it was simply for business reasons. What he seemed to delight in most was the life of Bohemia, with its easy *camaraderie*, its lax moral code, its contempt for the conventions. He enjoyed the company of women of facile virtue, the gay little supper parties after the theatre, and the glass that inebriates and cheers, in a word, he enjoyed going the pace that kills. He was a man of many *liasons*, but none were as serious or had lasted so long as his present pact with Laura Murdock. No woman before had been clever enough to hold him. He appeared very fond of her, and completely under her influence. His friends shook their heads, looked wise, and took and gave odds that he would be so foolish as to marry her.

The couple took seats at a table, the cynosure of all eyes. Every head turned in their direction, conversations were temporarily suspended and there was much whispering and craning of necks, to get a glimpse of the young woman whose reputation, or lack of it, was already so notorious. Far from being embarrassed at this display of public interest, Laura seemed to enjoy the attention she excited. Languidly sinking into her seat, she said to her escort with a smile:

"Don't they stare? You'd think they had never seen a woman before."

Brockton laughed as he lit a fresh cigar.

"How do you know they're staring at you? I'm not such a bad looker myself."

Laura ran over the menu to see what there was to tempt her appetite.

"Bring me some lobster," she said to the waiter.

"And a bottle of wine—Moët and Chandon white seal," broke in Brockton, "*frappé*—you understand, and make it a rush order. I have to get away in a few minutes."

Laura pursed her delicately chiseled lips together in a pout. She liked to do that on every possible occasion, because, having practiced it at home before the mirror, she thought it looked cunning.

"You're surely going to give yourself time to eat a bite, aren't you?" she cried in affected dismay.

The broker looked at his watch.

"I must be in Boston early to-morrow morning. The express leaves the Grand Central at 12:15. I've just time to drink a glass of wine and sprint for the train. That's why I kept the taxi waiting outside. I hate to go. I assure you I'd much rather sit here with you. But go I must."

As far as his *amours* were concerned, women of the Laura Murdock and Elfie St. Clair type appealed strongly to the broker. Not only did he enjoy their bohemianism and careless good-fellowship, but he entered fully into the spirit of their way of living. He professed to understand them and in a measure to sympathize with them. Entirely without humbug or cant, he recognized that they had their own place in the social game. They were outcasts, if you will, but interesting and amusing outcasts. He rather liked the looseness of living which does not quite reach the disreputable. Behind all this, however, was a high sense of honor. He detested and despised the average stage-door Johnny, and he loathed the type of man who seeks to take young girls out of theatrical companies for their ruin. Otherwise he had no objection to his women friends being as wise as himself. When they entered into an agreement with him there was no deception. In the first place, he wanted to like them; in the second place he wanted them to like him. His iron-gray hair, contrasting with their youth, not only made him look like their father, but his manner towards them was distinctly paternal. He insisted also on their financial arrangements, being kept on a strictly business basis. The amount of the living expenses was fixed at a definite figure and he expected them to limit themselves to it. He made them distinctly understand that he reserved the right at any time to withdraw his support, or transfer it to some other *inamorata*, and he gave them the same privilege. While he consulted only his own selfish pleasures, Brockton was not an uncharitable man. He was always ready to help anyone who was unfortunate, and at heart he sometimes felt sorry for these women who had to barter their self respect to indulge their love of luxury. He hoped that some of them would one day meet the right man and settle down to respectable married life, but he insisted that such an arrangement could be possible only by the honest admission on the woman's part of what she had been and the thorough and complete understanding of her past by the man involved. He was gruff and blunt in manner, yet well liked by his intimates. They thought him a brute, almost a savage, but almost every one agreed with Laura that he was "a pretty decent savage." She and the broker had been pals for two years, and she had never been happier in her life. He was most generous with his money and his close relations with several prominent theatrical managers made it possible for him to secure for her desirable engagements. There was no misunderstanding between them. He knew exactly what she was and what she had been. He any way. He always told her that whenever she felt it inconsistent with her happiness to continue with him, it was her privilege to quit, and he himself reserved the same right. As far as such an irregular marital relation as this could be said to be desirable, it was an ideal arrangement.

"How long will you be gone?" asked Laura, as she toyed with a lobster claw and glanced around the café, to see who was there.

"I've no idea," answered Brockton. "I may return day after to-morrow or I may be detained there a week or longer. It's a big job, you know—in connection with floating a big issue of railroad bonds. There's a barrel of money in it. I may not get back before you go to Denver."

The girl looked up at him quickly, and laying down her knife and fork, leaned across the table. Resting her dimpled chin on her ungloved and tapering hands, which were covered with blazing stones, she said with more genuine feeling than she had yet shown:

"Oh, Will—it was awfully good of you to get me that engagement and let me go. A number of girls I know were after it—some with far more experience than I've had. They're all crazy to play stock at this time of year. Of course, I don't need the money as much as they do, but I'm fond of acting and it's a bully way to spend some of the summer. Besides, I think the air out there—the high altitude—will do me lots of good."

"That's all very well," rejoined the broker with a grimace of mock despair, "but what am I going to do all alone in this dusty, thirsty town, while you're playing Camille, and what not under the shady trees at Denver? I'm an ass to stand for it."

She laid a consoling hand on his arm.

"No, you're, not. You're a darling boy. You know I had my heart set on getting that stock engagement, and you went to all kinds of trouble to make the manager let me have it. Really, Will—I can't say how grateful I am! I won't be so long away—only six short Weeks—and if you like you can come to Denver and bring me East again. It'll be awfully jolly traveling home together, won't it?"

Brockton looked at her and smiled indulgently. He was only joking, just to see how she would take it. Of course he would let her go. He would be a selfish brute if he played the tyrant and consulted only his own convenience.

"All right, kid," he said kindly. "Go and enjoy yourself. Never mind about me—I'll jog along somehow. I'll miss you, though. I don't mind telling you that. When you're ready to come home, just telegraph and I'll take the next train for Denver. If you need any money, you know where to write me. Meantime, put this in your inside pocket."

He pressed his strong fingers down on her open palm, and closed her hand. Opening it, she found five new crisp one hundred dollar notes. A crimson glow of pleasure spread over her face and neck. For a moment she was unable to stammer her thanks.

"Oh, Will—you are so good!"

"That's nothing," he laughed lightly, "have a good time with it. Buy what things you need. You understand—that is only a little extra pin money. Your regular weekly cheque will be sent to you at Denver."

All she could say was to repeat:

"Oh—Will—you are so good!"

He lifted his glass and looked whimsically at her through the dancing bubbles of the foaming champagne. In a low voice he said:

"Here's to my little girl! May she tread the stage of Denver with the grace and charm of an Ellen Terry and return to New York covered with new laurels!"

Calling for the bill, and tossing a ten dollar note to the waiter, he rose hastily:

"I hate to go and leave you here alone, but I must catch that train."

"Oh, don't mind me," she replied, smiling up at him. "I'll stay a few minutes yet." Nodding towards the left, she added: "I see Elfie over there. I'll sit with her. Don't worry about me. I'll go home in a taxi."

He took her hand. He would have liked to kiss her, but like most men, he hated to make public demonstration of his feelings.

"Good-bye, little one," he said fondly. "Be a good girl. Write me directly you get to Denver. Be sure to send me all the press notices——" Facetiously he added: "—all the bad ones mind. I'm not interested in the others. And when you're ready to come home, just telegraph, and I'll come for you. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye, Will."

The next moment he was gone.

For some time after his departure she sat quietly at the table, toying idly with the rich food in front of her. Absorbed in her own thoughts she paid no attention to what was transpiring around. She was singularly depressed that evening, she knew not why. It was very foolish, for she had every reason to feel elated. Things certainly continued to go her way. After all the storm and stress of her past life, she was at last settled and contented. She had plenty of money, a good friend, influence with the theatre managers, and now she had secured the very engagement she had been longing for. What could any reasonable woman possibly desire more? Yet for all that she sometimes felt there was something missing in her life. She was too intelligent not to know the degradation of the kind of existence she was leading, and sometimes the realization of it made her utterly miserable. If it were not for the champagne and the hourly excitement which helped her to forget, she sometimes felt she would take her life. In her heart she knew that she did not love Will Brockton, and she believed him too clever a man to imagine for a moment that she had any real affection for him. They were pals, that was all. He liked her very much—she was sure of that. But it was not love. How could a woman of her character expect to inspire decent love in any man? There was a careless, unconventional tie, which could be broken to-morrow. A quarrel, and she would see him no more. She shivered. The mere thought of such a contingency was decidedly unpleasant. It's so easy, she mused, to become accustomed to automobiles, luxurious apartments, fine gowns and the rest, but so hard—oh, so hard!—to learn how to do without them.

Emptying her glass, she rose from her seat and strolled toward where Elfie St. Clair was still sitting with the two men.

"Hello, Laura!" cried her friend as she came up. "We saw you from the distance. Come and sit down. These gentlemen are friends of mine—Mr. Warner—Mr. Madison—Miss Murdock."

The men bowed, while Elfie made room for the newcomer.

"Won't you take something?" asked Warner politely.

"No, thank you—I've just had a bite."

"Why did Mr. Brockton run away?" demanded Elfie, unable to restrain her feminine curiosity. His sudden departure was unusual enough to suggest a lover's quarrel.

"He had to catch a train—important business in Boston," replied Laura carelessly. Impulsively she burst out: "Oh, Elfie—what do you think? I got that stock engagement after all. I'm perfectly daffy about it. I play leads in 'Camille,' 'Mrs. Dane's Defense,' and such plays as that."

"Where is it?" demanded Elfie.

"In Denver. Don't you remember? I told you I was after it?"

"Denver? Why that's where Mr. Madison comes from."

Both girls turned and looked at the big Westerner. Laura regarded him with more attention. If this man was from Denver, he might be useful to her. She was not the kind to neglect anything that was likely to promote her interests. Looking him well over, she noted his big, muscular frame, his steel-gray eyes, and determined, prognathous jaw. It was a type of manhood that was new to her. He was decidedly worth cultivating.

"You live in Denver?" she said, trying on him the effect of her dimpled smile, which was irresistible to most men.

He nodded carelessly.

"Yes—I'm with one of the newspapers there."

"Oh!"

She was glad now that she had come over to Elfie's table. Decidedly this man would be very useful. It is always a good thing to know journalists. It suggested favorable paragraphs and good notices in the papers. She remembered what a philosophical chorus girl once told her: "Rather a good press agent than great talent." Forthwith Laura exerted herself to be very amiable. She laughed and chatted and when Madison, in his turn, ordered a bottle of wine, she graciously allowed him to drink to her success.

"But you must help me!" she said coquettishly.

"Sure!" he answered gayly, half in jest.

She inquired about Denver, the life there, the theatres, and their audiences. She asked his advice as to the best hotel for her to stop at, questioned him about his own life and work, and sought to flatter him by appearing to take interest in everything he said.

The small hours of the morning still found them there. When at last they parted, she said in that arch, captivating way, which none better than she knew how to employ:

"We will be good friends, won't we?"

"You bet we will!" was his laconic, careless rejoinder.

CHAPTER III.

Denver, Colorado,

June 15, 19—.

Dear Will:

I've made good all right. The management is delighted and already wants me to sign for next year. My notices are wonderful. They say I'm great. I enclose some of the newspaper dope. It's been awful fun. You should have seen me as the tuberculous Camille, expiring to slow music in Armand's arms. It was a scream. I had to bite the property bedclothes to keep from exploding outright. But the scene went fine. People sobbed all over the house.

Denver's a peach of a place. Fancy—I found a big "Welcome" arch up—no doubt in honor of my arrival—and it's been up ever since. Seriously, I'm a big social success—invited everywhere—tea parties, church gatherings and other choice functions. Can you imagine yours truly, demure and penitent, taking part in bazaars, solemnly presided over by elderly spinsters in spectacles? You ask why I don't write more regularly. My dear boy—if you only knew how busy I am, what with rehearsals, social duties and so forth! What nonsense to imagine for a moment that it was because my time was taken up by some other man. You must think I'm foolish. No, no, dear—not quite so dippy as that. No other charmer for mine while my Will is good to me. Write soon to

Your own

LAURA.

P.S.—How's dear old Broadway these days? If you see Elfie, tell her to write.

Colorado, land of enchantment, possesses at least one distinct advantage over other states of the Union. Apart from the rugged grandeur of its scenery, its lofty, awe-inspiring peaks and stupendous cañons, the climate is perhaps without its equal in the world. Denver, particularly, is richly favored in this respect. Situated near the foothills of the Rockies, on a high, broad plateau, sheltered by the majestic mountains from the fierce storms and blizzards that sweep the plains, the winters are delightfully mild and salubrious. Owing to the great altitude the atmosphere is pure and dry and in the hot months the breezes which blow almost continuously from the snow-capped heights of Pike's Peak, make the air deliciously cool, with a temperature rarely rising above the eighties. For this reason Denver is almost as popular a summer resort with those who live in the Middle West, as Colorado Springs, Manitou, and other fashionable places.

Nor does this picturesque mountain capital with its 200,000 population, lack in up-to-date comforts and amusements. It has beautiful homes, fine hotels, good theatres. Its people are cultured and discriminating. They hear the best music and see the latest comedies. In the winter, Paderewski plays for them; Sembrich sings for them; Mrs. Fiske and Maude Adams act for them. In the summer they applaud at an open air theatre pleasantly set among the shady trees, the latest Broadway successes performed by a stock company especially engaged in New York. It was as leading lady of this organization that Laura Murdock made her début in Denver.

As already intimated, Mr. Brockton's protégée was not a good actress; she was not even a competent actress. Deficient in mentality, lacking any real culture, she failed utterly to rise to the opportunity offered by the rôles with which she was entrusted. Fortunately for her, summer audiences are not highly critical. Her youth and beauty pleased, and the local reviewers, susceptible like ordinary mortals to the charms of a pretty woman, were unusually indulgent. Some of them paid doubtful compliments, but what they said of her acting sounded good to Laura, who eagerly cut out the notices and mailed them to Brockton.

So far her summer season had been a decided success. She liked Denver and Denver liked her. This she considered most fortunate, for it suited her purpose to make such a hit of this engagement that the echo of it would reach as far East as Broadway. It would give her better standing with the theatre managers in New York and put a quietus for good on comment in unfriendly quarters. A clever tactician with an eye always open to the main chance, she exerted herself to the utmost to make friends and neglected no opportunity to advance her interests. She attended church regularly and made liberal donations to the local charities. When entertainments were organized on behalf of the poor, she volunteered her services, which were gratefully accepted. Thus her local popularity grew and was firmly and quickly established.

The papers spoke eulogistically of her goodness of heart, interviewed her on every possible pretext and published portraits of her by the score. Society soon followed suit. The best people of the town took her up and the women gushed over her. She was such a young little thing, they said, so ingenuous and interesting, so refined, so different from most actresses. Sorry that she should be all alone in a strange place, exposed to the temptations of a big city, they took her under their wing, and invited her to their homes. One lady, particularly, was most cordial in her invitation. Her name was Mrs. Williams, and Laura met her at a church picnic. The wife of a millionaire cattle king, she owned a handsome house in Denver and a beautiful country home near Colorado Springs. Mrs. Williams took a great fancy to the demure young actress and declined to say good-bye in Denver until Laura had promised to go and spend a week with her at her country ranch.

"It's a lovely spot, dear," she said. "I'm sure you'll enjoy yourself. My house is perched up on the side of Ute Pass, and overlooks the whole Colorado Canon, two thousand feet below. It is a wonderful spectacle. You must come. I won't take a refusal."

Laura promised, willing enough. She would be glad of the rest after her weeks of hard work.

Of John Madison she had seen a great deal. Following her old tactics, she had started out to fascinate the tall newspaper man, expecting to find him an easy victim. For once, however, she found that she had met her match. Directly she arrived in Denver she sent him her card, and he called at the hotel, his manner courteous, but distinctly cold. He had not forgotten, however, the promise made in New York, and he offered to give her such help as he could. Aware of his close connection with the local newspapers, she was glad to accept his offer to act as her press representative. She even offered to pay him, but he flatly declined, and the covert smile that accompanied the refusal made her angry.

"Why do you refuse?" she demanded. "Are you so rich?"

"I'm dead broke," he answered dryly. "But you see, I'm a queer fellow—there are certain things I can't do—one of them is to take money from a woman."

On another occasion, when she went a little out of her way to show him attention he said, with brutal candor:

"Don't waste your time on me. I'm only a poor devil of a newspaper man. There are plenty of fatter fowl to pluck. Denver's full of softheads with money to burn."

She hated him for that speech. His careless words and disdainful attitude cut her sensitive nature to the quick. Evidently he despised her.

Yet for all that, he did not neglect her interests. For two weeks after her arrival and previous to her *début*, she was the most written about person in town. The papers were full of her. It was invaluable advertising and she tried to show her appreciation in other ways, inviting him to dinner, and sending him little presents. But still he held aloof, letting her understand plainly that he knew her record and was not to be hoodwinked or inveigled. The truth was, that women of her class did not interest him. Indeed, they filled him with aversion, yet he pitied rather than condemned them. "One never knows," he used to say when the question came up with his men friends, "what kind of a life they were up against, or to what temptations they were subjected. The most virtuous woman alive could not swear exactly what she would do if confronted with certain conditions." This was a pet theory of his, and it made him more charitable than others.

Meantime, he was studying Laura at close range. He found that she was weak rather than really vicious. There was much of the spoiled child in her make-up. Her bringing up had been bad. In different environments she might have been entirely different. There was much in her that attracted him. He liked her merry disposition, her girlish ingenuousness. Such a naïve nature, he argued, could not be wholly depraved. He frankly enjoyed her society, and it was not long before he let down the barriers of his reserve. Laura was quick to notice the change, and she would have belied her sex if it had not given her pleasure. Madison interested her; he was refreshingly different from all the men she had ever met. She wondered what his life was. At every opportunity she encouraged him to speak of himself.

"Do you like this newspaper work?" she demanded, one day.

He shook his head.

"No; there is nothing in it," he answered. "When a big story breaks loose—a strike or a murder, or a bank robbery—one likes the excitement, but when things quiet down the dull routine palls on you. I won't stay in it."

"Then what will you do?"

"Hike it up to the Northwest—and dig for gold," he replied. Confidentially he went on: "I have the chance of a quarter interest in a mine up there. If I strike luck, I'll be richer than Croesus."

"And then?" she smiled.

"Then I'll come back and marry you!" he said laughingly.

It was said lightly, but like many words uttered in jest, it sounded as if there might be some truth back of it. Both grew silent and the subject was quickly changed.

While mortified at her discomfiture, Laura thought more of the big fellow for his attitude of utter indifference. She had been so pampered and courted all her life that it was a novelty to find that she made absolutely no impression on this one man. Her respect for him grew in consequence. Gradually, he, too, seemed to take more pleasure in her society. He called more frequently and became more friendly. He was still on his guard, as if he still distrusted her—or perhaps himself—but he did not avoid her any longer.

The theatre naturally took up most of her time. When not acting, she was rehearsing new rôles. It was interesting work, and she felt it was valuable experience. Madison declared she had improved wonderfully, and, in his enthusiasm, wrote eulogistic articles about her in the papers that were copied far and wide. Indeed, she could thank him for all the success she had had. He was at the theatre every night, watching her from the front, taking the liveliest interest in her success, and promoting it in every possible way. A critic who ventured to find fault he threatened to horsewhip; he put her portrait in the papers and printed interesting stories concerning her that had only his imagination for foundation. He transacted business for her with the local manager, and acted in her behalf in all the necessary negotiations with the Church Bazaar committees.

Before very long they were the best of friends. Laura found him not only useful, but a delightful companion. What time could be spent from rehearsals, she spent with him. In the familiar, intimate, theatrical style, they already called each other by their first names. They went out horseback riding together, and he took her for long automobile trips, showing her many of the wonderful places with which Colorado abounds. They played golf at Broadmoor, and fished black-spotted trout in South Platte river. They drank health-giving waters at Great Spirit Springs, and viewed the reconstructed ruins of the prehistoric cliff-dwellers at Manitou. They traveled on the cog railroad to the dizzy summit of Pike's Peak, and visited the busy gold-mining camp at Cripple Creek. Here Madison was on familiar ground. He showed his companion the manner in which man wrests the coveted treasure from Nature,

the whole process of mining, the powerful electric drills, the ponderous machinery, the ore deposits in the hard granite. He pointed out the miners' cabins on the mountainsides, replicas of the rough log huts in Alaska in which he, himself, had lived. It was all very interesting and so novel that for the first time in her life Laura felt the delightful sensation of seeing something new. Time had no longer any significance to her. The days and weeks sped by so pleasantly that she gave no thought to returning East. Sometimes she even forgot to write her weekly letter to Mr. Brockton. She marveled herself that she could be so happy and contented far away from the alluring glitter of the Great White Way.

Then all at once the truth dawned upon her, and the revelation came with the suddenness and force of an unexpected blow. She was in love with this man. All these weeks, unknown to herself, quite unconsciously, she had been slowly falling desperately, madly, honestly and decently in love. The man she left behind in New York, the man to whom she owed everything, did not exist any more. John Madison was the man she loved.

At first she tried to laugh it off as being too absurd. She, Laura Murdock, with her ripe experience of the world and many adventures with men—to fall in love like a silly, sentimental schoolgirl! It was too ridiculous. How the Rialto would laugh if they knew. Of course, they never would know, for there was nothing in it. The Westerner probably did not care two straws for her. He liked her, of course, or he would not bother to waste his time with her, but, no doubt, he thought of her only as a friend, a lively companion who kept him amused. No doubt, too, he knew her record and secretly despised her. Even if he did not care for her and told her so—even if he were willing to marry her, what then? She would be a fool to listen to him. What kind of a life could he, a penniless scribbler, give her compared with the comforts and gifts which Willard Brockton was able to shower upon her?

Above all else, Laura had sought to be practical in life. She often declared that it was one of the secrets of her success. It was late in the day, therefore, to make a mistake of which only an unsophisticated beginner could be guilty. Yet, much as she tried to laugh it off and reassure herself, the matter worried her. When, mentally, she compared the two men, the advantage invariably remained with the younger. John was nearer her own age, they had in common many tastes and interests which the broker cared nothing about, and she felt more exuberant, more youthful, in the newspaper man's society. Brockton, she could not help remembering, was more than double her age. It would be unnatural if she had not found the younger man more congenial. In her heart she felt that Brockton, with all his money, had no real hold upon her, and that if John really did care for her and asked her to marry him, she would be face to face with the hardest question for which she had ever had to find an answer.

CHAPTER IV.

Early one morning John came to the hotel to take Laura for a prearranged excursion. Temporarily out of the bill at the theatre, and a long holiday being hers to enjoy, she had suggested a little trip to Manitou to see the far-famed Garden of the Gods, a place of scenic marvels, where, by a strange freak of Nature, great rocks and boulders, fantastic in shape and coloring, are thrown together in all kinds of curious formations. The plan was to go by train as far as Colorado Springs, and then finish the journey by automobile.

They started gleefully, by rail, and were soon spinning across the verdant plains in the direction of Pike's Peak, the snow-capped peak of which rose majestically in the distance. The day was beautiful, and both being in good spirits, they enjoyed to the full the fresh, invigorating air.

On reaching Colorado Springs, they partook of an appetizing luncheon, served merrily under the trees. She laughed and chattered and discussed plans for the future, while John, strangely silent, just looked at her, quietly enjoying her spontaneous gaiety, surprised himself at the keen interest he was taking in her society. And the more he watched her laughing eyes and dimpled smiles, the more he realized the loneliness, the solitude of his own empty, aimless life. The summer would soon be at an end. The past few weeks had sped by all too quickly for him, and in the interval this girl, with her vivacious manner and laughing eyes, had strangely grown upon him. What would he do when she was gone? When the meal was finished, he went in search of a machine. An expert chauffeur himself, they could manage the car without aid, and soon they were running smoothly and rapidly along the mountain roads.

Laura chatted continuously while John kept a watchful eye in front. As they flew along under the murmuring pines, he pointed out the various places of interest. The machine was running fast, with the going none too smooth, when, all at once, while making a sharp turn, the wheels skidded, and they were almost ditched. Laura gave a little scream, and, instinctively, grasped her companion's arm. He laughed to reassure her, and, giving the

wheel a vigorous twist, the car was again under control and once more on its way.

Laura had always felt nervous in automobiles, even in New York, where she was accustomed to go at a much slower pace. But to-day, in spite of the mishap they had just escaped, she had no fear. She knew that John was a splendid driver, watchful, resourceful, careful. With his immense strength and skill, the machine seemed but a toy in his hands.

She watched him furtively, admiring him. This was no city roué, his constitution undermined by dissipation. He was good to look at, wholesome, frank, virile. Perhaps if she had met him earlier, her life might have been very different. She might have been a respectable woman. She could have loved such a man as this. She did love him—she was sure of it now. There was no mistaking the feeling he inspired in her. Once, he chanced to glance down, and caught her looking intently at him.

"What's the matter?" he smiled.

"Nothing," she answered gravely.

Soon they reached their destination. The automobile came to a stop, and, getting down, she took his arm, and together they approached the imposing gateway of the far-famed Garden of the Gods. When she passed through the red perpendicular portals of the place, Laura was filled with awe. It was the first time she had beheld this unique and beautiful demonstration of Nature, and she could not repress her enthusiasm. In the wildest flights of her imagination, she had never pictured such a scene as the one now presented to her eyes. It was as if she had been suddenly transported to fairyland, and was treading among the colossal habitations of giants. On all sides were stupendous masses of rock, huge boulders of all colors—white, yellow and red—most fantastically shaped. There were lofty towers, strange, wind-wrought obelisks, pointed pinnacles, bizarre in shape as one sees in nightmares. It reminded her of the settings of Wagner's music dramas and the weird pictures of Gustave Doré. She admired the Graces, lofty fragments of strata shaped like obelisks. Then there was the Cradle, a huge rock so nicely balanced that it seemed as if a child's touch could send it crashing from its pedestal, yet probably it had stood there since creation day. Other rocks, strangely colored, were standing on end in all kinds of extravagant postures. Some were shaped like fierce animals; others resembled faces, houses, men. It seemed like a vision of another world, a glimpse of some vanished people, a race of titanic beings who had suddenly been petrified into stone. The place was deserted. There was no one there but themselves. A sepulchral silence hung heavy over everything. It was as mournful and awe-inspiring as a city of the dead.

By the time they had seen all the wonders of the garden the sun was low on the horizon. A glorious crimson glow shot up out of the west, and, flooding the heavens, tinged each surrounding object with rich color. Tired after the day's adventures, they sat on a bench at the base of a tall stone pillar, which, in the growing dark, seemed like a colossal sentinel standing guard in a camp of giants. Madison was very silent. Deep in his own thoughts, he paid little attention to his companion.

"How quiet it is!" murmured Laura, almost to herself, as she contrasted the heavy stillness of the place with the roar and excitement of Broadway.

"How lonely!" added Madison. Bitterly he exclaimed: "It reminds me of my own life."

Quickly she looked up at him. It was unusual for him to speak of himself.

"Are you lonely?" she demanded.

He nodded.

"Often."

She looked puzzled, not understanding.

"Why are you lonely? You are young and strong and clever. The world is before you——"

He remained silent for a moment, without replying. In the uncertain light of the late afternoon, she could see that his eyes were fixed steadily on her. In them was a look that every woman understands, be she pure or impure. Then slowly, his deep, bass voice beautifully modulated, he said gravely:

"I am lonely because I am alone. All these years, ever since I was a boy, I have spent my life alone. I have had many so-called friends—yes; but even friends do not satisfy the longing to have some one still nearer and dearer, some one to whom you can turn in trouble, some one who will be always there to share in your joys. Work—yes, I can work, but why should I strive and toil? For myself? Bah—I'm sick of it all. To live alone, as I do, is not worth the effort it costs. Sometimes I think I'd just as soon blow out my brains as not. What's the use of straining every nerve and sweating blood to make a success in life if there's no one to share success with when it comes?"

She understood. A thrill ran through her entire being. Her heart throbbed violently and her lips trembled as she said gently:

"Why don't you marry? Any girl would consider herself fortunate if she could go through life with such a man as you."

Suddenly she winced. His big, muscular hand had caught hers and was holding it firmly in an steel-like grip. Bending over so close that she felt his warm breath on her cheek, he said hoarsely:

"Do you mean that? Would you give up all that you have now—to marry me?"

Something rose up in her throat and choked her. Her heart beat furiously as though it would burst. What she had foreseen and dreaded was upon her.

"I?" she gasped in unaffected surprise.

"Yes, you," he said fiercely. "You must have seen what has been in my heart for days—that I care for you. The first moment I set eyes on you I knew that you were just the kind of girl I wanted for a wife. At first I was afraid of you. I had heard things about you—gossip and all that. You came here. We were thrown together. I still mistrusted you, but I watched you, and saw you weren't as bad as I'd been led to believe. I guess people have lied about you. What do I care what they say? You're good enough for me. I soon found out that I loved you. I'm a man of very few words. I'm not an adept at pretty speeches. Tell me—will you marry me?"

She made no reply. It was now almost dark, and he could not see her face plainly. Hoarsely he repeated:

"Did you hear me? I want you to marry me."

She shook her head.

"It's impossible," she murmured. "It's impossible."

"You don't care for me—I've made a fool of myself. Is that it?"

She laid her gloved hand gently on his hand.

"I do care for you."

"Then why is it impossible?" he demanded fiercely. He put his arm around her and tried to draw her to him.

Quietly, but firmly, she disengaged herself, and it was with some show of dignity that she replied:

"Because I care for you—just because of that."

"You are not free?" he demanded.

She hesitated.

"It is not that—there is another reason."

"What is it?"

At first she was tempted to deceive him and keep up for his benefit her masterful assumption of innocence. But what was the good? He would soon know her real record, if he did not already know it. Kind friends would soon enlighten him, and then he would despise her the more. A man of such broad experience was not to be hoodwinked so easily. No, it was folly to beat about the bush. At one time she might have seized the happiness he held out to her, but now it was too late.

"What is it?" he persisted. "Do you mean that man Brockton? Is he the obstacle?"

"He is one of them," she answered firmly. She was astonished at her own self-possession, but there was a quiver in her voice as she went on: "My life has been different to what you perhaps think. I am not altogether to blame, although I have no excuses to offer. You understand now?"

She half expected an explosion of wrath, but none came. Instead, he said calmly:

"I know all about your past life. I've known everything from the first: how you went to San Francisco as a kid and got into the show business, and how you went wrong, and then how you married—still a kid—and how your husband didn't treat you exactly right, and then how, in a fit of frenzied drunkenness he came home and shot himself."

The girl leaned forward and buried her face in her hands. A low moan escaped her lips. Madison touched her gently on the shoulder.

"But that's all past now," he went on. "We can forget that. I know how you were up against it, after that; how hard it was for you to get along. Then, finally, how you've lived, and—and that you and that man Brockton have been—well—never mind. I know all this, and still I ask you to marry me. What is past makes no difference. I don't care what you have been but only what you are. If you think you care enough for me to leave this man and begin life anew with me, I'll marry you. I may not be able to give you all the luxuries his money provided, but at least, as my wife, you'll be able to lift your head up in the world. I don't profess to be a saint myself. I'm no better and no worse than the next man, and I'm not unreasonable enough to expect too much in a woman who has had to make her own way in the world—especially on the stage. There's some good in you, yet, Laura; I believe in you. Something tells me that you'll make good if only given half a chance, and that chance I hold out to you now. Break away from this rotten life you've been leading. It can end only in one way. You're young now, and you're beautiful, and it doesn't seem to matter, but some day your youth and beauty will be gone, and what then? Quit now, while there's still time. Be my wife. I'll work hard for you, and, with God's help and you to inspire me, I'll get there!"

She listened in silence. His melodious, earnest voice sounded like sacred music in her ears. It was a glimpse of Heaven that he gave her, a promise of redemption and regeneration, yet her heart told her that it was impossible. If she consented, what would the outcome be? One day, sooner or later, he would regret having married her and would taunt her with her past. They would not be able to take a step in New York but some one would point derisively at her.

"It's impossible," she murmured weakly.

"Why?" he persisted.

"Give me time to consider," she pleaded.

"I'll give you until to-morrow."

With that, he released her, and went to light the lamps of the automobile. It was now quite dark, and it required skilful manoeuvring to find the right road. The return home was silent; each was engrossed in thought. At the door of the hotel he merely pressed her hand.

"To-morrow," he whispered.

All night long she tossed feverishly. Sleep was out of the question. In a few hours she must decide what her future life would be—the petted, pampered mistress of Willard Brockton, wealthy member of the New York Stock Exchange, or the wife of John Madison, an interesting but impecunious newspaper reporter. If she married this man, it meant that she must relinquish immediately everything she loved—her sumptuous apartment on Riverside Drive, her automobile, her beautiful gowns, and gay little midnight champagne suppers in good company. Her life henceforth would be dreadfully prosaic and commonplace. She would be comparatively poor, perhaps in actual want. Even if she remained on the stage, she could not hope to secure good parts. Probably she would not be able to dress even decently; no one would look at her; she would have to darn stockings and be content with one hat a season—all this was a picture depressing and discouraging enough to one who had been accustomed to all the luxuries money can buy.

On the other hand there would be compensatory advantages not to be ignored. As John Madison's legitimate wife, she could once more take her place in the world as a virtuous woman. She could again lift up her head and look decent people honestly in the face. She would be the lawful wife, entitled to regard, not the despised paramour, a plaything to be discarded and thrown aside at a man's whim. Once more she would be able to feel respect for herself. At heart Laura was not a bad girl. She was weak and luxury loving, and, when tempted, had been unable to resist entering into a style of living which suited her own peculiar tastes. She had paid the price with a light heart, but as she grew older she was becoming wiser. She realized what an awful price she was paying for her fun. She knew that, with the sacrifice of her chastity, she had surrendered everything a self-respecting woman holds dear, all for what—a few glittering trinkets! In what was she better than a common wanton? And what would her end be, but the end of all women of her kind? When her youth had passed and her beauty had faded, her admirers would grow cold and indifferent. Abandoned by all, friendless and homeless, she would go unwept to an early grave.

The thought was one to fill her with horror. Why not try to save herself now, while there was yet time? She still had a chance. A drowning man will grasp even at a straw. She was not irretrievably lost. The devil might still be cheated of a victim. This man believed in her; he offered to make her his honored wife. He forgave the past and held out a generous hand to save her. A revulsion of feeling suddenly shook the girl to the innermost recesses of her being. Burying her face in her pillow, she burst into a flood of tears. For the first time in her life, her better instincts were awakened.

She would show the world that it had misjudged her, that she was not as bad as she seemed. Her future life, her future conduct should redeem all that had gone before. Perhaps

the Almighty would be merciful and hold out a forgiving hand. She might still be a happy, decent woman. With a prayer on her lips, she dropped down on her knees. The following-day this telegram flashed over the wires to New York:

"Theatre closes next Saturday night. You needn't come for me. Am invited to spend a week with a lady at Colorado Spring's. Will return to New York alone. LAURA."

A few hours later this message was received in reply:

"Am compelled to go to Kansas City on business, so will pick you up anyhow. Leave address at Denver hotel. WILL."

CHAPTER V.

Mrs. Williams' ranch house at Colorado Springs was universally admitted to be a show place even among the many magnificent summer residences with which this fashionable resort is dotted. Perched high on the side of the famous Ute Pass, a wildly picturesque spot, so called because the Ute Indians used it as a favorite trail across the mountains, and commanding an unobstructed view of the beautiful valley below, it was a conspicuous landmark for miles. The house, unusually pretentious for a country home, and built of reddish rough stone in the Greek style of architecture, was two stories high, with a square turret on one side and a low, broad roof overhanging a stone terrace. Massive stone benches, also of Greek design, and strewn with cushions, were placed here and there, while over the western terrace, shading it from the afternoon sun, was suspended a canopy made from a Navajo blanket. The well-kept grounds, with trailing vines around the balustrades, groups of marble statuary, a fountain of a marble Venus gracefully splashing water into a wide basin in which floated large, white lilies, privet hedges, artistically clipped to represent all kinds of fantastic figures, rattan lounging chairs, and tables with the leading papers and magazines—all suggested a home of culture and wealth. So close was the house to the edge of the declivity that at one end the terrace actually overlooked the cañon, a sheer drop of 2,000 feet, while across the yawning chasm, one could see the rolling foothills and lofty heights of the Rockies, with Pike's Peak in the distance, snow-capped and colossal.

For more than a week Laura had been Mrs. Williams' guest. The rich society woman had taken a great liking to the young actress, and would not hear of her departure. An inveterate bridge player, she insisted on Laura staying, if only to learn the game. So, partly because she was unwilling to give offense, partly because she was comfortable and happy there, and at the same time near the man she loved, she had consented to remain a little longer. But only for a few days, she insisted. Autumn was already at hand. There was no time to lose. She realized that if she wanted to find a good engagement for the coming season she must return to New York at once, for, from now on, there would be no influence to aid her. To secure future engagements she must rely on her own efforts alone.

She did not regret the step she had taken. On the contrary, for the first time in her life, she felt perfectly happy and carefree. When, the day following their excursion to the Garden of the Gods, he had come to the hotel for her answer, there was very little said. Her eyes spoke to him, and he understood.

"Very well, John," she said simply.

He turned very pale, and, drawing her to him, kissed her solemnly.

"It's until death, little one!"

"Until death!" she repeated gravely.

Then they both sat down together and enthusiastically began to make plans for the future.

It was not without due premeditation that Madison had entered into this affair. He was not the kind of man to undertake anything lightly. Everything he had done in his life had been long and well thought out. He liked this girl and he wanted her for his wife. Both her beauty and her personality pleased him. He knew that she was not the kind of woman to whom men usually give their names, but he had never been conventional. He ridiculed and scoffed at the conventions. He made his own social laws and cared not a rap for the good or bad opinion of the world. If there had been opportunities to meet decent women, of good social standing, he had always thrown them aside with the exclamation that such women bored him to death, and in all his relations with the opposite sex there had never entered

into his heart a feeling or idea of real affection until now. He fell, for a moment only, under the spell of Laura's fascination, and then, drawing aloof, with cold logic he analyzed her and found out that while outwardly she had every sign of girlhood ingenuousness, sweetness of character and possibility of affection, spiritually and mentally she was nothing more than a moral wreck. At the beginning of their acquaintance he had watched with covert amusement her efforts to win him, and he had likewise noted her disappointment at her failure—not, he believed, that she cared so much for him personally, but that it hurt her vanity not to be successful with this big, good-natured, penniless bohemian, when men of wealth and position she made kneel at her feet. From afar he had watched her slowly changing point of view, how from an artificial ingenuousness she became serious, womanly, sincere. He knew that he had awakened in her her first decent affection, and he knew that she was awakening in him his first desire to accomplish things and be big and worth while. So, together, these two began to drift toward a path of decent dealing, decent ambition, decent thought and decent love, until at last they had both found themselves, acknowledged all the badness of what had been, and planned for all the goodness of what was to be.

Laura's immediate task, and assuredly it was both a difficult and unpleasant one, was to acquaint Will Brockton with her determination. That the news would astonish him, was certain. She also thought that he would be sorry. In his indifferent, selfish way, she believed that he cared for her—perhaps more than for any of the other women he had known. She knew him too well to believe that he would make a scene. He was too much the gentleman and man of the world for that. He would accept the situation philosophically. Besides, any opposition on his part would be in direct violation of their agreement, that it was her privilege to quit whensoever she might choose. She was considerably put out at first when she received his telegram telling her that he was coming to Denver to fetch her back, and her first impulse was to send a wire to stop him. She thought she would prefer to wait and tell him in New York. But, on consideration, she did nothing of the kind. Perhaps it were better to have it over with at once. Why make a mystery of it? There was nothing to conceal. The sooner every one knew it the better.

He had reached Denver that morning, and, finding she had already left Colorado Springs, followed here there post haste. He arrived at Mr. Williams' villa, *débonnair* and immaculate, as usual, and in the kindly paternal manner characteristic of him, he saluted Laura with a chaste kiss.

"Why, kid, how well you look!" he exclaimed heartily.

Laura was looking her best that morning. She had not expected Brockton so soon. Indeed, she had dressed to please John, who came to see her every afternoon. Her gown, made of summery, filmy stuff, was simple, girlish and attractive. Her hair, arranged in the simplest fashion, was parted in the center. There was about her that sweetness and girlishness of demeanor which had been her greatest asset through life.

Embarrassed, and temporarily at a loss how to account to her hostess for the broker's presence and evident intimacy, the young girl introduced him as—her uncle. It was not the first white fib she had told in her life, and it was one of the least harmful. With ready tact, she quickly added that Mr. Brockton was a skilful bridge player. This was enough to insure his welcome. Mrs. Williams, impressed with the visitor's talents and aristocratic appearance insisted on his staying to dinner, which cordial invitation he politely accepted. Diplomatically, he burst into extravagant raptures over the beauty of the view.

"What a magnificent panorama! This is worth coming a thousand miles to see."

Visibly pleased, Mrs. Williams smiled:

"I hope you will afford me the privilege of entertaining you a few days. We could show you views still more beautiful."

Brockton bowed.

"You are very kind, madame. I regret exceedingly that business calls me immediately back to New York."

"But not before you've shown us your skill at bridge," she laughed. "We're having a game inside now. I'll be pleased to have you join us."

"I shall be delighted," he bowed.

The old lady reentered the house to join her friends, and he turned quickly to Laura:

"When can you get ready?"

She made no answer. Apparently she had not heard. Sitting at the end of the terrace, she leaned over the balustrade of the porch, looking intently into the cañon below, as if expecting to see some one, her eyes shielded with her hands from the hot afternoon sun. Approaching her, Brockton repeated the question.

"When can you get ready?"

She started as if suddenly surprised in some secret reverie.

"Ready? What for?"

"Why—to go back to New York, of course."

"New York?" she echoed.

"Yes," he said mockingly, "New York. Why, Laura, what's the matter? You seem dazed. Didn't you ever hear of a little old place called New York?"

She laughed nervously.

"Don't be silly." Passing her hand over her forehead, she said: "I'm a little stupid to-day—I think it's the sun."

At that moment a maid servant approached the broker.

"Mrs. Williams wishes me to show you to your room, sir," she said.

"All right," replied Brockton, turning to follow her. To Laura, he said: "I'll go and brush up. Wait for me here. I'll be back in a minute."

Laura sat motionless, watching the winding road, which, like a long, undulating ribbon, led up the declivity out of the valley. Straining her eyes, she tried to make out the little cloud of dust that would warn her of John's approach. She wondered what detained him. He said he would come at four o'clock, and now it was nearly five. Yet, perhaps, it was just as well. It would hardly do for the men to meet until she had had her talk with Will. The critical moment had come. She must tell Brockton everything. Nothing must be held back. He must be told that she had finished with him forever.

In a few minutes Brockton reappeared, smoking a cigar. Clean-shaven and comfortable in a Tuxedo coat, he had the air of a man at peace with himself and the whole world. Laura was still sitting where he had left her. With her head resting on one hand in a meditative manner, she was so intently watching the road that she did not look up as he approached. He watched her for a moment without speaking. Then slowly removing his cigar from his mouth, he asked laconically:

"Blue?"

She shook her head.

"No."

"What's up?"

"Nothing."

"A little preoccupied?"

"Perhaps."

Still she did not turn her head, yet her heart was beating fast. This was her opportunity. He looked in the same direction she was looking.

"What's up that way?" he demanded.

"Which way?"

"The way you are looking."

"That's the road from Manitou Springs. They call it the trail out here."

Brockton nodded.

"I know that. I've done a lot of business west of the Missouri."

The girl gave a half-yawn of indifference.

"I didn't know it," she said.

"Oh, yes," he went on; "south of here, in the San Juan country. Spent a couple of years there once."

"That's interesting," replied Laura, with another yawn, and still not turning her head.

With a chuckle of self-satisfaction, he went on:

"It was then that I made some money there. It's always interesting when you make money. Still——"

"Still what?" she asked absent-mindedly.

He looked at her, as if surprised at her manner. Somewhat impatiently he said:

"I can't make out why you have your eyes glued on that road. Some one coming?"

"Yes."

"One of Mrs. Williams' friends, eh?"

Crossing to the other side of the terrace, he seated himself in one of the comfortable lounging chairs.

"Yes," answered the girl.

"Yours, too?" he asked dryly.

"Yes."

"Man?"

"Yes, a *real* man."

There was no mistaking the significance of these last words, which she uttered with strong emphasis, as if they came right from the heart.

The broker sat up with a start. At first he was too surprised to speak, but quickly he regained his composure, and gave vent to a long, low whistle, which was inaudible to his companion. Carelessly throwing his cigar over the balustrade, he rose from his seat, and stood leaning on another chair a short distance away. Laura, meantime, had not moved, except to place her left hand on a cushion and lean her head wearily against it. She still sat motionless, her gaze steadfastly fixed on the road in the pass. Brockton broke the rather awkward silence.

"A *real* man?" he echoed. "By that you mean——"

"Just that," she said testily, "a real man."

He gave an imperceptible shrug with his shoulders, and his tone was tinged with irony as he inquired with forced mildness:

"Any different—from the *many* you have known?"

"Yes," she retorted; "from *all* I have known."

He laughed derisively.

"So that's why you didn't come into Denver to meet me to-day, but left word for me to come out here?"

"Yes."

"I thought I was pretty decent to take a dusty ride half-way across the continent in order to keep you company on your way back to New York, and welcome you to our home, but maybe I had the wrong idea."

She nodded, and almost mockingly replied:

"Yes, I think you had the wrong idea."

"In love, eh?" he chuckled.

"Yes," she answered firmly. "Just that—in love."

He smiled grimly.

"A new sensation?"

"No," she retorted quick as a flash, "the first conviction."

He left the seat on which he was leaning, and approached nearer to where she still sat crouched.

"You have had that idea before," he said ironically. "Every woman's love is the real one when it comes. Do you make a distinction in this case, young lady?"

"Yes," she answered.

"For instance, what?"

She rose to her feet, and, going to a chair, sat carelessly on one of the arms, drawing imaginary lines on the ground with her parasol. He could see that she was highly nervous and trying hard to control herself. Quickly she said:

"This man is poor—absolutely broke. He hasn't even got a good job. You know, Will—all the rest, including yourself, generally had some material inducement——"

The broker gave a snort of impatience, and, going to the table, picked up a magazine, and made a pretense of becoming deeply interested in its contents. But his fit of sulks did not last long. Looking up, he growled:

"What's his business?"

"He's a newspaper man."

"H'm-m! Romance, eh?"

"Yes, if you want to call it that—romance."

"Do I know him?"

She shook her head and smiled.

"I hardly think so. He has been to New York only once or twice in his life, and he's not the kind of man one usually finds in your set."

Brockton sat looking at her with an amused, indulgent, almost paternal expression on his face. In contrast with his big, bluff physical personality, his iron-gray hair and bull-dog expression Laura appeared more youthful and girlish than ever. A stranger catching a glimpse of the terrace might have taken them for father and daughter engaged in an intimate chat.

"How old is he?" he demanded.

"Thirty." Instantly she added: "You are forty-five."

"No," he corrected dryly; "forty-six."

Laura laughed. She saw that his good-humor had returned. At least there was no immediate danger of his doing anything desperate. The nervous tension was over for the time being. Rising and going near to him, she asked archly:

"Shall I tell you about him, eh?"

The broker looked serious.

"That depends."

"On what?"

"Yourself."

"In what way?" she demanded.

He hesitated and looked at her for a moment in silence before he replied:

"If it will interfere with the plans I have made for you and myself."

The girl turned her head. Coldly, she said:

"Have you made any particular plans for me that have anything particularly to do with you?"

Lighting another cigar, he said with assumed nonchalance:

"Why, yes. I have given up the lease of your apartment on West End Avenue and bought a house on Riverside Drive. I thought you would like it better. Everything will be quiet and nice. It'll be more comfortable for you. There's a stable nearby. Your horses and car can be kept there. I'm going to put the house in your name. That way you'll be your own mistress. Besides, I've fixed you up for a new part."



"I'VE BOUGHT A HOUSE FOR YOU ON RIVERSIDE DRIVE."

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CHAPTER VI.

Laura gasped, and opened wide her eyes. A house of her own on Riverside Drive! She had always wished for that; it had been the dream of her life. Why—it meant that independence, wealth were already hers! She need have no more gnawing anxiety about the future. The price? Well, had she not paid it already? Perhaps she had been foolish. The world is hard—one never gets the credit for trying to be decent. Who would care? Yes—one would. She saw a pair of honest gray eyes seeking hers and questioning her, demanding if she had been true to their oath—"until death!"

"A new part!" she faltered. "What kind of a part?"

A covert smile played about the broker's lips. He had noted her hesitation, and well he knew the weight of his words. He had not studied women all these years for nothing. Carelessly he went on:

"One of Charlie Burgess's shows, translated from some French fellow. It's been running over in Paris, Berlin, Vienna, and all those places for a year or more, and appears to be a tremendous hit. It's a big production, and it's going to cost a lot of money to do it here. I told Charlie he could put me down for a half-interest and I'd give all the money, provided that you got an important rôle. Great part, I'm told—just the kind of thing you've been looking for. Looks as if it might stay in New York all season. That's the change of plan. How does it strike you?"

Laura averted her face and made no reply. Going to the edge of the terrace, she leaned against the balustrade, and gazed once more into the depths below. The sun had already begun to set behind the distant mountain-tops, and the cañon was beautiful in its tints of purple and amber.

"How does it strike you?" he repeated.

"I don't know," she replied without turning her head.

He rose from his seat and strolled towards her. The good-humor had faded out of his face. The lines about his mouth were more tightly drawn. It was evident that his patience was exhausted and that he was becoming angry. But Brockton never made a scene. No matter how incensed he might be, he never lost his *sang froid* or forgot his manners. Quietly he asked:

"Feel like quitting?"

"I can't tell," she replied in the same indifferent tone.

"So it's the newspaper man, eh?"

"That would be the only reason."

Turning quickly, he placed himself in a position so that he faced her. Looking her steadily in the eyes, he said slowly:

"You've been on the square with me this summer, haven't you?"

She instantly noted the change in his tone. Her face grew a shade paler, but she looked up at him without flinching. Quickly she said:

"What do you mean by 'on the square'?"

"Don't evade," he exclaimed, slightly raising his voice. "There's only one meaning when I say that—and you know it. I'm pretty liberal, Laura, but you understand where I draw the line——" Sternly and more slowly he added: "You've not jumped that, have you?"

The girl tossed her head haughtily. There are some questions no one may ask or answer. She looked him straight in the face. He could read nothing there. Quietly she said:

"This has been such a wonderful summer, such a wonderfully different summer." It was her turn to be ironical when she added: "Can you understand what I mean by that, when I say 'a wonderfully different summer'?"

The broker smiled in spite of himself.

"So—he's thirty and 'broke,' and you're twenty-five and pretty. He evidently, being a newspaper man, has that peculiar gift of gab that we call romantic expression. So I guess I'm not blind. You both think you've fallen in love. That it?"

"Yes," replied the girl gravely. "I think that's about it, only I don't agree with the 'gift of gab' and the 'romantic' end of it. He's a man and I'm a woman, and we've both had our adventures. His are more respectable than mine, that's all." Musingly, as if to herself, she added: "I don't think, Will, that there can be much of that element which some folk describe as hallucination. We know what we're about."

Picking up from the table a box of candies which the broker had brought her, she selected one of the sugared delicacies and popped it in her mouth. Brockton walked up and down with long, nervous strides. The girl's calmness disconcerted him. With all his experience, he was at a loss how to handle her. Perhaps he might try a final shot.

"Then the Riverside Drive proposition and Burgess's show offer are off, eh?" he said sharply.

Hesitatingly she answered:

"I don't say that."

"And if you go back on the Overland Limited day after to-morrow," he went on bitterly, "you'd just as soon I'd go to-morrow or wait until the day after you leave!"

"I didn't say that, either," she replied, replacing the candy box on the table.

He stopped short.

"What's the game?" he demanded impatiently.

"I can't tell you now."

"Waiting for him to come?"

"Exactly."

"Think he's serious, eh?"

"I know he is."

"Marriage?"

"Possibly."

He laughed ironically.

"You've tried that once," he said, "and taken the wrong end. Are you going to play the same game again?"

"Yes—but with a different card," she answered.

"What's his name?"

"Madison—John Madison."

Picking up a magazine, she slowly turned the pages.

"And his job?"

"I told you—a reporter."

The broker gave a low and expressive whistle. Sarcastically he inquired: "What are you going to live on—extra editions?"

"No, we're young, there's plenty of time," she answered calmly. "I can work in the meantime and so can he. With his ability and my ability it will only be a matter of a year or two when things will shape themselves to make it possible."

Brockton chuckled to himself.

"Sounds well—a year off."

Irritated at his facetious tone and bantering manner, the girl plainly showed her resentment. Her face flushed, and, throwing down the magazine, she went towards the door of the house. Petulantly she cried:

"If I had thought you were going to make fun of me, Will, I wouldn't have talked to you at all."

Quickly he made a step forward and intercepted her.

"I don't want to make fun of you, but you must realize that after two years it isn't exactly pleasant to be dumped with so little ceremony. Maybe you have never given me any credit for possessing the slightest feeling, but even I can receive shocks from other sources than a break in the market."

She stopped and looked at him kindly. Her voice was softened as she said:

"It isn't easy for me to do this, Will. You've been awfully kind, awfully considerate, but when I went to you it was just with the understanding that we were to be pals. You reserved the right then to quit me whenever you felt like it, and you gave me the same privilege. Now, if some girl came along who really captivated you in the right way, and you wanted to marry, it would hurt me a little—maybe a lot—but I should never forget that agreement we made, a sort of two weeks' notice clause, like people have in contracts."

The broker turned away, visibly moved. Striding up to the edge of the terrace, he stood looking down into the cañon. Laura remained where he had left her, looking after him. There followed a long silence, which at length he broke.

"I'm not hedging, Laura. If that's the way you want it to be, I'll stand by just exactly what I said." Turning and looking at her, he went on: "But I'm fond of you, a damned sight fonder than I thought I was, now that I find you slipping away; but if this young fellow is on the square——"

She approached him and slipped her hand in his. He went on:

"If he's on the square, and has youth and ability, and you've been on the square with him, why, all right. Your life hasn't had much in it to help you get a diploma from any celestial college, and if you can start out now and be a good girl, have a good husband, and maybe some day good children, why—I'm not going to stand in the way. Only, I don't want you to make any of those mistakes that you made before."

"I know," she smiled sadly, "but somehow I feel that this time the real thing has come and with it the real man. I can't tell you, Will, how much different it is, but everything I felt before seemed so sort of earthy—and somehow the love that I have for this man is so different. For the first time in my life it's made me want to be truthful and sincere and humble. The only other thing I ever had that I cared the least bit about, now that I look back, was your friendship." Impulsively throwing her arms around him, she added: "We have been good pals, haven't we?"

He smiled as he fondled her.

"Yes; it's been a mighty good two years for me. I was always proud to take you around, because I think you are one of the prettiest things in New York."

Playfully, her good spirits once more in the ascendant, she jumped into the armchair with a little girlish laugh. He went on:

"You're always jolly and you never complained. You spent a lot of money, but it was a pleasure to see you spend it, and what's more, you never offended me. Most women offend men by coming around looking untidy and sort of unkempt, but somehow you always knew the value of your beauty and you always dressed up. I always thought that maybe some day the fellow would come along, grab you, and make you happy in a nice way, but I thought that he'd have to have a lot of money. You know, you've lived a rather extravagant life for five years, Laura. It won't be an easy job to come down to cases and suffer for the little dainty necessities you've been used to."

She sat leaning forward, her chin resting on her hands, a serious, far-away expression on her face. Slowly she said:

"I've thought all about that, and I think I understand."

"You know how it is," he went on. "If you were working without anybody's help, you might have a hard time getting an engagement. As an actress, you're only fair."

Laura toyed impatiently with her parasol.

"You needn't remind me of that," she said testily. "That part of my life is my own. I don't want you to start now and make it harder for me to do the right thing. It isn't fair; it isn't square, and it isn't right. You've got to let me go my own way." Putting her hand on the broker's shoulder, she went on: "I'm sorry to leave you, Will, in a way, but I want you to know that if I go with John it changes the spelling of the word 'comradeship' into 'love,' and the word 'mistress' into 'wife.' Now, please don't talk any more."

"Just a word," he interrupted. "Is it absolutely settled?"

"I told you I didn't know exactly what our plans are," she answered impatiently. "I shall know to-day—that's what I'm waiting for. I can't understand why he doesn't come."

The broker, whose gaze had been idly sweeping the cañon, suddenly sat up and pointed up the pass.

"Is that the fellow, coming up here?" he exclaimed.

Laura rose quickly from her seat, and, running to the balustrade, peered over.

"Where?" she asked.

"Up the road there," said Brockton, pointing. "Don't you see the man on that yellow horse?"

She looked a moment, straining her eyes.

"Yes—that's John!" Waving her handkerchief and putting one hand to her mouth, she cried out: "Hello!"

From the distance came the sound of a man's voice:

"Hello yourself!"

"Hurry up, you're late!" cried Laura, her face now flushed from pleasure and excitement.

"Better late than never," came the rejoinder.

"Hurry up," she repeated.

"Not with this horse," was the answer.

Laura turned to Brockton, her face beaming. Enthusiastically she exclaimed:

"Now, Will, does he look like a yellow reporter?"

The broker's face broke into a rather uncomfortable smile.

"He *is* a good-looking chap."

The girl leaned far over the balustrade to watch her lover's progress.

"Oh, he's just simply more than that!" Turning quickly to the broker, she asked: "Where's

Mrs. Williams?"

He pointed indoors.

"She was in there playing bridge when I came out."

Going hurriedly to the door leading into the house, Laura called out:

"Mrs. Williams! Oh, Mrs. Williams!"

"What is it, my dear?" replied her hostess from within.

"Mr. Madison is coming up the path."

"That's good," came the reply. "He's just in time for dinner."

"Won't you come out and see him?"

"No, my child. I'm up to my neck in bridge. I'm six dollars and twenty cents out now, and up against an awful streak of luck."

"Shall I invite him to dinner?"

"Yes, do, dear; and tell him to cross his fingers when he thinks of me."

The girl ran back to Brockton, who was still standing at the edge of the terrace, watching the rider's progress. Slipping her hand involuntarily through the broker's arm and looking eagerly with him over the balustrade, she asked with girlish enthusiasm:

"Do you like him?"

"I don't know him," replied Brockton with an amused smile.

"Well, do you think you'll like him?" she persisted.

"I hope I'll like him," he answered reservedly.

"Well, if you hope you'll like him, you ought to think you'll like him. He'll turn the corner of that rock in just a minute, and then you can see him. Do you want to see him?"

"Why, yes—do you?" he replied, amused at her girlish enthusiasm.

"Do I?" she echoed. "Why, I haven't seen him since last night. There he is!" Waving her hand wildly, she cried out: "Hello, John!"

The rider was now close at hand, for Madison's voice was heard in all the fullness of its rich, deep tones:

"Hello, girlie! How's everything?"

"Fine!" she called back. "Do hurry."

"Tell that to this horse, will you? The word 'hurry' is not in his dictionary."

"I'm coming down to meet you," she called again.

"All right!" came the answer.

Turning quickly to Brockton, like a spoilt child, pleading for a favor, she said demurely:

"You don't care. You'll wait, won't you?"

"Sure," replied the broker laconically.

The girl ran nimbly down the stairs of the terrace, and disappeared among the cactus bushes.

CHAPTER VII.

Brockton leaned over the balustrade trying, through the increasing dusk, to catch a glimpse of the girl's slender form, as in her light summer gown she flitted among the trees. The autumn afternoon was now far advanced. The shadows of approaching night were already falling across the Pass. The golden glow that tinged the distant snow-clad peaks grew deeper in color. The lights were rapidly fading to beautiful opalescent hues.

It was only by the exercise of the greatest self-control that the broker had retained his composure. What the girl had just told him was a staggering and unexpected blow. Underneath the man's stolid, business-like manner, there was a big heart. He was selfish and comfort-loving, like most men of his class and opportunities, but he was far from being as callous and blasé as he pretended. He had grown to be very fond of Laura. He knew that up to this time and during her whole career he was the first man who had had any real influence over her. Since the day when they first became pals, he had always dominated, and while his moral teaching left much to be desired, he had always endeavored to keep her semi-respectable in the bohemian, unconventional kind of life she had elected to lead. His coming all the way from New York to Denver to accompany her home—for the business at Kansas City was, of course, only a pleasant fiction—was proof of his keen interest in the girl. And what a disappointment awaited him! He had come after her, only to find that she had drifted away from him. What perhaps made matters worse, he could not in the least object to the manner of her going. She had been absolutely fair and square in her agreement with him. If this new love affair really meant new life to her, respectability, happiness, he would be worse than a cad to stand in her way. Nor could he, logically, bear any malice towards the man who was taking her from him.

Presently he heard voices and footsteps on the walk below, and the next moment Laura reappeared, dragging John Madison after her. The big fellow's clothes were dusty after the long ride. His corduroy trousers were encased in leggings, and on his boots were brass spurs, such as are worn in the army. In his hand he held rather awkwardly a gray cowboy hat. As the two men faced one another, there was a dramatic pause. Each looked at the other interrogatively, with ill-disguised hostility. One felt it needed but a spark to bring about an explosion. Physically, they were both fine-looking men, although the contrast was most marked. Brockton was tall and well-built, and many considered him a handsome man, but by the side of the big Westerner, he suffered by comparison. The broker was the conventional type of Eastern business man, the style of man one meets in clubs and drawing-rooms, well dressed, well groomed; John Madison, in his six feet of muscular manhood, careless and picturesque in attire, suggested the free, open life on the plains, where men face danger as a matter of course, and are prepared to defend their lives at an instant's notice. Each man took the other's measure in silence, neither flinching a muscle. The smile faded from Madison's face, and his mouth dropped into an expression of fierce determination. For a moment, Laura almost lost her self composure. Nervous, frightened, now that she had brought them together, her voice trembled slightly from apprehension:

"Oh, I beg your pardon! Mr. Madison—this is Mr. Brockton, a friend of mine from New York. You've often heard me speak of him. He came out here to keep me company when I go home."

Madison advanced with hand outstretched. Looking the broker straight in the eye, he said:

"I am very glad to know you, Mr. Brockton."

"Thank you," returned the New Yorker with forced cordiality.

The newspaper man shuffled uneasily on his feet, as if he realized the false position in which both of them were placed, but was ready enough, if only for convenience sake, to avoid hostilities. Indeed, the broker's easy and friendly manner entirely disarmed the antagonism that Madison had long been nursing. With a side glance, at Laura, he went on:

"I've heard a great deal about you and your kindness to Miss Murdock. Anything that you have done for her in a spirit of friendliness, I am sure all her friends must deeply appreciate, and I count myself in as one."

Brockton smiled amiably, as he replied:

"Then we have a great deal in common, Mr. Madison, for I also count Miss Murdock a friend, and when two friends of a friend have the pleasure of meeting, I daresay that's a pretty good foundation for them to become friends, too."

The big fellow nodded and showed his white teeth. With a determined effort not to show himself behind his rival in cordiality, he said:

"Whatever my opinion may have been of you, Mr. Brockton, before you arrived, now I have seen you—and I'm a man who forms his conclusions right off the bat—I don't mind saying you've agreeably surprised me. That's just a first impression, but they run kind o' strong with me."

Brockton carelessly flicked the ash from his cigar as he answered in the same tone:

"Well, young man, I size up a fellow in pretty short order, and all things being equal, I think you'll do."

Laura, radiant at this totally unexpected result of the encounter, looked from one man to the other in delighted amazement. She was afraid they would fly at each other's throats, and

here they were, apparently, the best of friends. Making a move towards the house she said:

"Shall I get the tea?"

"Tea?" exclaimed Madison in mock dismay.

The girl shook her finger in his face.

"Yes, tea. You know it must be tea—nothing stronger."

Madison looked comically at the broker:

"How strong are you for that tea, Mr. Brockton?"

"I'll pass," rejoined the broker, entering into the spirit of the fun, "it's your deal, Mr. Madison."

"Mine?" echoed the Westerner, laughing. "No, deal me out this hand."

Putting on her favorite little pout, Laura pretended to be angry.

"I don't think you're at all pleasant, but I'll tell you one thing—it's tea this deal or no game."

Throwing herself into a seat, she picked up a magazine, and made a pretense of becoming interested in the illustrations.

Brockton moved towards the entrance to the house.

"No game then," he said laughingly. "I'm going in to help Mrs. Williams. Maybe she's lost seven dollars by this time. I may be able to get it back for her."

He disappeared in the house. Directly he was gone Laura sprang from her seat, and running up to Madison, flung her arms unrestrainedly about his neck.

"John!" she exclaimed.

"Well, dear?"

"Are you going to be cross with me?"

"Why?"

"Because he came?"

"Because who came?" he demanded, "Brockton?"

"Yes."

"You didn't know, did you?"

"Yes, I did."

"That he was coming?"

"He wired me when he reached Kansas City."

"Does he know?"

"About us?"

"Yes."

"I've told him."

"When?"

"To-day."

"Here?"

"Yes."

Madison looked at her closely for a moment. Then slowly, he asked:

"What was the result?"

"I think it hurt him."

"Naturally."

Thoughtfully, almost pensively, she added:

"More than I had any idea it would."

Madison shrugged his big, square shoulders, and sinking into a chair, said laconically:

"I'm sorry."

"He cautioned me to be very careful, and to be sure I knew my way."

"That's right," nodded Madison approvingly.

Laura took a couple of cushions from a sofa near one of the windows, and returning to where he was sitting, threw them on the ground near his chair. From the interior of the house floated the soulful strains of a Chopin nocturne. Sitting down quietly at his feet, she said softly:

"John."

"What, dear?"

"We've been very happy all summer."

"Very."

"This thing has gradually been growing on us."

"That's true," he assented.

Musingly she went on:

"I little thought when I came out here to Denver to play in a little stock company, that it was going to bring me all this happiness; but it has, hasn't it?"

He smiled indulgently and caressed her golden hair. Changing her position, she got up and sat on his knee, her arms around his neck. After a moment's silence she said:

"Now the season's over, there's nothing to keep me in Colorado. I've got to go back to New York and work."

"I know," he replied gloomily. "I've been awake all night thinking about it."

"Well?" she asked anxiously.

"Well?" he repeated, without satisfying her curiosity.

"What are we going to do?" she inquired.

He remained silent for a moment; then he said:

"Why, you've got to go, I suppose."

"Is it good-bye?"

He nodded gloomily.

"For a while, I suppose—it's good-bye."

Turning his face round so she could see it, she looked searchingly at him.

"What do you mean by 'a while'?"

"Until I get money enough together, and am making enough to support you. Then I'll come and take you out of the show business and make you Mrs. Madison."

She tightened her arm around his neck and placed her cheek lovingly against his. In one fond, pure caress she showed him all the affection of which a woman is capable. Fondling up against him she seemed like a dainty little kitten purring close to its master. Her every thought and desire seemed to be centered on this man, who had taught her for the first time the meaning of the word "love." Tenderly she said:

"John, that is what I want above everything else."

He smiled fondly at her. Gravely he said:

"But, Laura, dear, we must come to some distinct understanding before we start to make our plans. We're not children."

"No, we're not," she assented positively.

Rising from his knee, she went to the side of the porch and, leaning her elbows on the balustrade, gazed meditatively out into the valley.

"Now, in the first place," he continued, "we'll discuss you, and in the second place we'll discuss me. We'll keep nothing from each other, and we'll start out on this campaign of decency and honor, fully understanding its responsibilities, without a chance of a come-back on either side."

Laura turned and looked at him. Her face was pale and serious. Yes, plain words must be spoken between them and the proper time was now—so he might yet draw back, if he found he could not take her as she was.

"You mean," she said in a tone so low that he hardly caught it, "that we should tell each other all about each other so, no matter what is said about us by other people, *we'll* know it first."

Madison rose and paced the porch nervously:

"That's precisely what I'm trying to get at," he said.

The girl was silent for a moment; then hesitatingly she said:

"Well, John, there are so many things I don't want to speak of—even to you. It isn't easy for a woman to go back and dig up a lot of ugly memories and try to excuse them—"

He interrupted her:

"I don't ask that. I know your life, as I told you. That makes no difference now. The past is past. I love you as I know you, as you are to-day. It's only the future we want to worry about. Laura, the habit of life is a hard thing to get away from. You've lived in this way for a long time. As my affianced wife you'll have to give it up. You'll have to go back to New York and struggle along on your own hook, until I get enough together to come for you. I don't know how long that will be." Determinedly, almost fiercely, he added: "But it *will* be. Do you love me enough to stick out for the right thing?"

The girl said nothing. Her bosom heaved and her mouth quivered. She appeared deeply moved. Then, suddenly, going quickly up to her companion, she threw her arms affectionately around his neck. Earnestly she said:

"Yes, John. I think this is my one great chance. I do love you, and I want to do just what you say."

The big fellow's face beamed with content and happiness as fondly he caressed her hair.

"I think you will, little girl," he said. "And I'm going to make the same promise. I've been no angel myself. Ever since I've been able to earn my own living, I've abused every natural gift God gave me. This restlessness and love of adventure has kept me where I am. My life hasn't been exactly loose, but it's been all in pieces. I've frittered my time and opportunities away just for the fun of it. But, Laura, dear—when I met you and began to know you I realized for the first time that I was making an awful waste of myself. Now it's all different. Give me time—only a few months—and I'll show you what I can do."

"John!"

It was all she could say, but he understood, and clasping her passionately, his head dropped lower over her face, until his warm lips met her unresisting mouth. When, after a blissful interval, she looked up, he saw that there were tears in her eyes. Tenderly he said:

"Some lovers place a woman on a pedestal and say: 'She never has made a mistake.' Well, we don't need any pedestals. I know you will never make a mistake again."

Gravely she placed both her hands on his square shoulders. Looking him straight in the eyes, she said:

"John, I will never make you take those words back."

"That goes double," he rejoined laughingly. "You're going to cut out the cafés and the lobster suppers, and I'm going to cut out my shiftlessness and indolence. You're going to be somebody, and if my hunch is worth the powder to blow it up, we'll show folks things they never thought were in us. We'll begin right now. You're ready, ain't you, dear?"

"Yes, I'm ready."

Pointing towards the house, he said:

"Then call him."

"Brockton?"

"Yes, tell him you go back to New York without any traveling companion."

She hesitated and looked perplexed. She was hardly prepared to act so quickly as this.

"Now?" she demanded.

"Now," he said firmly.

She clasped and unclasped her hands nervously. Timidly she said:

"You want to hear me tell him?"

He smiled.

"We're partners, aren't we? I ought to be in on any important transaction like that, but it's just as you say."

The girl nodded. Hesitatingly she said:

"I think it would be right you should. I'll call him now."

"All right."

He strolled carelessly in the direction of the stairway, while Laura moved towards the house. It was dark now outside, and the interior of the bungalow was already lighted up. Halting just outside the front door, she called:

"Mr. Brockton! Oh, Mr. Brockton!"

"Yes?" answered the broker's voice from inside.

"Can you spare a moment to come out here?"

"I'll be there presently."

"No—now," she insisted. "You must come now."

"All right, I'm coming."

She waited for him until he appeared.

CHAPTER VIII.

There were few things that Brockton enjoyed more than a game of bridge. So long as the cards went his way, he was dead to the world. Having routed his opponents and carried everything before him for the last half hour, he was feeling in particularly good humor, and it was only with a mock grimace that he protested at being disturbed.

"Say, Laura, it's a shame to lure me away from that mad speculation in there. I thought I might make my fare back to New York, if I played until next summer." Dropping his jesting tone, he inquired interrogatively: "What's up?"

"Mr. Madison wants to talk to you, or rather I do, and I want him to listen."

The broker gave her one keen look. She did not have to explain what the talk was to be about. He understood instinctively. Instantly, his manner changed. The easy jocularity vanished. Once more he was the shrewd, hard, calculating business man. Coldly he said:

"Very well—what is it about?"

Descending the steps, he came down the terrace to where Laura and Madison were seated. The girl began:

"Say, Will—"

"Yes," he answered icily.

"I'm going home day after to-morrow, on the Overland Limited."

He nodded.

"I know."

Awkwardly and glancing nervously at Madison, as if to gain courage, she went on:

"It was awfully kind of you to come out here and offer to escort me back to New York, but—under the circumstances—I'd rather you'd take an earlier—or a later train."

The broker looked from one to the other. Coolly he asked:

"May I ask what circumstances you refer to?"

Timidly she went on:

"Mr. Madison and I are going to be married." She paused for a moment, as if in a dilemma how best to put it. Finally she said: "He knows of your former friendship for me, and he thinks it must end."

The broker gave a grunt. He was raging within, but what was the use of being unpleasant over it? He could not alter matters. Trying to appear unconcerned, he said:

"Hum! Then the Riverside Drive proposition, with Burgess's show thrown in, is off, eh?"

"Yes," she replied firmly, "everything is absolutely declared off."

Brockton shrugged his shoulders. With an inward chuckle he said ironically:

"Can't even be friends any more, eh?"

Madison, who had listened without interfering, now rose and stepped forward. Fixing the broker with a cold stare, he said:

"You could hardly expect Miss Murdock to be friendly with you—under the circumstances." Assisting Laura to put a scarf across her shoulders, he added: "You could hardly expect me to sanction any such friendship."

Brockton gave a careless nod. Patronizingly he said:

"I think I understand your position, young man, and I agree with you perfectly, that is—if your plans turn out successful."

"Thank you," said Madison stiffly.

Going up to the broker, Laura held out her hand. With a smile she said:

"Then everything is settled, just the way it ought to be—frankly and above board?"

Brockton took her hand, and held it in his for a minute. With a visible effort to conceal his feelings, he said:

"Why, I guess so. If I was perfectly confident that this new arrangement was going to result happily for you both, I think it would be great, only I'm somewhat doubtful, for when people become serious and then fail, I know how hard these things hit, having been hit once myself."

Madison looked at him as if trying to gauge his full meaning. Then quietly he said:

"So you think we're making a wrong move, and there isn't a chance of success, eh?"

"No, I don't make any such gloomy prophecy. If you make Laura a good husband, and she makes you a good wife, and together you win out, I'll be mighty glad. As far as I am concerned, I shall absolutely forget every thought of Laura's friendship for me."

The girl looked grateful.

"I thought you'd be just that way," she said.

The broker rose and advancing, took both her hands. There was more than a suspicion of emotion in his voice as he said:

"Good-bye, girlie—be happy." Turning to the newspaper man, he said: "Madison, good luck." Shaking him cordially by the hand he added: "I think you've got the stuff in you to succeed, if your foot don't slip."

The newspaper man looked at him inquiringly. Curtly he demanded:

"What do you mean by my foot slipping, Mr. Brockton?"

The broker returned his gaze steadily.

"Do you want me to tell you?"

"I sure do."

Brockton turned to Laura, who stood listening, rather uneasy at the turn the conversation was taking.

"Laura," he said quietly, "run into the house and see if Mrs. Williams has won another quarter. Madison and I are going to smoke a cigar and have a friendly chat. When we get through, I think we'll both feel better."

She looked at him anxiously. Fearfully she asked:

"You are sure that everything will be all right?"

"Sure," he said smilingly.

She looked at Madison, as if for reassurance. He nodded and she went towards the house. When she had disappeared, Brockton held out a handsomely engraved gold cigar case.

"Have a cigar?" he said cordially, as if to make things as amicable as possible.

"No—I'll smoke my own," replied Madison coldly.

The men sat down and there was a short silence, during which they lit and puffed at their cigars. It was now pitch dark outside, and the brilliant illuminations in the interior of the house only served to intensify the almost opaque blackness of the grounds. Nothing could be seen but the glow of each man's cigar, as he puffed it silently. The broker broke the long pause.

"What's your business?" he demanded curtly.

"What's yours?" retorted the Westerner quickly.

"I'm a broker."

"I'm a reporter."

"What kind?" inquired Brockton.

"General utility—dog fights, and dramatic criticisms."

"Pay you well?" asked Brockton carelessly.

The journalist started and looked up sharply at his interlocutor.

"That's a pretty fresh question!" he exclaimed. "What's the idea?"

"I'm interested—that's all," replied Brockton coolly. Knocking the ash off his cigar, he continued: "I'm a plain man, Mr. Madison, and I do business in a plain way. Now, if I ask you a few questions and discuss this matter with you in a frank way, don't get it in your head that I'm jealous or sore, but simply I don't want either of you people to make a move that's going to cost you a lot of pain and trouble. If you want me to talk sense to you, all right. If you don't we'll drop it now. What's the answer?"

Madison listened attentively until he stopped speaking. Then he looked up, his manner defiant and aggressive.

"I'll take a chance," he said contemptuously, "but before you start I want to tell you that the class of people you belong to, I have no use for—they don't speak my language. You are what they call a manipulator of stocks. That means that you are living on the weaknesses of other people, and it almost means that you get your daily bread—yes—and your cake and your wine, too, from the sweat and toil of others. You're a safe gambler, a 'gambler under cover.' Show me a man who's dealing bank; he's free and above board. But you—you can figure the percentage against you, and then if you buck the tiger and get stung, you do it with your eyes open. With you Wall Street men, the game is crooked twelve months of the year. From a business point of view, I think you're a crook!" He paused, as if to see the effect of his words. Then he added: "Now I guess we understand each other. If you've got anything to say, why—spill it."

Brockton rose impatiently. His voice rising in anger, he said:

"We're not talking business now, but women. How much money do you earn?"

For a moment Madison was taken aback by the very impudence of the question. He glared at his questioner, and half rose from his seat with a threatening gesture. But noting the cool and composed manner of the broker, he merely shrugged his shoulders. Clenching his teeth, he leaned forward and said warningly:

"Understand, I don't think it is any of your damned business! But I'm going through with you on this proposition, just to see how the land lays. Take my tip, however. Be mighty careful how you speak about the girl, if you're not looking for trouble."

Paying no attention to the covert threat, Brockton went on:

"How much did you say you made?"

"Thirty dollars a week."

The broker gave vent to a low, but expressive whistle. Elevating his eyebrows, he asked:

"Do you know how much Laura could make if she took a job just on her own merits?"

Madison shook his head. Impatiently he replied:

"As I don't intend to share in her salary, I never took the trouble to inquire."

"She'd get about forty dollars."

"That laps me ten," retorted the other.

Brockton persisted.

"But how are you going to support her?" he demanded. "Her cabs cost more than your salary, and she pays her week's salary for an every-day walking hat. She's always had a maid. Her simplest gown flirts with a hundred dollar note. Her manicurist and her hairdresser will eat up as much as you pay for your board. She never walks when it's stormy, and every afternoon there's her ride in the park. She dines in the best places in New York, and one meal costs her more than you make in a day. Do you imagine for a moment that she's going to sacrifice these luxuries for any great length of time?"

"I intend to give them to her," replied Madison promptly.

"On thirty dollars a week?"

"I propose to go out and make a lot of money."

"How?"

"I haven't decided yet, but you can bet your sweet life that if I ever try and make up my mind that it's got to be, it's got to be."

Brockton looked skeptical.

"Never have made it, have you?" he said.

"I have never tried," replied Madison doggedly.

"Then how do you know you can?"

"I'm honest and energetic, that's how I know!" retorted the journalist. With a sneer he added: "If you can get great wealth the way you go along, I don't see why I can't earn a little."

Puffing vigorously at his expensive perfecto, Brockton strode leisurely up and down the terrace. He spoke calmly and dispassionately, as if he personally were not in the least concerned with the subject under discussion. From his manner one might take him for an elderly brother advising a junior of life's many pitfalls.

"That's where you make a mistake," he said coolly. "Money doesn't always come with brilliancy. I know a lot of fellows in New York who can paint a fine picture, write a good play, and when it comes to oratory they've got me lashed to a pole. But, somehow, they never make money. They're always in debt. They never get anything for what they do. In other words, young man, they are like a sky rocket without a stick—plenty of brilliancy, but no direction. They blow up and fizzle all over the ground."

"That's in New York," interrupted Madison scornfully. "I'm in Colorado. I guess you know there is a difference."

The broker shrugged his shoulders.

"I hope you'll make your money," he said carelessly, "because, I tell you frankly, that's the only way you can hold this girl. She's full of heroics now, self sacrifice, and all the things that go to make up the third act of a play, but the minute she comes to darn her stockings, wash out her own handkerchiefs and dry them on the windows and send out for a pail of coffee and a sandwich for lunch, take it from me—she'll change her tune!" Suddenly confronting his rival, he went on: "You're in Colorado writing her letters once a day with no cheques in them. That may be all right for some girl who hasn't tasted the joy of easy living, full of the good things of life, but one who for ten years has been doing very well in the way these women do, is not going to let up for any great length of time. So take my advice, if you want to hold her, get that money quick, and don't be so damned particular how you get it, either."

Madison started quickly to his feet, his fists clenched. Savagely he exclaimed:

"Of course, you know you've got the best of me——"

"How?" demanded Brockton coolly.

"We're guests. I have to control myself."

"No one's listening," said the broker.

"'Tisn't that," snapped the other impatiently. "If it was anywhere but here, if there was any way to avoid all the nasty scandal, I'd come a-shootin' for you and you know it——"

"You're a fighter, eh?" sneered Brockton.

"Perhaps," snapped the journalist. There was a dangerous gleam in his eye, as he went on: "Let me tell you this. I don't know how you make your money, but I know what you do with it. You buy yourself a small circle of sycophants; you pay them well for feeding your vanity, and then you pose with a certain frank admission of vice and degradation. And those who aren't quite as brazen as you call it manhood. Manhood?" he echoed contemptuously. "Why, you don't know what the word means! Yours is the attitude of a pup and a cur."

Brockton turned. His lips were compressed, his eyes flashed. Starting angrily forward he exclaimed:

"Wait a minute, young man, or I'll——"

Madison gave one stride towards him, and for a moment both men stood confronting each other, their fists clenched. Their primal instincts were aroused. Like wild beasts, full of savage hatred, they were hungry and ready to fly at each other's throats.

"You'll what?" demanded Madison, raising his fist.

"Lose my temper and make a damned fool of myself," retorted the broker retaining his *sang froid* only by the greatest effort. With an attempt at jocularly he went on: "That's something I've not done for—let me see—why, it must be nearly twenty years—oh, yes—fully that——"

He smiled and Madison, disarmed, fell back. In a sulky undertone, the Westerner grumbled:

"Possibly it's been about that length of time since you were human, eh?"

"Possibly—but you see, Mr. Madison, after all, you're at fault——"

"Yes?"

"Yes, the very first thing you did was to lose your temper. Now people who always lose their temper will never make a lot of money, and you admit that that is a great necessity—I mean now—to you——"

Turning on his heel, Madison picked up a newspaper and slammed it down angrily on a seat.

"I can't stand for the brutal way you talk!" Leaning on the balustrade and looking into the dark depths below, he lapsed into a sullen silence.

Brockton approached him.

"But you've got to stand it," he said. "The truth is never gentle. Most conditions in life are unpleasant, and if you want to meet them squarely, you have got to realize the unpleasant point of view. That's the only way you can fight them and win!"

Madison turned around. The rage was gone out of his eyes, and his voice had regained its equanimity. Decisively he said:

"I believe Laura means what she says, in spite of all you say and the disagreeable logic of it. I think she loves me. If she should ever want to go back to the old way of getting along, I think she'd tell me so. So you see, Brockton, all your talk is wasted, and we'll drop the subject."

Crossing to the other side of the terrace, he dropped into a chair, and lit another cigar. Brockton followed him.

"And if she should ever go back and come to me," said the broker slowly and impressively, "I am going to insist that she let you know all about it. It'll be hard enough to lose her, caring for her the way you do, but it would hurt a lot more to be double crossed——"

Madison laughed scornfully.

"That's very kind. Thanks!"

"Don't get sore," said Brockton. "It's common sense, and it goes, does it not?"

"Just what goes?" demanded the journalist, turning sharply.

Brockton eyed him gravely for a second or two; then he said slowly:

"If she leaves you first, you are to tell me, and if she comes to me, I'll make her let you know just when and why——"

A fierce flame again blazed out from the big fellow's eyes. He half started from his chair, and he flung his fist out threateningly.

"Look out!" he cried.

"I said 'common sense,'" rejoined Brockton quietly.

"All right," replied his rival, more calmly.

"Agreed?" demanded the broker.

"You're on," muttered Madison.

CHAPTER IX.

The Rialto, flooded with the warm sunshine of a glorious spring morning, presented its every-day aspect of leisurely gaiety and business bustle. The theatrical season was already on the wane; each day Broadway's pavements in the immediate vicinity of Forty-second Street became more congested with lean-looking thespians, just in from "the road." The Rialto—the haven of every disheartened barnstormer, the cradle of every would-be Hamlet! An important section of the big town's commercial life, yet a world apart—the world of the theatre, a shallow, artificial, unreal land, with laws and manners all its own; a region of lights and tinsel and mock emotions, its people frankly unmoral and irresponsible as a child, yet ever interesting and not unlovable; luxury-loving and extravagant, flush to-day, bankrupt to-morrow; inflated with false pretense and exaggerated self importance, yet tender-hearted and ingenuous to a fault, and not without their sphere of usefulness—theirs the mission "to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to Nature," and in tragedy and comedy, move mankind to tears and laughter, while upholding the best traditions of a noble art.

Sweeping northwards from Herald Square as far as Forty-seventh Street, the Rialto, on this particular morning, did full credit to the famous public mart in Venice, from which it took its picturesque name. Here in the heart of theatredom was the players' curb market, the theatrical rendezvous of the metropolis, where the mummer comes both to talk shop with his fellow actor, and seek a new engagement. On every side luxurious theatres reared their stately facades, box-offices open for business invited all to enter, obstreperous ticket speculators jostled passersby in their eagerness to sell their seats. Street hoardings, ash barrels and sandwich men were plastered with flamboyant multi-colored show bills. The play, and nothing but the play was certainly the thing; the hapless stranger was buffeted in a maelstrom of theatrical activity. The very air reeked of calcium and grease paint.

The sidewalks were crowded with actors of all ages, some smartly dressed, others seedy-looking and down at heel. They stood chatting idly in little groups, thronged the doors of managers' offices and dramatic agencies, promenaded up and down with self-conscious strut. If some were seedy, all looked sanguine and happy. Actors and actresses both, they laughed and joked and patted one another on the back, as they strove to outdo each other in narrating wonderful experiences on the road. Right and left one heard the younger players exclaim exuberantly: "Great notices!—made the hit of my life!—am to be starred next season!—manager crazy for me to sign!" The bystanders, older than the speakers, listened politely and nodded approvingly, but did not seem otherwise impressed. Old-timers these, they knew too well the symptoms of the novice. Every beginner had these illusions, like the measles; then, as one got older in the "perfesh" one became immune. Had they not had many such attacks themselves? They had dreamed of playing Brutus, Macbeth and Romeo before crowded houses, and having their names spelled out in blazing electric letters over the entrance of Broadway theatres, yet here they were to-day, just where they stood twenty years before, playing general utility at forty dollars a week, and only thirty-six weeks in the year! Need one wonder that their eyes were tired and their faces lined? Their clothes were shabby, all ambition had been ruthlessly crushed out of them, but no matter. They still stood sunning themselves on the Rialto, listening good naturedly to the youngsters' prattle. Now

and then grim tragedy could be detected stalking behind comedy's mask. Haggard faces and shabby clothes spoke eloquently of poverty's pinch. A long summer ahead and nothing saved. Well—what of it? That was nothing unusual. If times were hard and engagements few, that was the price the mummer must pay. Why did he go into the rotten business? By this time he painfully realized that all cannot be stars, to own automobiles and fine country houses and have the managers and the public worshipping at their feet. Some must be content to belong to the humble rank and file, and these were the kind that haunted Broadway.

Two loungers, one a young actor, the other a man considerably his senior, stood talking at the corner of Forty-second Street, opposite the entrance to the Empire Theatre. The younger man was pale and sickly looking, and his long hair, classic features, and general seedy appearance stamped him as a "legit," or a player whose theatrical activities had been confined to Shakespearian and the classic dramas.

Why actors who specialize in the legitimate should be invariably careless in their personal appearance has yet to be explained. Their fellow-artists, who play in modern comedy, usually appear on the street trim and well groomed. Their clothes, cut in the latest fashion, and the way they wear them, constitute valuable factors in their success. But the Benvolios, the Mercutios and Horatios and other heroes of the romantic and standard dramas, are, in private life, a queer and sad-looking lot. Their excuse may be that for the historical dramas the manager furnishes the costumes, whereas for the modern play the player has to provide his own.

This particular actor wore a faded Fedora hat, his trousers were baggy at the knee, and he tapped impatiently on the pavement with a cheap little cane. His attitude was one of general discouragement, which was not surprising, seeing that after playing Shakespeare in the one-night stands all season, he found himself stranded on Broadway without a cent. While he confided his troubles to his old friend, Jim Weston, he cast envious glances at other fellow actors, more fortunate than he, who were entering a red-curtained chop house close by. As his olfactory organ caught the delicious odors of grilling steaks and juicy roasts, he winced. That morning he had breakfasted but meagerly, and when again the hunger pangs seized him there would be no chop house for him. He must slink into the little dairy round the corner and lining-up at the lunch counter, together with a dozen other thespians in like straits, shamefacedly order a glass of milk and piece of pie.

"Do you think it's any merrier for me?" exclaimed Weston, after he had listened to the other's hard-luck story. "Why, man alive, I'm ready to give up. I've tramped Broadway for nine weeks, until every flagstone gives me the laugh when it sees my feet coming. It's something fierce!"

Jim Weston was only one of the many hundred human derelicts cast away on the theatrical strand. An advance agent of the old school, he found himself at the age of fifty outdistanced by younger and more active men. In the three decades of his life, which he had devoted to the service of the stage, he had seen the gradual evolution of the theatrical business. The old-time circus and minstrel men had been pushed aside and younger men, more up-to-date in their methods, had taken their place. Jim realized that he was a back number, but he hung on just the same. He was too old now to begin learning a new trade. He had given all the energy of his youth to the service of the theatre and now he was older and not so active the theatre had gone back on him. Often he had thought of ending it all, there and then, but that he mused, was the coward's way. There was the "missis" and the "kids." He wasn't going to desert them. So day after day, he kept on tramping Broadway, haunting the agencies, in the hope of something turning up.

His companion, absorbed in his own gloomy reflections, tapped the pavement nervously with his cane, and Weston continued:

"Got a letter from the missis this morning. The kids got to have more clothes, there's measles in the town and mumps in the next village. I've just got to raise some money, or git some work, or the first thing you'll know, I'll be hanging around Central Park on a dark night with a club."

"Hello, Jim!" hailed a feminine voice in greeting.

The two men quickly looked up. An attractive, stylishly dressed young woman had halted. A smile of recognition lit up the agent's wan face, and starting forward, he shook warmly the proffered hand. The actor, touching his hat, turned to go. To Weston, he said:

"If you hear of anything in my line, bear me in mind, old man."

"I will, Ned, never fear. Good-bye and good luck."

The actor strolled on and the agent turned to his feminine acquaintance:

"Why, Elfie St. Clair!" he exclaimed, "I haven't seen you for an age."

It was Elfie St. Clair, bearing, as usual, all the outward signs of prosperity. Like most

women of her class, she always over-dressed. From her picture hat and jeweled neck, to her silk stockings and dainty patent leather slippers, she had them all on, and more than one passerby turned to stare. Extravagant clothes which, on Fifth Avenue would be taken as a matter of course, caused a mild sensation among the general dullness of the busy Rialto. But Elfie ignored the attention she attracted, and went on chatting, unconcerned. What did she care if people guessed how she made the money to dress as she did? She was too old at the business for that, too hardened, yet with all her effrontery, she had at least one redeeming virtue. In her days of prosperity she was never too proud to greet or help old friends. She had met Jim Weston years ago. He was press agent for the first company she joined, and she had not forgotten trifling little services he had rendered her at that precarious time. With a glance at his shabby clothes, she asked:

"What are you doing now?"

"Same as usual—nothing!" he answered dryly.

"Down on your luck, eh?" she said sympathetically.

"Never had any luck," he grumbled.

"Been out long?"

"Only six weeks the whole season. Show busted. I'm on my uppers for fair this time—eligible for the down-and-out club. No prospects, either."

The girl made a motion with her pocketbook. Kindly she said:

"Say, Jim—let me loan you a ten spot—we're old pals, you and I——"

He shook his head determinedly. Almost savagely, he exclaimed:

"No, I'll be d——d if I do! The river before that. Thank God, I still have my self respect left!" Quickly changing the topic, he went on: "I met an old friend of yours the other day."

"Who?"

"Laura Murdock."

The girl started.

"Laura!" she exclaimed. "Why, I haven't seen her for months—only once since she went to Denver and fell in love with a newspaper man. Wasn't that perfectly crazy? I was always afraid she would do something of the sort. There is a sentimental streak in her, you know. I did all I could to dissuade her, but it was no use. She had made up her mind to be good, and that was the end of it. Such a pity! She was getting on so fine. You know, of course, that she has cut out Brockton, and the rest of the crowd. I've quite lost sight of her. Where did you see her?"

The agent's thin lips then tightened into a grim smile.

"You'd hardly know her now," he said.

The girl looked inquiringly at him.

"Not know her—why?"

Hesitatingly he went on:

"Wal—you know how it is when things don't seem to go just right. Laura never was over strong with the managers unless she had a good pull, and now she's shifting for herself, they've gone back on her. She got a fairly good part at the beginning of the season, but she didn't make good. The critics hit her pretty hard, and the manager gave her two weeks' notice. Since then she's been playing such parts as she can get, but I guess she ain't averaged fifteen dollars a week the whole blessed winter."

"Where is she now?"

"At Mrs. Farley's. She has a small room there. I think she pays four dollars a week—when she pays it. You know Mrs. Farley's. I'm stopping there, too. It ain't exactly swell, but it's better than the park, especially on cold nights."

Elfie turned pale under her cosmetics. Too well she knew the horrors of poverty. She was shocked to hear that one of her own sisterhood should be reduced to such straits as these. The lightning had struck uncomfortably near home. Besides she had always been fond of Laura. Yes, she knew Mrs. Farley's, a shrewish Irishwoman, who kept a cheap theatrical boarding house in Forty ——th Street. Ten years ago, in the days when she was a stage beginner, struggling to make both ends meet, she had lived there and as she looked back on those days of self denial and humiliation she shuddered.

"I'm awfully sorry," she said, her voice trembling from unaffected emotion. "Tell Laura you met me and say I had no idea of it. Tell her I'll come and see her the very first opportunity. Goodbye."

A smile and a nod, and she disappeared, swallowed up in the vortex of humanity that swirls in eddies along the Great White Way. The agent stood looking after her. With a sagacious shake of his head, he murmured to himself:

"I don't know but that she's the wise one, after all. What's the good of being decent? The world respects the man who can wear fine duds. Nobody asks how he got 'em. One's a fool to care. Every one for himself and let the devil take the hindmost."

Having thus unburdened himself of this philosophical reflection, Jim Weston proceeded on his way. Continuing north up Broadway as far as Forty-third Street, he crossed Long Acre Square and stopping in front of a dilapidated-looking brown-stone house, climbed wearily up the steep stoop. The house was one of the few old-fashioned private residences still left standing in the business section of the city. Some forty or more years ago, when Long Acre was practically a suburb of New York, this particular house was the home of a proud Knickerbocker family. Its rooms and halls and staircases rang with the laughter of richly-attired men and women—the society of New York in ante-bellum days. But in the modern relentless march uptown of commercialism, all that remained of its one-time glory had been swept away. The house fell into decay and ruin, and while waiting for it to be pulled down entirely, to make room for an up-to-date skyscraper, the present owners had rented it just to pay the taxes. And a queer collection of tenants they had secured. A quick-lunch-counter man occupied the basement: a theatrical costumer had the front parlor, with armor and wigs, and other bizarre exhibits in the window. Up one flight of stairs was a private detective bureau, while on the next flight was a theatrical agency, presided over by a Mr. Quiller—foxy Quiller, his clients nicknamed him, where actors and actresses out of employment, might or might not, hear of things to their advantage.

There was no elevator and the stairs were dark and fatiguing to climb. By the time he had reached the top, Jim Weston was out of breath. Halting a moment to get his wind, he then continued along a hall until he came to an office, the door of which was opened. He entered.

In a large gloomy-looking room, scantily lighted by two windows, which looked as if they had not been washed for months, a score of men and women were sitting in solemn silence, on as many rickety chairs. That they were professionals "out of engagement" was evident at a glance. The women wore smart frocks, and the men were clean shaven, but there was an obsequious deference in their manner and a worried, expectant expression on their faces that one sees only in dependents anxious to please. In the far corner, near the window, was Mr. Quiller's private office, on the frosted glass door of which was the word "Private." Above the door, and all about the room were large cards bearing such friendly greetings as: "MY TIME'S WORTH MONEY! DON'T WASTE IT." "THIS IS MY BUSY DAY; BE BRIEF." "DON'T COME TILL I SEND FOR YOU—THIS MEANS YOU!" The other decorations consisted of a number of theatrical photographs tacked here and there on the walls and a few old playbills. At a desk near the entrance, a slovenly office boy sat reading a dime novel.

He looked up as Jim entered and nodded with familiar insolence. The advance man was no stranger there. Each day for months past, he had climbed those dingy stairs, only to get the same discouraging answer: "Nothing doing." Yet he had persevered. He never let a day go by without dropping in at least once. There was always the chance of something turning up. Approaching the desk he inquired:

"Mr. Quiller in?"

"Busy!" growled the boy. With a gesture of his hand toward the others already waiting, he said insolently: "All them people is here before you."

Actors and actresses, when they are recognized as human beings at all, are only "people" in managerial offices. The ordinary courtesies of life do not extend to the humble player. The star, the public favorite, is courted and fawned upon by the cringing theatre director, but the rank and file of the profession are just "people". If the office boy was rude, he merely reflected the scornful attitude of his superiors.

Weston quickly took a seat and waited. The others were strangers to him. Their faces were familiar from seeing them frequently in the same place, and he guessed that they had come on the same mission as himself. Secretly, he felt sorry for them, especially for the women, some of whom were young and pretty. They looked thin, careworn and sad. Ah, who knew better than he, how hard and disappointing a career it was! They were only beginners and already they were bitterly disillusioned, while he had gone through it all and come out—a wreck!

The silence was awkward and oppressive. Through the closed door of the private office was heard a man's harsh voice; then a woman's softer tones in reply. One of those waiting whispered to a neighbor and then some one laughed, which relieved the unnatural tension. All forced themselves to appear cheerful and unconcerned, each secretly ashamed to be

there, humiliated at being subjected to the same treatment as menials in this Intelligence office of the stage.

Two women were talking in an undertone and Weston, sitting close by, could not help hearing what they said. One, an attractive, modest-looking girl, was almost in tears, complaining bitterly of indignities to which she had been subjected by a manager.

"I wouldn't stand for it," she said, "so he gave me two weeks' notice, on the pretext that the author didn't like me in the part. He knew he was lying—my notices were fine! Such a time as I had with him! I made a hit on the opening night. He came back on the stage and invited me to supper. As he talked of signing with me for five years, I didn't dare refuse. At supper he let me understand what the price would be. I instantly rose from the table and told him I wasn't that kind of a girl. Then he got mad. He told me to think well before I made the mistake of my life. He said no girls got along on the stage unless they consented to these conditions, and that if I refused I would be blacklisted by every manager in town. I didn't even deign to answer. I called a cab and left him. The following day I got my walking papers. I did not care so much about leaving the company. Under the circumstances I couldn't have stayed and retained my self respect. I laughed at his threat, but I've since found it was no idle one. I've been turned down everywhere."

Her companion, an older woman, more sophisticated and more worldly, shook her head sympathetically:

"Nonsense, child, that's only a coincidence. It's preposterous to imagine for a moment that reputable managers would lend themselves to anything of the kind. You happened to come across a scoundrel—that's all. Broadway's full of such human vultures—more's the pity—and they're giving the stage a bad name. But a woman doesn't have to be bad unless she wants to be. Maybe advancement is quicker by the easiest way, but the good girls get there just the same, if they've talent. Look at the women who have succeeded on the stage and whose name not a breath of scandal has ever touched. Take, for instance, Maude——"

Before she could complete the name, the door of Mr. Quiller's sanctum opened, and a young woman emerged, followed to the threshold by the dramatic agent, a jaundiced little man, with ferret-like eyes, and a greasy frock coat.

"Next!" he exclaimed in a rasping voice.

"Miss Durant!" called out the office boy.

The woman whose warm championship of the stage had been so abruptly interrupted, rose with alacrity and disappeared behind Mr. Quiller's closed door, while the young actress whose interview was ended made her way to the main entrance. Her face was veiled and she walked quickly, looking to neither left nor right, her eyes fixed on the floor, as if anxious to avoid observation. As she passed Weston, he happened to look up.

"Hello, Laura!" he exclaimed, as he recognized her. "So it was you in there with old skinflint all that time."

It was Laura Murdock, but what a startling change a few months had wrought! Who could have recognized in this pale, attenuated-looking young person, whose old-fashioned clothes, and out-of-style hat, suggested poverty's grim clutch, the famous beauty, whose jewelry and gowns used to be the envy of every woman in New York? Where the pace is so swift, those who do not keep up with the procession soon drop far behind. The girl had had a hard time of it since she bade John Madison good-bye in Colorado. He had resigned his newspaper position and had gone with a companion to search for gold. He travelled East with her as far as Chicago, where they said farewell.

"You'll be true, little one," he cried, as he clasped her in his strong arms.

"Until death, John!" she said through her tears.

They promised to write at least once a week and tell each other everything. The time would soon pass, and when he came back they would get married. And so they parted, he to Nevada; she back to New York, once more to take up her work—not her old life.

Faithful to her solemn promise, she gave up her fine apartment, and took less expensive rooms. She dressed more modestly, eschewed taxicabs, after-theatre suppers, and other unnecessary luxuries and shunned her old associates. Little champagne suppers, and the small hours, knew her no more. She was sincere in her determination to break off with that kind of life forever. Henceforth she would live within such income as she could legitimately earn on the stage.

But she soon found that it was more difficult than she supposed. Managers' offices did not seem so easy of access as before. The success of her stock engagement at Denver had not impressed the New York managers so favorably as she expected it would. When she called and stated she was at liberty, they were evasive and non-committal; the next time she called they were out. It was the same everywhere. No one seemed to want her at any price. She did

not realize that at no time had the stage been clamoring for her services. She saw only that there was a conspiracy of silence and indifference around her now.

If she were willing to go on living as before, and use the influence of such men as Willard Brockton, she could have all the parts she wanted to play, but that was a price she would pay no longer. The weeks went by, and no money coming in, it was not long before her slender earnings were depleted. For a time she managed to keep the wolf from the door by selling some of her old finery, dainty creations in point lace and chiffons, which she would never wear again, but when these were gone, blank destitution stared her in the face. A brief engagement she was lucky enough to secure after unheard-of exertions, helped matters for a while, but the show came to grief, and then things were as bad as ever. Visits to the pawnshop became frequent and soon she was compelled to give up her rooms and seek still cheaper quarters. But in all her troubles, she never lost courage. Sleeping and waking, the searching, questioning eyes of John Madison were continually before her. At all times she could hear him saying: "You'll be true, little one!" And it strengthened her resolve to battle bravely on, until he came to claim her for his bride.

"I didn't see you, Jim," said Laura, sinking wearily into a chair near him. "Well, what luck to-day?"

He shook his head.

"Bad—bad. Guess you don't want to hear."

"I'm sorry," she said. "Where have you been?"

She listened with sympathetic interest, as he told her of the day's useless trappings. When he had finished, he looked inquiringly at her. Abruptly he asked:

"And you—got anything yet?"

She shook her head despondently.

"No, Jim, not yet."

He made a gesture towards the private office, which she had just vacated.

"You were in there such a long time, I made sure there was something doing."

Laura shrugged her shoulders impatiently:

"Quiller sent for me, and I hurried here thinking it was serious. Then he had the nerve to say he'd guarantee me an engagement, if I could put up five hundred dollars. I could not help laughing. 'Where would I get five hundred dollars?' I said. 'You know that better than I,' he replied. 'Surely you've plenty of admirers who'd be willing to put the money up for you.' What do you think of his impudence? I felt like slapping his face."

The advance man gave a dry chuckle.

"Up to the old game," he said. "Do you think these people live on the petty commissions we pay 'em? Not on your life! They gets just such gals as you to find an angel willing to put up the 'dough'. That's why there are so many near-actresses on the stage. It isn't talent they want nowadays, it's money." Changing the subject, he went on: "By the way, I met an old chum of yours just now. She asked after you——"

"An old chum?" echoed Laura, puzzled.

"Yes—Elfie St. Clair."

The girl's pale face reddened slightly. Involuntarily her manner stiffened. Indifferently she said:

"I haven't seen her for months. What did she say?"

"She seemed to know things weren't quite right with you. She's a bad lot, that girl, but she has a good heart. She asked where you lived."

"You didn't tell her, I hope," exclaimed Laura hurriedly.

"Yes, I did," answered the advance man doggedly. "Why shouldn't I?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "She's the last woman in the world I want to see. I never want to see her again. If she calls I won't see her." Glancing at the clock, she added: "I must be going. What are you doing here?"

Weston smiled grimly.

"Wasting time, I guess. Quiller said there might be something to-day. He's said the same every day for three months past."

"Well, I must go," she said. "Good-bye, I'll probably see you at the house."

"Yes," he nodded. "Maybe there'll be some good news to tell you, but I doubt it."

The girl disappeared and Jim resumed his seat, patiently awaiting his turn to see Mr. Quiller.

CHAPTER X.

Mrs. Farley's establishment was situated on Forty —th Street, between Eighth and Ninth Avenues, a neighborhood at one time much in vogue, but now given up almost entirely to boarding-houses of the cheaper kind. Old-fashioned brownstone residences, with high ceilings, cracked walls, dirty, paper-patched windows, and narrow little gardens choked up with weeds, they were as unattractive-looking from without as they were gloomy and destitute of comfort within. Yet poverty-stricken as were the surroundings, the street itself was respectable enough. As in the case of a homely woman, its very ugliness served to keep its morals above reproach. Vice required more alluring quarters than these for profitable pursuit of its red-light trade. If, therefore, a woman stood in need of a certificate of character, all that was necessary was to say that she lived there.

The back room, which, for nearly six long, weary weeks Laura had occupied on the second floor was characteristic of the place and the class of lodgers who lived there. For years the house had been falling into general decay, with no attempt at repairs. The ceilings were cracked; the wall-paper was old and spotted, and in places hung down brazenly in loose flaps. The cheap carpet was worn threadbare, with here and there large rents, which acted as so many dangerous pitfalls for the unwary. The furniture, of the cheapest possible description, comprised a large, old-fashioned wardrobe, for the most part full of rubbish, a dresser scattered with a few cheap toilet articles, a broken-down washstand and a three-quarter old wooden bed, which, placed against the wall right in the center of the room, monopolized most of the little space there was. At the foot of the bed, a small table, covered with a soiled and ink-stained cloth, was heaped with newspapers and magazines; on the right, facing the door, leading to the hall outside, an old-style mantelpiece surmounted a rusty fireplace. A single arm gas jet served for illuminating purposes, and in a little alcove stood a table with a small gas stove connected by rubber tubing with a gas fixture. There were two windows in the room, opening outward in the French manner on to a dilapidated balcony which overlooked the street below.

This was the wretched place for which Laura had given up all her former ease and magnificence—her \$8,000 apartment, her crystal bathtub, her French maid, her automobile, and every other conceivable luxury. The descent from affluence to actual want had been gradual, but none the less swift and sure. It had cost her many a bitter pang, many an hour of keen humiliation, but she had made the sacrifice willingly, cheerfully, feeling in her heart that he would wish it and commend her for it. In all her troubles, John was never for a moment out of her thoughts. Everywhere about the room were reminders of the man who any day might return to claim her for his wife. On the dresser stood a small photograph of him in a cheap frame; tacked over the head of the bed was a larger portrait. A small bow of dainty blue ribbon at the top covered the tack, and underneath was a bunch of violets, now withered, but a silent and touching tribute to the absent one.

The room showed every evidence of being occupied, and at a glance it was easy to guess the vocation and also the sex of the tenant. In the wardrobe hung a few old dresses, most of them a good deal worn and shabby, while in an open drawer at the bottom could be seen several old pairs of women's shoes. On an armchair was thrown a cheap kimona. The dresser, in keeping with the general meanness, was adorned with pictorial postcards stuck in between the mirror and the frame, and on it were all the accessories necessary to the actress—powder box and puff, a rouge box and a rabbit's paw, a hand mirror, a small alcohol curling-iron heater, and a bottle of cheap perfume, purple in color, and nearly empty. On the mantelpiece were arranged photographs of actors and actresses and pieces of cheap bric-a-brac. Conspicuous in a corner was a huge theatrical trunk, plastered with the labels of hotels and theatres. Had the lid been raised, a caller might have seen in the tray, among the remnants of a once elaborate wardrobe, one little token that told at once the whole miserable story—a bundle of pawntickets!

Another week had gone by, and Laura's situation, instead of improving, grew steadily more precarious. An engagement seemed farther away than ever; it was impossible to secure one of any kind. One disappointment followed another. Either the companies were all full, or the part offered was not in her line. Managers consciencelessly broke their promises; Mr. Quiller and the other dramatic agents were blandly indifferent. Meantime no money was coming in, and the girl was completely at the end of her resources. Her clothes were now

little better than rags; very soon she would not be able to go out at all, let alone make the round of the managers' offices. She owed three weeks rent to her landlady, a matter-of-fact, hard-as-nails type of woman, who was not to be put off much longer with mere promises. Unless she could settle soon, Mrs. Farley would tell her to get out, and then where could she go?

Perhaps for the first time in her life Laura realized now how utterly alone she was in the world. Never had it seemed to her so big, so indifferent, so heartless. Her parents were dead, and as far as she knew she had no relatives. Friends—so-called friends—were at best only fair weather acquaintances. There was not one from whom she would accept assistance. One man would help her, a man to whose generosity she could appeal with the certainty of instant response—Willard Brockton. But she would die sooner. She would not confess defeat. The one being who really cared for her and to whom she could properly appeal was thousands of miles away, in complete ignorance of her plight. She could telegraph him for money, but he might not understand, and she was too proud to lay her actions open to misconstruction. No, she must have patience and wait. If she had to go out scrubbing she would hold out until John Madison came back for her. But it was a bitter experience for a girl who had grown accustomed to every luxury, and, at times, her fortitude and patience were tried to the utmost. The constant humiliation, to say nothing of the mental and physical suffering, was sometimes more than she could bear, and there were many nights when she sobbed herself to sleep. Even her good looks suffered. Constant anxiety made her thin; sleepless nights drove the color from her cheeks and put dark circles round her eyes. She did not have even enough to eat. Forced to economize, she went without regular meals, satisfying her hunger cravings with what little she could cook herself in her own comfortless room.

But in these dark hours, there was one ray of light, and that was her serene faith in her absent lover. She was convinced now that her attachment for the journalist was no passing fancy, no mere caprice of the moment. For the first time in her life, she felt the uplifting, exalted emotion of a pure love, and it seemed to burn in her bosom like a cleansing touch, wiping out the stain in her past. With all her experiences, tragic and otherwise, Laura Murdock had found nothing equal to this sudden, swiftly increasing love for the young Westerner.

That he would come back for her sooner or later, she never for a moment doubted. Of his perfect loyalty, she was convinced. He was her one thought, night and day, and there was no keener pleasure in this, her new life, than in maintaining their constant correspondence. Not a day passed that did not carry a letter Westwards; each morning the postman brought a letter from Madison, full of what he was doing, setting enthusiastically forth his plans for the future. These letters, which were her most treasured possessions, she kept in a big, cardboard box under the bed. By actual count, there were 125 letters and 80 telegrams, tied in eight separate bundles with dainty blue ribbon. On days when she was particularly depressed and discouraged, she felt comforted if she could drag out the letter-box and reread the messages from the loved one.

This is what she was doing one afternoon about a week after her fruitless visit to Mr. Quiller's office. The weather being stormy, she could not go out, so, after lunching abundantly on a glass of milk and a few dry crackers, she once more dragged the box from under the bed. Selecting a bundle of letters, she climbed on the bed, and, squatting down, her feet crossed in Oriental fashion, proceeded to enjoy them. Every now and then she would glance up from the sheet of closely written paper, and take a long, loving look at the large portrait of her sweetheart over the bed.

While thus busily engaged, there suddenly came a knock at the door. Quickly Laura jumped from the bed, replaced the letters in the box, which she slid back in its place, and called out:

"Come in."

Cautiously the door was opened a few inches, and a chocolate-colored negress put her head in. Seeing that Laura was alone, she pushed the door open wider and came in, letter in hand.

"Hello, Annie!" said Laura amiably.

"Heah's yo' mail, Miss Laura," said the slavey, with a significant leer.

"Thank you," said the young actress, taking the proffered missive.

She merely glanced at the familiar, beloved superscription, making no attempt to open the envelope in the presence of the maid. But Annie, the slovenly type of negress one encounters in cheap theatrical boarding-houses, showed no disposition to withdraw. Like most servants, she was inquisitive, and never neglected an opportunity to spy and gossip, considering it a part of her duties to learn everything possible of the private affairs of the lodgers. Quite unlike the traditional, smiling, good-natured "mammy" of the South, she was one of those cunning, crafty, heartless, surly Northern negresses, who, to the number of thousands, seek

employment as maids with women of easy morals, and, infesting a certain district of New York where white and black people of the lower classes mingle indiscriminately, make it one of the most criminal and dangerous sections of the city. Innately and brutally selfish, such women prey on those they profess to serve, and are honest and faithful only so long as it serves their purpose.

Annie kept one eye on the letter, while she pretended to tidy things about the room. Presently she said:

"One like dat comes every mornin', don't it? Used to all be postmahked Denver. Must 'a' moved."

As she spoke, she tried to get a glimpse of the letter over Laura's shoulder, but as the actress turned, she quickly looked away, and added:

"Where is dat place called Goldfield, Miss Laura?"

"In Nevada."

"In *Nevada*?" echoed the woman, laying comical stress on the pronunciation.

"Yes—Nevada. What's strange about that?"

Annie drew her jacket closer around her, as if she were chilly. Shaking her head, she said:

"Must be mighty smaht to write yuh every day. De pos'man brings it 'leven o'clock mos' always, sometimes twelve, and again sometimes tehn. Today he was late. But it comes, every day, don't it?"

"I know," said Laura, with a faint smile.

She disliked the negress, but reasons of policy prompted her always to appear cordial. Annie began brushing the armchair vigorously, and, as she worked, tried once more to see the postmark on the letter. Finally she said:

"Guess mus' be from yo' husban', ain't it?"

Laura shook her head.

"No, I haven't any."

The negress whisked her feather duster triumphantly.

"Dat's what Ah tole Mis' Farley when she was down talkin' about yo' dis mornin'. She said if he was yo' husban' he might do somethin' to help yo' out. Ah tole her Ah didn't think yo' had any husban'. Den she says yo' ought to have one, yo're so pretty."

Laura laughed.

"Don't be so foolish, Annie."

Noticing that she had left the room door ajar, the negress went and banged it shut. Then, proceeding to hang a clean towel on the washstand, she continued gossiping:

"Der ain't a decent door in dis old house. Mis' Farley said yo' might have mos' any man yo' wanted just for de askin', but Ah said yuh was too particular about the man yo'd want. Den she did a heap o' talkin'."

"About what?" demanded Laura quickly.

She was amused as well as annoyed at the woman's impudence, but it was just as well to know what was being said about her downstairs. Pretending, therefore, to be interested, and curbing her impatience, she placed the still unopened letter on the table, and, going to her trunk, took from it a thimble and thread. Closing down the lid again, she sat on the trunk and began to sew a rip in her skirt. Annie, meantime, had begun to fuss at making the bed.



SHE BEGAN TO SEW A RIP IN HER SKIRT.

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"Well, yo' know," went on the maid, "Mis' Farley she's been havin' so much trouble wid her roomers. Yestuhday dat young lady on de second flo' front, she lef. She's gwine wid some troupe on the road. She owed her room for three weeks, and jus' had to leave her trunk. My! how Mis' Farley did scold her. Mis' Farley let on she could have paid dat money if she wanted to, but, somehow, Ah guess she couldn't——"

She was carrying the pillows round the table, when suddenly she stopped talking and stooped to inspect the letter, which was still lying there. Laura happened to look up. Indignantly, she exclaimed:

"Annie!"

The negress looked confused, but was not otherwise abashed. Going on with her work, she continued coolly:

"—For if she could, she wouldn't have left her trunk, would she, Miss Laura?"

"No, I suppose not," replied the actress guardedly. After a pause, she asked: "What did Mrs. Farley say about me?"

The negress picked up the kimona from the chair and carried it to the wardrobe. With some hesitation, she said:

"Oh, nothin' much."

She needed encouragement, and Laura gave it to her.

"Well, what?"

Thus coaxed, Annie went on:

"She kinder say somethin' 'bout yo' bein' three weeks behind in yo' room rent, an' she said she t'ought it was 'bout time yuh handed her somethin', seem' as how yuh must o' had some stylish friends when yuh come here."

"Who, for instance?"

"Ah don't know. Mis' Farley said some of 'em might slip yo' enough jest to help yuh out." Stopping in her work, she looked curiously at the actress. "Ain't yo' got nobody to take care of yo' at all, Miss Laura?"

Laura shook her head despondently. Sadly, she replied:

"No! No one."

"Dat's too bad."

"Why?"

The negress grinned. Significantly, she said:

"Mis' Farley says yuh wouldn't have no trouble at all gettin' any man to take care of yuh if yuh wanted to."

Laura averted her head. A chill ran through her. Only too well she knew what the girl meant. She wished she would stop gossiping and go. With some display of irritation, she said:

"Don't talk that way, Annie—please."

But the negress was not to be put off so easily. In her coarse, brutal way, she felt sorry for the pretty young lady, and aware that in some quarters good looks are negotiable, she felt chagrined that such valuable assets should not be realized upon. Playing nervously with a corner of the table-cloth, she continued:

"Dere's a gemman dat calls on one of de ladies from de Circus, in de big front room downstairs. He's mighty nice, and he's been askin' 'bout yo'."

"Oh, shut up!" cried Laura, thoroughly exasperated.

The doors of the wardrobe, being loose on their hinges, kept swinging open, and the negress several times had impatiently slammed them shut. Turning to Laura, she went on:

"Mis' Farley says——"

The doors came open again, and hit her in the back. This time the maid lost her temper completely. Giving them a vicious push, she exclaimed:

"Damn dat door!"

Then going to the washstand, and grabbing a basin which was half-full of water, she emptied it into the waste jar. Now thoroughly angry, she went on sourly:

"Mis' Farley says if she don't get some one in the house dat has reg'lar money soon, she'll have to shut up and go to the po'house."

A look of distress and annoyance crossed Laura's face. It was hard to hear this from a menial.

"I'm sorry," she said; "I'll try again to-day."

Rising from the trunk, she crossed the room, and, taking a desk-pad from the mantel-piece, returned and took a seat at the table.

"Ain't yo' got any job at all?" demanded Annie, who was watching her as closely as she dared.

"No."

"When yuh come here yuh had lots of money and yo' was mighty good to me. You know Mr. Weston?"

"Jim Weston?"

"Yassum, Mr. Weston, what goes ahead o' shows and lives on the top floor back; he says nobody's got jobs now. Dey're so many actors and actresses out o' work. Mis' Farley says she don't know how she's goin' to live. She said you'd been mighty nice up until three weeks ago, but yuh ain't got much left, have you, Miss Laura?"

The girl shook her head mournfully.

"No. It's all gone."

The negress threw up her hands and from sheer excitement sat plump down on the bed.

"Mah sakes!" she exclaimed, rolling her eyes. "All dem rings and things? You ain't done sold them?"

"They're pawned," said Laura sadly. "What did Mrs. Farley say she was going to do?"

"Guess maybe Ah'd better not tell."

"Please do."

"Yuh been so good to me, Miss Laura. Never was nobody in dis house what give me so much, and Ah ain't been gettin' much lately. And when Mis' Farley said yuh must either pay yo' rent or she would ask yuh for your room, Ah jest set right down on de back kitchen stairs and cried. Besides, Mis' Farley don't like me very well since you've been havin' yo' breakfasts and dinners brought up here."

"Why not?"

Taking the kimona off the chair-back, Laura went to the dresser, and, putting the kimona in the drawer, took out her purse, an action not unobserved by the stealthy African, who at once grew correspondingly more amiable and communicative.

"She has a rule in dis house dat nobody can use huh chiny or fo'ks or spoons who ain't boading heah, and de odder day when yuh asked me to bring up a knife and fo'k she ketched me coming upstairs, and she says, 'Where yuh goin' wid all dose things, Annie?' Ah said, 'Ah'm just goin' up to Miss Laura's room with dat knife and fo'k.' Ah said, 'Ah'm goin' up for nothin' at all, Mis' Farley, she jest wants to look at them, Ah guess.' She said, 'She wants to eat huh dinner wid 'em, Ah guess.' Ah got real mad, and Ah told her if she'd give me mah pay Ah'd brush right out o' here; dat's what Ah'd do, Ah'd brush right out o' here."

She shook out the towel violently, as if to emphasize her indignation. Laura could not restrain a smile.

"I'm sorry, Annie, if I've caused you any trouble. Never mind, I'll be able to pay the rent to-morrow or next day, anyway."

Fumbling in her purse, she took out a quarter, and turned to the servant:

"Here!"

"No, ma'am; Ah don' want dat," said Annie, making a show of reluctance.

"Please take it," insisted Laura.

"No, ma'am; Ah don' want it. You need dat. Dat's breakfast money for yuh, Miss Laura."

"Please take it, Annie. I might just as well get rid of this as anything else."

Rather reluctantly, the negress took the money. With a grin, she said:

"Yuh always was so good, Miss Laura. Sho' yuh don' want dis?"

"Sure."

"Sho' yo' goin' to get plenty mo'?"

"Sure."

Suddenly a shrill, feminine voice was heard downstairs, calling loudly:

"Annie! Annie!"

The negress hastily went to the door and opened it.

"Dat's Mis' Farley!" she said in an undertone. Answering in the same key, she shouted: "Yassum, Mis' Farley."

"Is Miss Murdock up there?" cried the same voice.

"Yassum, Mis' Farley; yassum!"

"Anything doin'?"

"Huh?"

"Anything doin'?"

The negress hesitated, and looked at Laura.

"Ah—Ah—hain't asked, Missy Farley."

"Then do it," said the voice determinedly.

Laura advanced to the rescue.

"I'll answer her," she said. Putting her head out of the door, she cried:

"What is it, Mrs. Farley?"

The irate landlady's voice underwent a quick change. In a softened voice, she called up:

"Did ye have any luck this morning, dearie?"

"No; but I promise you faithfully to help you out this afternoon or to-morrow."

"Sure? Are you certain?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, I must say these people expect me to keep——"

There was an exclamation of skeptical impatience, and the door below slammed with a bang. Laura quietly closed her door, through which Mrs. Farley's angry mutterings could still be heard indistinctly. Laura sighed, and, walking to the table, sat down again. Annie looked at her a moment, and then slowly opened the door.

"Yo' sho' dere ain't nothin' I can do fo' yuh, Miss Laura?"

"Nothing," said Laura wearily.

The negress reluctantly turned to go. Her work now finished, there was no further excuse for remaining. Slowly she left the room, carrying her broom and dustpan with her.

CHAPTER XI.

Immediately the maid had disappeared, Laura sprang to her feet and picked up John's letter. It was only with the greatest difficulty that she had managed to curb her impatience. Eagerly she tore open the envelope.

The letter consisted, as usual, of several pages closely written. Things were pretty much the same, he said. It was a wonderful country, vast and unconquered, a land where man was constantly at war with the forces of Nature. Extraordinary finds were being made every day; one literally picked up gold nuggets by the handful. If he and his partner were only reasonably lucky, there was no reason why they should not become enormously rich. He hoped his little girl was happy and prosperous. He was sure she was true. Each night when he went to sleep in his tent, he placed two things under his pillow, things that had become necessary to his salvation—a Colt revolver and her sweet photograph. He quite understood that it was difficult to secure good engagements, especially since Brockton's backing was withdrawn, but he advised her to take heart and accept anything she could get—for the present. It would not be for long. When he came back, rich beyond the dreams of avarice, she would not have to worry about theatre managers any more.

She read the letter through hurriedly, re-read it, and then, pressing the missive to her lips, laid it down on the table.

"Accept anything!" she murmured. "Ah, he does not understand. How should he? If only there was something to accept!" Rising wearily, she sighed: "Hope, just nothing but hope."

Her mouth quivered, and her bosom, agitated by the emotion she was trying hard to suppress, rose and fell convulsively. He did not understand. How was it possible for her to wait? She had already waited until everything was gone—her rings, her watch and chain, even the clothes on her back. She was absolutely penniless; unless relief came soon she would be turned into the streets. Oh, why could he not have guessed the truth from her letters, and come back to her?

Going to the bed, she fell face down upon it, burying her face in her hands. A convulsive sobbing shook her entire being. It was too hard to bear. She had tried to be brave, but her heart was breaking. Ah, if John only knew! What did she care for riches? If only he would come to comfort her and give her courage.

For fifteen minutes she lay there, motionless, a pathetic figure of utter despondency. The minutes might have lengthened into hours, when suddenly a hurdy-gurdy in the street below started to play a popular air. Often the most trivial and commonplace incident will change the entire current of our thoughts. It was so in this instance. The cheap music had the effect of instantly galvanizing the young actress into life. It suddenly occurred to her that she was ravenously hungry. She rose from the bed, went to the wardrobe and took out a box of crackers. Then opening the window, at the same time humming the tune of the hurdy-gurdy, she got a bottle of milk that was standing on the sill outside and placed it on the table. Next she went to the washstand and rinsed out a tumbler. While thus engaged, there came a

timid knock at the door. Startled, not knowing who it could be, unwilling that strangers should detect the traces of tears, she went quickly to the dresser and powdered her nose. The knocking was repeated.

"Come in!" she called out, without turning round.

The door opened and Jim Weston appeared. He halted on the threshold, holding the knob in his hand.

"May I come in?"

"Hello, Jim! Of course you may. I'm awfully glad you came. I was feeling horribly blue. Any luck?"

The advance agent came in, closing the door carefully behind him.

"Lots of it," he grinned.

"That's good," exclaimed Laura, who was still at the mirror arranging her hair. "Tell me."

"It's bad luck—as usual. I kind o' felt around up at Burgess's office. I thought I might get a job there, but he put me off until to-morrow. Somehow those fellows always do business to-morrow."

Laura closed the window, shutting out the sound of the street music, which now could be heard only faintly. Grimly, she said:

"Yes, and there's always to-day to look after." Going up to him, she said kindly: "I know just how you feel. Sit down, Jim."

He took a seat near the table, and accepted a dry cracker which she offered him. As he munched it, Laura went on:

"It's pretty tough for me, but it must be a whole lot worse for you, with a wife and kids."

The agent made a wry face.

"Oh, if a man's alone he can generally get along—turn his hand to anything. But a woman ___"

"Worse, you think?"

He eyed her a moment without replying. Then he said:

"I was just thinking about you and what Burgess said."

"What was that?" asked the girl indifferently, as she sipped her milk.

The agent cleared his throat. With an air of some importance, he said:

"You know Burgess and I used to be in the circus business together. He took care of the grafters when I was boss canvas man. I never could see any good in shaking down the rubes for all the money they had and then taking part of it. He used to run the privilege car, you know."

Laura looked puzzled.

"Privilege car?" she echoed.

"Yes," he went on, "had charge of all the pick-pockets—dips we called 'em—sure-thing gamblers and the like. Made him rich. I kept sort o' on the level and I'm broke. Guess it don't pay to be honest—"

Laura gave him a quick look. In a significant tone of voice, she said:

"You don't really think that?"

The man shook his head dubiously.

"No, maybe not. Ever since I married the missis and the first kid come we figured the only good money was the kind folks worked for and earned. But when you can't get hold of that, it's tough."

The girl nodded, and, averting her head, looked out of the window.

"I know," she said simply.

The agent was in a loquacious mood this afternoon, and needed little encouragement to do all the talking. He went on:

"Burgess don't seem to be losing sleep over the tricks he turned. He's happy and prosperous, but I guess he ain't any better now than he ought to be."

"I guess he isn't," rejoined Laura quickly. "I know I've been trying to induce him to give me an engagement, but for some reason I get no satisfaction. There are half a dozen parts in his new attractions that I could do. He has never said absolutely 'no'; but, somehow, he's never said 'yes'."

"That's odd," said her visitor, scratching his head, as if puzzled. "He spoke about you today."

"In what way?" demanded the girl.

"I gave him my address, and he saw it was yours, too. He asked if I lived in the same place."

"Was that all?"

"He wanted to know how you was getting on. I let him know you needed work, but I didn't tip my hand you was flat broke. He said something about you being a damned fool."

Laura looked up in surprise.

"How?" she demanded.

Weston twirled his hat round nervously, and remained silent.

"How?" she demanded again.

Thus encouraged, he proceeded:

"Well, Johnny Ensworth—you know he used to do the fights on the *Evening Screamer*; now he's press agent for Burgess; nice fellow and way on the inside—and he told me where you were in wrong."

"What have I done?" she asked, taking a seat in the armchair.

"Burgess don't put up the money for any of them musical comedies—he just trails. Of course, he's got a lot of influence, and he's always Johnny-on-the-Spot to turn any dirty trick that they want. There are four or five rich men in town who are there with the bank-roll, providing he engages women who ain't so very particular about the location of their residence, and who don't hear a curfew ring at eleven-thirty every night."

"And he thinks I am too particular?" interrupted Laura dryly.

"That's what was slipped me. Seems that one of the richest men who is in on Mr. Burgess's address book is that fellow Brockton. You're an old friend of his. He's got more money than he knows what to do with. He likes to play show business. And he thought that if you——"

Rising quickly, the girl went to the wardrobe, and, taking out her hat, picked up a pair of scissors, and proceeded to curl the feathers. The hat was already in so deplorable a condition that this belated home treatment was not likely to help it, but the diversion served its purpose, which was to distract the agent's attention away from her face.

"I didn't mean no offence," said Jim apologetically. "I thought it was just as well to tell you where he and Burgess stand. They're pals."

Laura jumped up, and, putting the hat and scissors down on the bed, went close up to her visitor. Confronting him, she said with angry emphasis:

"I don't want you to talk about him or any of them. I just want you to know that I'm trying to do everything in my power to go through this season without any more trouble. I've pawned everything I've got; I've cut every friend I knew. But where am I going to end? That's what I want to know—where am I going to end?" Sitting down on the bed, she went on: "Every place I look for a position something interferes. It's almost as if I were blacklisted. I know I could get jobs all right, if I wanted to pay the price, but I won't. I just want to tell you, I won't. No!"

Nervous and restless, she again rose, and, going to the fireplace, rested her elbow on the mantel. The advance agent coughed and nodded his head approvingly.

"That's the way to talk," he said. "I don't know you very well, but I've watched you close. I'm just a common, ordinary showman, who never had much money, and I'm going out o' date. I've spent most of my time with nigger minstrel shows and circuses, but I've been on the square. That's why I'm broke." Rather sadly he added: "Once I thought the missis would have to go back and do her acrobatic act, but she couldn't do that, she's grown so deuced fat." Rising and going up to Laura, he said: "Just you don't mind. It'll all come out right."

"It's an awful tough game, isn't it?" she said, averting her face.

She wiped away the tears that were silently coursing down her wan cheeks. Then, going to the table, she took up the glass, poured the unused milk back in the bottle, and replaced the biscuits in the wardrobe.

"Tough!" exclaimed the agent. "It's hell forty ways from the Jack. It's tough for me, but for a pretty woman with a lot o' rich fools jumping out o' their automobiles and hanging around stage doors, it must be something awful. I ain't blaming the women. They say 'self-preservation is the first law of nature,' and I guess that's right; but sometimes when the show is over and I see them fellows with their hair plastered back, smoking cigarettes in a holder long enough to reach from here to Harlem, and a bank-roll that would bust my pocket and turn my head, I feel as if I'd like to get a gun and go a-shooting around this old town."

"Jim!" protested Laura.

"Yes, I do," he insisted hotly; "you bet!"

"That wouldn't pay, would it?"

"No; they're not worth the job of sitting on that throne in Sing Sing, and I'm too poor to go to Matteawan. But all them fellows under nineteen and over fifty-nine ain't much use to themselves or any one else."

"Perhaps all of them are not so bad," said Laura meditatively.

"Yes, they are," he insisted angrily; "angels and all. Last season I had one of them shows where a rich fellow backed it on account of a girl. We lost money and he lost his girl; then we got stuck in Texas. I telegraphed: 'Must have a thousand, or can't move.' He just answered: 'Don't move.' We didn't."

"But that was business."

"Bad business," he nodded. "It took a year for some of them folks to get back to Broadway. Some of the girls never did, and I guess never will."

"Maybe they're better off, Jim."

"Couldn't be worse. They're still in Texas. Wish I knew how to do something else—being a plumber or a walking delegate—they always have jobs."

"I wish I could do something else, too, but I can't. We've got to make the best of it."

Weston rose and took his hat.

"I guess so. Well, I'll see you this evening. I hope you'll have good news by that time." He started to open the door, and then came back a step, and in a voice meant to be kindly, he said: "If you'd like to go to the theatre to-night, and take some other woman in the house, maybe I can get a couple of tickets for one of the shows. I know a lot of fellows who are working."

The girl smiled sadly; tears filled her eyes.

"No, thanks, Jim; I haven't anything to wear to the theatre, and I don't——"

He understood. His face broadened into a sympathetic smile, and, putting his arm affectionately round her waist, as a father might with his daughter, he said kindly:

"Now, you just cheer up! Something's sure to turn up. It always has for me, and I'm a lot older than you, both in years and in this business. There's always a break in hard luck some time——"

Laura dried her eyes, and tried to force a smile.

"I hope so," she said. "But things are looking pretty hopeless now, aren't they?"

"Never mind," he said, as he went toward the door. "I'll go and give Mrs. F. a line o' talk and try to square you for a couple of days more, anyway. But I guess she's laying pretty close to the cushion herself, poor woman."

"Annie says a lot of people owe her."

"Well, you can't pay what you haven't got. And even if money was growing on trees, it's winter now. I'm off. Maybe to-day is lucky day. So long!"

"Good-by," smiled Laura.

"Keep your nerve," he said, as he closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER XII.

"Keep your nerve!"

The words rang mockingly in the girl's ear long after the good-natured advance agent had made his departure. Keep her nerve? That was precisely what she was trying to do, and it was proving almost beyond her strength. Why had John left her to make this fight alone? He must have known, even better than she, herself, what a terrific, heart-breaking struggle it would be. Or did he wish to put her to the test, to find out if her professed determination to live a new and cleaner life was genuine and sincere. If that was his motive, surely she had been tried enough. Then, as she gave herself up to reflection, doubts began to creep in, doubts of herself, doubts of him. If he really loved her, truly and unselfishly, would he let her suffer in this way, would he have so completely deserted her? It did not once occur to her that John, being thousands of miles away, could not possibly realize her present plight. A sudden feeling of rebellion came over her. She began to nourish resentment that he should show such little concern, that he should have taken no steps to keep informed of her circumstances.

For a long-time she sat in moody silence, engrossed in deep thought, listening only abstractedly to the street sounds without. Presently her glance, wandering aimlessly around the room, fell on the letter she had just received from Goldfield. She picked it up, as if about to read it; then, as if in anger, she threw it impatiently from her. Leaning forward on the table, her face buried in her two hands, she broke down completely:

"I can't stand it—I just simply can't stand it," she moaned to herself.

A sudden knock on the door caused her to sit up with a jump. Rising, confused, as if surprised in some guilty action, she called out:

"What is it?"

"A lady to see you!" cried Annie's shrill voice on the other side of the door.

Laura went to open.

"To see me?" she exclaimed in unaffected surprise.

"It's me—Elfie," called out a familiar voice below. "May I come up?"

Laura started. Her face turned red and white in turns. Elfie St. Clair! Should she see her, or say she was out? Yet, why shouldn't she see her? She needed some one like Elfie to cheer her up. Drying her eyes, she quickly pulled herself together, and hastened to the top of the stairs. Her voice, trembling with suppressed excitement, almost unable to control the agitation that suddenly seized upon her, she cried out:

"Is that you, Elfie?"

"Yes, shall I come up?"

"Why, of course—of course!"

Panting and flushed from the extraordinary exertion of climbing two flights of stairs, Elfie at last appeared, gorgeously gowned in the extreme style affected by ladies who contract alliances with wealthy gentlemen without the formality of going through a marriage ceremony. Her dress, of the latest fashion and the richest material, with dangling gold handbag and chatelaine, contrasted strangely with Laura's shabbiness and the general dinginess of Mrs. Farley's boarding-house. But the two girls were too glad to see each other to care about anything else. With little cries of delight, they fell into each other's arms.

"Laura, you old dear!" exclaimed the newcomer in her customary explosive and vivacious manner. "I've just found out where you've been hiding, and came around to see you."

"That's awfully good of you, Elfie. You're looking bully. How are you, dear?"

"Fine."

"Come in, and sit down. I haven't much to offer, but——"

Laura was visibly embarrassed. Even her forced gayety and attempt at cordiality did not quite conceal her nervousness. It was the first time that Elfie had seen her living in such surroundings, and, in spite of her efforts to remain cool and self-possessed, her cheeks burned with humiliation.

"Oh, never mind," said Elfie quickly. Her first glance had told her how matters stood, but she made no comment. Good-naturedly, she rattled on: It's such a grand day outside, and I've come around in my car to take you out. You know, I've got a new one, and it can go some.

"I am sorry, but I can't go out this afternoon, Elfie."

"What's the matter?"

"You see, I'm staying home a good deal nowadays. I haven't been feeling very well, and I don't go out much."

"I should think not. I haven't seen even a glimpse of you anywhere since you returned from Denver. I caught sight of you one day on Broadway, but couldn't get you—you dived into some office or other."

Rising from her chair, for the first time she surveyed the room critically. Unable to contain herself any longer, she burst out explosively:

"Gee! Whatever made you come into a dump like this? It's the limit!"

Laura smiled uneasily. Going to the table, she said awkwardly:

"Oh, I know it isn't pleasant, but it's my home, and, after all—a home's a home."

Elfie shrugged her shoulders.

"Looks more like a prison." Finding on the mantel a bit of stale candy, she popped it into her mouth from sheer force of habit. But it was no sooner in than, with an expression of disgust, she spat it out on the floor. Scornfully, she added: "Makes me think of the old days, the dairy kitchen and a hall bedroom,"

Laura sighed.

"It's comfortable," she said wearily.

"Not!" retorted Elfie saucily. Sitting on the bed, she jumped on the mattress as if trying it: "Say, is this here for effect, or do you sleep on it?"

"I sleep on it," said Laura quietly.

"No wonder you look tired," laughed her caller. "Say, listen, dearie, what else is the matter with you, anyway?"

Laura looked up at her companion in pretended surprise.

"Matter?" she echoed. "Why, nothing."

"Oh, yes, there is," insisted Elfie, shaking her head sagaciously. "What's happened between you and Brockton?" Noticing the faded flowers in the vase on the table, she took them out, and after tossing them into the fireplace, refilled the vase with the fresh gardenias which she was wearing. Meantime, she did not stop chattering. "He's not broke, because I saw him the other day."

"You saw him? Where?"

"In the park. He asked me out to luncheon, but I couldn't go. You know, dearie, I've got to be so careful. Jerry's so awful jealous—the old fool."

Laura had to smile in spite of herself.

"Do you see much of Jerry nowadays?"

"Not any more than I can help and be nice," chuckled Elfie. "He gets on my nerves. Of course, I have heard about your quitting Brockton."

"Then why do you ask?" demanded Laura.

"Just wanted to hear from your own dear lips what the trouble was. Now, tell me all about it. Can I smoke here?"

Pulling her gold cigarette-case up with her chatelaine, she opened it, and selected a cigarette.

"Certainly," said Laura, getting the matches from the bureau and putting them on the table.

"Have one?" said her companion.

"No, thank you," said Laura, sitting down so that she faced her companion.

"H'm-m, h'm-m, hah!" sputtered Elfie, lighting her cigarette. "Now, go ahead. Tell me all the scandal. I'm just crazy to know."

"There's nothing to tell," said Laura wearily. "I haven't been able to find work, that is all, and I'm short of money. You can't live in hotels, you know, and have cabs and all that sort of thing, when you're not working."

"Yes, you can," retorted her visitor. "I haven't worked in a year."

"But you don't understand, dear. I—I—well, you know, I—well, you know—I can't say what I want."

"Oh, yes, you can. You can say anything to me—everybody else does. We've been pals. I know you got along a little faster in the business than I did. The chorus was my limit, and you went into the legitimate thing. But we got our living just the same way. I didn't suppose there was any secret between you and me about that."

"I know there wasn't then, Elfie; but I tell you I'm different now. I don't want to do that sort of thing, and I've been very unlucky. This has been a terribly hard season for me. I simply haven't been able to get an engagement."

"Well, you can't get on this way," said Elfie. She paused a moment, knocking the ashes off her cigarette to cover her hesitation, and then went on: "Won't Brockton help you out?"

Laura rose abruptly and walked over to the fireplace. With some display of impatience, she exclaimed:

"What's the use of talking to you, Elfie? You don't understand."

Her legs crossed in masculine style, and puffing the cigarette deliberately, Elfie looked at her friend quizzingly:

"No?" she said mockingly. "Why don't I understand?"

"Because you can't," cried Laura hotly; "you've never felt as I have."

"How do you know?" demanded the other, with an elevation of her eyebrows.

Laura made a gesture of impatience.

"Oh, what's the use of explaining?" she cried.

Her visitor looked at her for a moment without making reply. Then, with the serious, reproachful manner of a mother reproving a wayward child, she said:

"You know, Laura, I'm not much on giving advice, but you make me sick. I thought you'd grown wise. A young girl just butting into this business might possibly make a fool of herself, but you ought to be onto the game, and make the best of it."

Laura was fast losing her temper. Her eyes flashed, and her hands worked nervously. Angrily, she exclaimed:

"If you came up here, Elfie, to talk that sort of stuff to me, please don't. Out West this summer, I met some one, a real man, who did me a lot of good. You know him. You introduced him to me that night at the restaurant. Well, we met again in Denver. I learned to love him. He opened my eyes to a different way of going along. He's a man who—oh, well, what's the use! You don't know—you don't know."

She tossed her head disdainfully as if the matter was not worthy of further discussion, and sank down on the bed. Elfie, who had listened attentively, removed the cigarette from her mouth, and threw it into the fireplace. Scornfully, she said:

"I don't know, don't I? I don't know, I suppose, then, when I came to this town from up-State—a little burg named Oswego—and joined a chorus, that I didn't fall in love with just such a man. I suppose I don't know that then I was the best-looking girl in New York, and everybody talked about me? I suppose I don't know that there were men, all ages, and with all kinds of money, ready to give me anything for the mere privilege of taking me out to supper? And I didn't do it, did I? For three years I stuck by this good man, who was to lead me in a good way, toward a good life. And all the time I was getting older, never quite so pretty one day as I had been the day before. I never knew then what it was to be tinkered with by hairdressers and manicures, or a hundred and one of those other people who make you look good. I didn't have to have them then." Rising, she went up to the table and faced her companion. "Well, you know, Laura, what happened."

"Wasn't it partly your fault, Elfie?"

Her friend leaned across the table, her face flushed with anger.

"Was it my fault that time made me older and I took on a lot of flesh? Was it my fault that the work and the life took out the color, and left the make-up? Was it my fault that other pretty young girls came along, just as I'd come, and were chased after, just as I was? Was it my fault the cabs weren't waiting any more and people didn't talk about how pretty I was? And was it my fault when he finally had me alone, and just because no one else wanted me, he got tired and threw me flat—" Bringing her hand down on the table with a bang, she added: "Cold flat—and I'd been on the dead level with him." With almost a sob, she went up to the bureau, powdered her nose, and returned to the table. "It almost broke my heart. Then I made up my mind to get even and get all I could out of the game. Jerry came along. He was a has-been, and I was on the road to be. He wanted to be good to me, and I let him. That's all!"

"Still, I don't see how you can live that way," said Laura, lying back on the bed.

"Well, you did," retorted Elfie, "and you didn't kick."

"Yes," rejoined Laura calmly, "but things are different with me now. You'd be the same way if you were in my place."

"No," laughed Elfie mockingly, "I've had all the romance I want, and I'll stake you to all your love affairs. I am out to gather in as much coin as I can in my own way, so when the old rainy day comes along I'll have a little change to buy myself an umbrella."

Laura started angrily to her feet. Hotly she cried:

"What did you come here for? Why can't you leave me alone when I'm trying to get along?"

"Because I want to help you," retorted Elfie calmly.

With tears streaming down her cheeks, almost hysterical, Laura tossed aside the quilt and sank down in a heap on the bed.

"You can't help me!" she sobbed. "I'm all right—I tell you I am." Peevishly she demanded: "What do you care, anyway?"

Elfie rose, and going over to the bed, sat down and took her old chum's hand. Quietly she said:

"But I do care. I know how you feel with an old cat for a landlady, and living up here on a side street with a lot of cheap burlesque people." Laura snatched her hand away, and going up to the window, turned her back. It was a direct snub, but Elfie did not care. Unabashed, she went on: "Why, the room's cold, and there's no hot water, and you're beginning to look shabby. You haven't got a job—chances are you won't have one." Pointing contemptuously to the picture of John Madison over the bed, she went on: "What does that fellow do for you? Send you long letters of condolences? That's what I used to get. When I wanted to buy a new pair of shoes or a silk petticoat he told me how much he loved me; so I had the other ones re-soled and turned the old petticoat. And look at you—you're beginning to show it." Surveying her friend's face more closely, she went on: "I do believe there are lines coming in your face, and you hide in the house because you've nothing to wear."

Jumping off the bed, Laura went quickly to the dresser, and picking up the hand mirror, looked carefully at herself. Then laying the glass down, she turned and faced the other. Sharply she retorted:

"But I've got what you haven't got. I may have to hide my clothes, but I don't have to hide my face. And you with that man—he's old enough to be your father—a toddling dote, hanging on your apron strings. I don't see how you dare show your face to a decent woman!"

It was Elfie's turn now to lose her temper. She rose, flushed with anger.

"You don't, eh?" she cried hotly. "But you did once, and I never caught you hanging your head. You say he's old. I know he's old, but he's good to me. He's making what's left of my life pleasant. You think I like him. I don't—sometimes I hate him—but he understands; and you can bet your life his cheque is in my mail every Saturday night, or there's a new lock on the door Sunday morning."

"How dare you say such things to me?" exclaimed Laura indignantly.

"Because I want you to be square with yourself. You've lost all that precious virtue women gab about. When you've got the name, I say get the game."

Almost speechless from anger, Laura pointed to the door.

"You can go now, Elfie, and don't come back!"

"All right," exclaimed Elfie, gathering up her muff and gloves, "if that's the way you want it to be, I'm sorry."

She was hurrying toward the door, when suddenly there came a knock. Laura, with an effort, controlled herself.

"Come in," she called out.

Annie entered, with a note, which she handed to Laura.

"Mis' Farley sent dis, Miss Laura."

Laura read the note. A look of mingled annoyance and embarrassment came into her face.

"There's no answer," she said sharply, crushing the note up in her hand.

But Annie was not to be put off.

"She tol' me not to leave until Ah got an answah."

"You must ask her to wait," retorted Laura doggedly.

"She wants an answer," persisted the negress.

"Tell her I'll be right down—that it will be all right."

"But, Miss Laura, she tol' me to get an answah."

She went out reluctantly, closing the door.

"She's taking advantage of your being here," exclaimed Laura apologetically, half to herself and half to her visitor.

"How?" demanded Elfie.

"She wants money—three weeks' room-rent. I presume she thought you'd give it to me."

"Huh!" exclaimed the other, tossing her head.

Changing her tone, Laura went up to her.

"Elfie," she said, "I've been a little cross; I didn't mean it."

"Well?" demanded her companion.

"Could—could you lend me thirty-five dollars until I get to work?"

"Me?" demanded her visitor, in indignant astonishment.

"You actually have the face to ask me to lend you thirty-five dollars?"

"Yes, you've got plenty of money to spare."

"Well, you certainly have got a nerve!" exclaimed Elfie.

"You might give it to me," pleaded Laura. "I haven't a dollar in the world, and you pretend to be such a friend to me!"

Elfie turned angrily.

"So that's the kind of a woman you are, eh? A moment ago you were going to kick me out of the place because I wasn't decent enough to associate with you. You know how I live. You know how I get my money—the same way you got most of yours. And now that you've got this spasm of goodness, I'm not fit to be in your room; but you'll take my money to pay your debts. You'll let me go out and do this sort of thing for your benefit, while you try to play the grand lady. I've got your number now, Laura. Where in hell is your virtue, anyway? You can go to the devil, rich, poor, or any other way. I'm off!"

She rushed toward the door. For a moment Laura stood speechless; then, with a loud cry, she broke down and burst into hysterics:

"Elfie! Elfie! Don't go now! Don't leave me now! Don't go!" Her visitor stood hesitating, with one hand on the doorknob. Laura went on: "I can't stand it. I can't be alone. Don't go, please, don't go!"

She fell into her friend's arms, sobbing. On the instant Elfie's hardness of demeanor changed. With all her coarseness, she was a good-natured woman at heart. Melting into the tenderest womanly sympathy, she tried her best to express herself in her crude way. Leading the weeping girl to the armchair, she made her sit down. Then, seating herself on

the arm, she put her arm round her old chum and hugged her to her breast.

"There, old girl," she said soothingly, "don't cry, don't cry. You just sit down here and let me put my arms around you. I'm awful sorry—on the level, I am. I shouldn't have said it, I know that. But I've got feelings, too, even if folks don't give me credit for it."

Laura looked up through her tears.

"I know, Elfie, I've gone through about all I can stand."

Her friend smoothed her by stroking her hair.

"Well, I should say you have—and more than I would. Anyway, a good cry never hurts any woman. I have one myself sometimes, under cover."

As Laura recovered control of herself, she grew meditative. Musingly she said:

"Perhaps what you said was true."

"We won't talk about it—there!" said Elfie, drying her friend's eyes and kissing her.

"But perhaps it was true," persisted Laura, "and then——"

"And then——"

"I think I've stood this just as long; as I can. Every day is a living horror——"

Elfie nodded acquiescence. Glancing round the room, she exclaimed, with a comical grimace of disgust:

"It's the limit!"

"I've got to have money to pay the rent," continued Laura anxiously. "I've pawned everything I have, except the clothes on my back——"

Elfie threw her arms consolingly round her friend.

"I'll give you all the money you need, dearie. Great heavens, don't worry about that! Don't you care if I got sore and—lost my head."

Laura shook her head.

"No, I can't let you do that. You may have been mad—awfully mad—but what you said was the truth. I can't take your money."

"Oh, forget that!" laughed Elfie.

Laura put up a hand to cool her burning forehead. Looking out of the window, she said wistfully:

"Maybe—maybe if he knew all about it—the suffering—he wouldn't blame me."

"Who?" cried Elfie sarcastically. "The good man who wanted to lead you to the good life without even a bread-basket for an advance agent? Huh!"

"He doesn't know how desperately poor I am," explained Laura half-apologetically.

"He knows you're out of work, don't he?"

"Not exactly. I told him it was difficult to find an engagement, but he has no idea that things are as they are."

"Then you're a chump!" declared Elfie, with an expressive shrug of her shoulders. "Hasn't he sent you anything?"

"He hasn't anything to send."

Elfie bounded with indignant surprise.

"What? Then what does he think you're going to live on—asphalt croquettes with conversation sauce?"

Sinking down on a chair, Laura gave way again.

"I don't know—I don't know!" she cried, sobbing.

Elfie went over to her friend and placed her arms about her.

"Don't be foolish, dearie. You know there is somebody waiting for you—somebody who'll be good to you and get you out of this mess."

Laura looked up quickly.

"You mean Will Brockton?" she said, fixing her companion with a steady stare.

"Yes."

"Do you know where he is?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"You won't get sore again if I tell you, will you?"

Laura rose.

"No—why?" she said.

"He's downstairs—waiting in the car. I promised to tell him what you said."

"Then it was all planned, and—and——"

"Now, dearie, I knew you were up against it, and I wanted to bring you two together. He's got half of the Burgess shows, and if you'll only see him, everything will be fixed."

"When does he want to see me?"

"Now."

"Here?"

"Yes. Shall I tell him to come up?"

Motionless as a statue, Laura made no sign. Her face pale as death, her hands clasped in front of her, she stood as if transfixed, staring out of the window.

"Shall I tell him to come up?" repeated Elfie impatiently.

Still no answer for a long moment that seemed like an hour. Then all at once, with a quick, convulsive movement, as if by a determined effort she had succeeded in conquering her own will, she turned and cried, with a half sob:

"Yes—yes—tell him to come up!"

Elfie sprang joyously forward. Her arguments had not been in vain, after all. Kissing her friend's cold cheeks, she exclaimed:

"Now you're a sensible dear. I'll bet he's half-frozen down there. I'll send him up at once."

Anxious to get Brockton there before the girl had a chance to change her mind, she was hurrying toward the door, when she happened to notice Laura's red eyes and tear-stained face. That would never do. Coming back, she exclaimed:

"Look at you, Laura! You're a perfect sight!"

Throwing her gloves and muff onto a chair, she led the girl to the washstand, and taking a towel, wiped her eyes and face.

"It'll never do to have him see you looking like this!" she said. "Now, Laura, I want you to promise me you won't do any more crying. Come over here and let me powder your nose ___"

Incapable of further resistance, feeling herself a helpless victim in the hands of irrevocable Fate, Laura followed docilely to the dresser, where Elfie took the powder-puff and powdered her face. This done, she daubed her cheeks with the rouge-paw and pencilled her lips and eyebrows. As she worked, she rattled on:

"Now, when he comes up, you tell him he has got to blow us all off to a swell dinner to-night—seven-thirty. Let me look at you——"

Laura put up her face like an obedient child. Elfie kissed her.

"Now you're all right," she said cheerfully. "Make it strong, now—seven-thirty, don't forget. I'll be there. So-long."

Going to the armchair and gathering up the muff and gloves she had thrown there, Elfie left the room.

CHAPTER XIII.

For a minute or two Laura remained motionless. Sinking inertly onto a chair after the door closed, she sat still, engrossed in deep thought.

This, then, was the end of her good resolutions and her hopes of regeneration! What would *he* say? Would he care and grieve after her, or would he treat it as a jest, an idle romance with which they had amused themselves those happy midsummer days in Denver? Yes—it was a dream—nothing more. Life was too hard, too brutal for such ideal longings to be possible of realization. It was just as well that she had come to her senses before it was too late.

Rising with a sigh, she crossed to the other side of the room, and halting at the wardrobe, stood contemplating John's portrait which was tacked up there. Then calmly, deliberately, she loosened the nails with a pair of scissors and took the picture down. Proceeding to the dresser, she picked up the small picture in the frame; then, kneeling on the mattress, she pulled down the large picture of him that was over the bed, and placed all three portraits under a pillow. Barely was this done, when there was a sharp rap at the door.

"Come in," she called out.

The door opened, and Brockton entered, well groomed and immaculately dressed. For a moment he stood irresolute on the threshold, just looking at her. There was obvious embarrassment on the part of each of them. Laura went toward him, with hand extended.

"Hello, Laura," he said pleasantly.

"I'm—I'm glad to see you, Will."

"Thank you."

"Won't you sit down?" she said timidly.

"Thank you again," he smiled.

Quickly regaining his ease of manner, he put his hat and cane on the table, took off his overcoat, which he placed on the back of the armchair, and sat down.

"It's rather cold, isn't it?" said Laura, taking a seat opposite him.

"Just a bit sharp."

"You came with Elfie in the car?"

"She picked me up on Broadway; we lunched together."

"By appointment?" she asked quickly.

"I'd asked her," he answered dryly.

"Well?" she demanded.

"Well, Laura," he replied calmly.

"She told you?"

He shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"Not a great deal. What do you want to tell me?"

Avoiding his direct glance, she said very simply:

"Will, I'm ready to come back."

With an effort, the broker concealed his sense of triumph and satisfaction. Rising quickly, he went up to her. Taking her hand, he said tenderly:

"I'm mighty glad of that, Laura. I've missed you like the very devil."

Visibly embarrassed, she asked timidly:

"Do we—do we have to talk it over much?"

"Not at all unless you want to. I understand—in fact, I always have."

"Yes," she said wearily, "I guess you always did. I didn't."

"It will be just the same as it was before, you know."

"Yes—of course——"

"I didn't think it was possible for me to miss anyone the way I have you. I've been lonely."

She smiled faintly:

"It's nice in you to say that."

Drawing back a few steps he cast a hurried glance around the room.

"You'll have to move out of here right away. This place is enough to give one the colly-wabbles. If you'll be ready to-morrow, I'll send my man over to help you take care of the luggage."

"To-morrow will be all right, thank you," she replied.

He put his hand in his pocket and took out a big roll of money. Peeling off five yellow-backed bills and placing them on the table, he said:

"And you'll need some money in the meantime. I'll leave this here."

"You seem to have come prepared," she smiled. "Did Elfie and you plan all this out?"

He chuckled as he replied:

"Not planned—just hoped. I think you'd better go to some nice hotel now. Later we can arrange."

She offered no objection, accepting everything suggested as a matter of course. Having sold herself, as it were, to the highest bidder, it was not her place to raise any further obstacles. Dispassionately, therefore, she said:

"Will, we'll always be frank. I said I was ready to go. It's up to you—when and where."

He smiled, surprised to find her so tractable.

"The hotel scheme is the best, but, Laura——"

"Yes?"

He looked at her keenly, trying to penetrate beneath the surface of her almost unnatural calm. He did not wish to be fooled again.

"You're quite sure this is in earnest?" he demanded. "You don't want to change? You've time enough now."

She shook her head.

"I've made up my mind. It's final," she said positively.

"If you want to work," he went on, "Burgess has a nice part for you. I'll telephone and arrange if you say so."

"Please do. Say I'll see him in the morning."

The broker rose and paced nervously up and down the room. So far so good, but he had not yet finished. There was still something unpleasant that must be attended to before all was settled, and now was the proper and only time to do it. Turning abruptly, he said:

"Laura, you remember when we were in Denver——"

Starting forward, the girl raised one hand entreatingly. For the moment her studied quiet was laid aside.

"Please, please don't speak of that!" she cried.

Brockton stood still, looking her squarely in the eyes. His manner was extremely serious and determined.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I've got to." Slowly and deliberately he went on: "Last summer, in Denver, I told John Madison that if this time ever came—when you would return to me of your own free will—I'd have you write him the truth. Before we go any further, I'd like you to do that—now."

Even under her cosmetics, the girl grew a shade paler. In a trembling, uncertain voice, she faltered:

"Say good-by?"

"Just that," said Brockton firmly.

She looked distressed. The muscles about the corners of her mouth worked convulsively.

"I wouldn't know how to begin. It will hurt him terribly."

"It will be worse if you don't," insisted the broker. "He'll like you the better for telling him. It would be honest, and that is what he expects."

She knew he was right, and that there was no way out of it, yet this was the hardest ordeal of all. In her heart she knew she was lying—lying to Brockton, lying to John, lying to herself. But she must lie, for she had not the strength to resist. The world was too hard, the suffering too great. What could she tell John—that she had ceased to love him and gone back to her old life? How he would despise her! Yet it must be—. Her eyes blinded with scalding tears, she asked:

"Must I write—now?"

"I think you should," he replied kindly but firmly.

Dropping onto a seat near the table, she took up a pen.

"How shall I begin?" she asked tremulously.

He looked at her in surprise.

"Do you mean that you don't know what to say?"

She nodded and turned away her head, not daring to let him see her white, tear-stained face. He made a step forward.

"Then I'll dictate a letter," he said.

"That's right," she half-sobbed. "I'll do just as you say. You're the one to tell me now—"

"Address it the way you want to," he said. "I'm going to be pretty brutal. In the long run, I think that is best, don't you?"

"It's up to you," she said quietly.

"Ready?"

"Begin."

Looking-over her shoulder, while she put pen to paper, he began to dictate:

"This is the last letter you will ever receive from me. All is over between us. I need not enter into explanations. I have tried and I have failed. Do not think badly of me. It was beyond my strength. Good-by. I shall not tell you where I've gone, but remind you of what Brockton told you the last time he saw you. He is here now, dictating this letter. What I am doing is voluntary—my own suggestion. Don't grieve. Be happy and successful. I do not love you—"

When she came to the last sentence, she stopped, laid her pen down, and looked up at the broker.

"Will—please—" she protested.

But he insisted.

"It has got to go just that way," he said determinedly. "'I do not love you.' Sign it 'Laura.' Fold it, put it in an envelope—seal it—address it. Shall I mail it?"

She hesitated, and then stammered:

"No. If you don't mind, I'd sooner mail it myself. It's a sort of a last—last message, you know. I'd like to send it myself."

Brockton went to the armchair, took his coat, and put it on.

"All right," he said cheerily. "You're a little upset now, and I'm going. We are all to dine together to-night at seven-thirty. There'll be a party. Of course you'll come."

"I don't think I can," she answered, with some embarrassment. "You see—"

He understood. Nodding and pointing to the money he had left on the table, he said:

"I know. I guess there's enough there for your immediate needs. Later you can straighten things up. Shall I send the car?"

"Yes, please."

He drew nearer and bent over her, as if about to caress her. Instinctively she shrank from his embrace. What at any other time would have appeared perfectly natural was now repugnant to her. It seemed indecent when the ink on her letter to John Madison was not yet dry.

"Please don't," she said. "Remember, we don't dine until seven-thirty."

"All right," he laughed, as he took his hat and cane and went out of the door.

For a few minutes after his departure Laura sat in meditative silence. There was no drawing back now. She had accepted this man's money. She must go on to the end, no matter where it led her. She had sold herself; henceforth she was this man's slave and chattel. Suddenly she was seized with a feeling of disgust. She loathed herself for her weakness, her lack of stamina, her cowardice. She did not deserve that a decent man should love or respect her. Angry at herself, angry with the world, she rose, and going to the dresser, got the alcohol lamp and placed it on the table. While she was lighting it there came a knock at the door.

"Come in," she called out.

Annie entered.

"Is that you, Annie?"

"Yassum," said the negress.

Laura took the bank notes which Brockton had left and threw them on the table. With affected carelessness, she said:

"Mrs. Farley wants her rent. There is some money. Take it to her."

Approaching the table, the negress' eyes nearly started out of her head when she caught sight of the bank notes. Bewildered, she exclaimed:

"Dey ain't nothin' heah, Miss Laura, but five great big one hundred dollah bills!"

"Take two," said Laura. "And look in that upper drawer. You'll find some pawn-tickets there."

"Yassum," said the negress, obeying instructions. "Dat's real money—dem's yellow backs, sure!"

"Take the two top ones," continued Laura, "and go get my lace gown and one of the hats. The ticket is for a hundred and ten dollars. Keep ten for yourself, and hurry."

Annie gasped from sheer excitement.

"Ten for myself?" she grinned. "I never seen so much money. Yassum, Miss Laura, yassum." As she went toward the door she turned round, and said: "Ah'm so mighty glad yo' out all yo' trouble, Miss Laura. I says to Mis' Farley, now——"

Laura cut her off short.

"Don't—don't!" she exclaimed sharply. "Go do as I tell you, and mind your business."

Annie turned sullenly and walked toward the door. At that moment Laura noticed the letter which still lay on the table. She called the maid back:

"Wait a minute. I want you to mail a letter."

Picking up the letter, she held it out to the negress, who put out her hand to receive it. Laura still hesitated. Looking at the envelope long and wistfully, her nerve failed her. Dismissing the girl with a gesture, she said:

"Never mind. I'll mail it myself."

The negress went out. When the door shut behind her, Laura went quickly to the table and held the letter over the flame of the alcohol lamp. The envelope speedily ignited. As it burned she held it for a moment in her fingers, and when half-consumed, threw it into a waste-jar. Sitting on the side of the bed, she watched the letter burn, and when the last tiny flame flickered out, she sank down on the bed, her head supported on her elbows, her chin resting in her hands, thinking, thinking.

CHAPTER XIV.

Hugging the grateful warmth of an expiring camp fire, the figures of two stalwart men lay stretched out on the hard, frozen ground, bundled up in heavy army blankets. The mercury was forty-five below zero and still falling, but they did not appear to mind. Gaunt and hollow-eyed, enfeebled from long fasting, they had succumbed at last to utter physical exhaustion, and fallen into a sound and merciful sleep.

All Nature slept with them. The distant howling of wolves and the occasional scream of an eagle only served to intensify the universal stillness. The sepulchral silence of the Far North enveloped everything like an invisible mantle. Away to the east, the first gray mists of approaching daylight were creeping over the jagged mountain tops. The cold was intense. The snow was so deep in spots that the entire landscape was obliterated; only the trees, marvellously festooned with lace-like icicles, and a few huge, fire-scarred rocks which here and there thrust their jagged points above the surface, remained of the desolate marsh and forest land. Everywhere, as far as the eye could carry, was a trackless waste of snow drift.

The men lay motionless; only by their deep, rhythmical breathing could one know that they were alive. Dead to the world, they were as insensible to the cutting wind which, with the force of a half-gale, swept over the icy plains, sending the last flickering embers of their fire up in a cloud of flying sparks, as they were to the pain in their fever-racked bodies.

It was lucky they were still able to make a fire. The flames gave them warmth and kept the wolves at bay. But for that and the occasional small game they had been able to shoot, they would have perished long ago, and then the gold-fever would have claimed two victims more. For days and days they had tramped aimlessly through that wild region, prospecting for the yellow metal, until, footsore and weary, nature at last gave way. They had lost their bearings and could go no farther. Miles away from the nearest human habitation, they were face to face with death from starvation. Then the weather changed; it suddenly grew very cold; before they knew it, the blizzard was upon them. The suffering had been terrible, the obstacles inconceivable, yet they never faltered. A goal lay before them, and they pushed right on, determined to attain it. The prospector for gold plays for heavy stakes—a fortune or his life. Never willing to acknowledge defeat, undeterred by continual, heart-breaking disappointment, still he pushes on. Spurred by the irresistible lure of gold, there is no place so dangerous or so difficult of access that he will not penetrate to it. In winter he perishes of cold, in summer he is overcome by the heat, yet no matter. Nothing short of death itself can stop him in his determined, insensate quest for wealth.

It grew gradually lighter. The sky was overcast and threatening. A light snow began to fall. One of the men shivered and opened his eyes. Looking stupidly about him, with a long-drawn-out yawn, first at the dying fire, then at his still unconscious mate, he jumped up with a shout. At first he was too dazed with sleep to stand straight, and his teeth chattered from the cold. He was also ravenously hungry. But first they must think of the fire. That must be kept up at all costs. He was so weak that he staggered, and his clothes hung from him in rags; but shambling over to where his companion lay, he shook him roughly:

"Hello, Jim—hello, there! The d—d fire is almost out. Quick, man!"

Thus unceremoniously aroused from his trance-like slumber, John Madison, or what remained of him, lifted his head and painfully raised himself on one elbow. He was a pitiable-looking object. His hair, all dishevelled and matted, hung down over haggard-looking eyes; his cheeks were hollow from hunger, his ghastly pale face, livid from the cold, was covered with several weeks' growth of beard. From head to foot he was filthy and neglected from lack of the necessaries of life, and there was in his staring eyes a haunted, terrified look—the look of a man who has been face to face with death and yet lived to tell the tale. His remaining rags barely covered his emaciated, trembling frame. Shoes had gone long ago. His bleeding, frost-bitten feet were partly protected with coarse sacking tied with string. No one could have recognized in this human derelict the strapping specimen of proud manhood who six weeks before had said good-by to Laura and started out light-heartedly to conquer the world. Instead, the world had conquered him.

Throwing off the blanket, he staggered to his feet. He felt sick and dizzy. Once he reeled and nearly fell. Twenty hours without food takes the backbone out of any man, and it was as bad as that, with no prospect of anything better. Weakly he stooped, and gathering up a little snow, put it in his mouth. Then his face winced with pain. The hunger pangs were there again. Stamping the ground and exercising his arms vigorously for a few moments, to get his blood in circulation, he turned, and, stooping down again to his couch, drew from under the roll of blanket that had served him for a pillow, a formidable-looking Colt six-shooter and a girl's photograph. The Colt he slipped between his rags; the picture he pressed to his lips.

"God bless you, little one!" he murmured.

His companion, who was busy bending over the fire, trying to coax it back to life, happened to look up.

"Say, young feller!" he bellowed. "Cut out that mush, and lend a hand with this fire. Get some wood, and plenty—quick!"

Madison made no retort. He was too weak to care. Besides, Bill was right. He had no business to think only of himself when they were both making a last stand for life itself. Hastily gathering an armful of small twigs, he threw them on the fire. As he watched the flames leap up, his mate still grumbled:

"This ain't no time for foolin'. I should think yer'd try to get us out of this mess, instead of wastin' time mooning-over that picture."

Madison stooped over the fire and warmed his frozen hands. Shivering, he said:

"Bill—you don't know—how can you know?—what that picture means to me. It's all that's left to me. I never expect to see her again. I guess we'll both leave our carcasses here for the vultures to feed on. I can't go on much longer like this without food or shelter. I'm almost ready to cash in myself."

The other doggedly bit on a piece of ice and said nothing. Madison continued:

"If I gave up three square meals a day and a comfortable bed to come out here and die in this infernal hole, it was only for her sake. We were to get married soon. I promised to go back with a fortune, and she said she'd wait for me——"

The figure crouching on the other side of the fire chuckled grimly:

"Wait for you, eh?" he echoed dubiously.

"Yes, wait for me—why not?" snapped John.

The other shook his head.

"She may and she may not. It depends on the gal. Where is she?"

"New York."

"Working?"

"Yes—in a fashion. She's an actress."

"Oh!"

Bill gave another derisive chuckle. Irritated, John demanded hotly:

"What's the matter?"

"Queer lot—actresses!" grinned Bill. "Never knew no good of 'em."

John's eyes flashed dangerously, and weak though he was, he sprang up and put his hand to his hip. Before he drew his gun, his mate apologized.

"No offense, pard. I didn't mean no harm. I guess if she's your gal, she's all right. No offense."

Madison, mollified, sat down again. Warmly he said:

"Ah, Bill—you don't know—you don't know. She means everything to me. I'd sooner cut my throat than think her false for one instant. Why—she'd wait for me if it took years. I know her; you don't. She's the best girl in the world."

Bill nodded. Sententiously he said:

"That's the right line o' talk, I guess, for a feller wot's in love, but it's not goin' to help us find the trail. We've got to get on and find something to eat. Jist at present, wittles is more to the point than spooning."

Bill Branigan was an original. An Irish-American, he was earning good wages in one of the Chicago stockyards when the gold rush to Alaska began. Attacked like many others with the get-rich-quick fever, he went to the Yukon, and later found his way to Goldfield, Nevada, where he met Madison. The two men were instantly attracted to each other. Superb specimens of hardy manhood, both were ambitious, fearless, thirsty for adventure. Bill proposed a partnership—a risk-all, divide-all agreement. His other scheme having failed, Madison was glad enough to accept the offer. So with renewed hope and determination, both men turned their faces to the setting sun, and wandered across the mountain ranges, looking for gold. A loquacious Indian, after being generously dosed with "firewater," had told them of a lonely unknown place in the wilderness, where the ground was literally strewn with gold. Nuggets as big as a man's fist, he said, could be found by merely scratching the surface of the soil. They swallowed the yarn with the necessary grain of salt; but in the gold region, where so many miracles have happened, nothing is deemed impossible. The wildest

romance receives credence. Vast fortunes had been made over night on clues no less preposterous. Anyhow, it was worth investigating. So, quietly, almost stealthily, taking no one into their confidence, they started North.

After days of strenuous tramping and effort, climbing hills, fording streams, cutting through impenetrable brushwood, they finally reached the region of which the Indian had given a fairly accurate description. Nearly two hundred miles from the nearest camp, on the top of a mountain plateau, the country was as wild and desolate as it is possible to imagine. Probably no white man had ever set foot there before. Soon their supplies ran low, and as they advanced further into the wilderness, and game grew scarcer, it became more difficult to find food. In addition to hunger, they suffered severely from the cold, and the jagged rocks tearing their boots made them footsore.

Of gold they had seen a few traces, but the ore was not present in such quantities as to encourage them to believe they had stumbled across another El Dorado, or even to make it worth their while to stake out a claim. Branigan, disappointed, was in favor of going back. The Indian was lying, he said. There was danger of getting lost in the mountains. The severe winter storms were about due. Prudence counselled caution. John took an opposite view. They had picked up several lumps of quartz streaked with yellow. If gold was there in minute particles, he argued, it was there also in larger quantities. The only thing was to have patience, to go on prospecting, and ferret out the hiding-place where jealous Nature secreted her treasures.

So they had struggled on, hoping against hope, thinking they would soon come across a trapper's hut, fighting for mere existence each inch of the way, becoming more bewildered and demoralized as they realized the gravity of their plight, advancing further and further into the merciless desert, literally stumbling into the jaws of death. Then came the snow, and the faint Indian trails were completely obliterated. This put the climax on their misery. Now there was no knowing where they were. Having no compass, they were hopelessly lost. In clear weather it was possible to find the right direction by the stars, but the sky, long-overcast and menacing, vouchsafed no sign. Even if the road could be found, escape was impossible. Starved and footsore, they were now so weak that they were scarcely able to drag themselves along. Yet move they must; to remain in one spot meant to fall down and go to sleep and perish. They had had nothing to eat for days except snow and some roots which Bill dug up from under the snow. Once they were attacked by wolves. Madison shot one of their pursuers with his revolver, and the rest of the pack turned tail and ran. The dead wolf they ate. They did not stop to cook it, but devoured it raw, like famished dogs worrying a bone. It saved their lives for a time, and then the hunger pangs began again, terrible, incessant.

The freshly stacked fire send clouds of smoke skywards, and its crimson glow, casting a vivid light on the two men crouching close by, made their abject figures stand out with startling distinctness against the gray background of the snow-clad landscape. Madison, who had long been silent, staring stolidly into the flames, listening absent-mindedly to his companion's arguments, at last broke in:

"Gold! I'm sick of gold—sick of the very word. I'd give all the gold there is in the world just to see Laura once again. That's all I'd ask—to see her just once. Then I'd be willing to die in peace. She has no idea of this. Do you think they'll ever know? Maybe some one will find our bodies."

Bill made no answer. He was paying no attention. His mind was too weak to grasp what was said. He had only one thought—one fixed thought—and that was—gold. Pointing off in the distance, where a mass of moss-covered rock rose like some gigantic vessel in an ocean of snow, he said in a thick, uncertain voice:

"John, my boy, I had a dream last night. I dreamt I tried some of them high spots yonder. I struck the rock with my pick, and suddenly I was dazzled. Wet flakes of shining gold stared up at me from the quartz. I struck again, and there was more gold. I pulled the moss from it, and everywhere there was gold. I struck right and left, and a perfect shower of nuggets as big as my head rolled at my feet. Then I woke up."

"Yes," said John sarcastically, "then you woke up."

Bill nodded stupidly.

"I know it was only a dream," he said, "but somehow I can't get the gold out of my head. I've a notion to go and try them rocks. You might try in the other direction."

John shrugged his shoulders.

"Won't do any harm as I know of," he said wearily. "Go and try. I'll stay here a while and nurse my frost bites. When I'm rested I'll go and try my luck."

His mate rose, and taking his pick, the weight of which was almost too much for his strength, said cheerily:

"If I find anything, I'll holler," he said.

"I guess you won't holler," replied his comrade, with a wan smile.

When his mate had disappeared, Madison remained sitting by the fire, staring meditatively into its red depths. He was not thinking of gold just then, but of a golden-haired girl who was thousands of miles away, little dreaming of the unexpected fate that had befallen him. He wondered what Laura was doing, if she was happy and successful. She had written in rather discouraging tone, saying it seemed impossible to find the right kind of engagement, but of course that was long ago, at the beginning of the season. Letters took so long to come from New York. By this time she must have found something she liked, and in which she could do herself justice. He did not like to see her on the stage. It was an artificial, unhealthy life. He had intended, when they were married, taking her away from her former surroundings for good. It would not be necessary for her to earn her living. He could have made enough for both.

When they were married! What cruel irony that sounded now. Perhaps she would never hear of his fate. Inquiries would be made at Goldfield and search parties might be sent to scour the brush, but it would be too late. They would find only their dead bodies, picked clean by the birds of prey. How happy he might have been. After all his many years, he at last had found a girl who really cared for him, a girl who was willing to give up everything for his sake, a girl whose firmness of character he could not help but respect.

What had he cared what her past had been? The very fact that she had been willing to abandon her luxurious way of living, and endure comparative poverty for his sake, was proof enough of her sincerity. He had hoped she would not have to make a sacrifice long. One day he thought he would make a lucky "strike" and go back laden with gold, which he would pour into her lap. How delighted and surprised she would have been. He would have given her a fine house, automobiles, beautiful gowns, precious jewels, everything money can buy. Nothing would have been too good to reward her weary months of waiting. And now—

Rising wearily to his feet, he threw some more wood on the fire, and then snatching up a short steel pick, proceeded in the direction opposite to that taken by Branigan. He soon reached the foothills, and began work scraping the moss-covered rocks, striking deep into boulders, turning over the soil, his eye watchful for a glimpse of glittering gold particles.

He toiled for a couple of hours, till his hands were blistered and his muscles ached. There was no sign of his companion. He hollered several times at the top of his voice, but receiving no response, he concluded that Bill, in his prospecting, had wandered farther away than he intended. There was no reason for uneasiness. If he did not return soon, he would go in search of him. As he toiled on mechanically, he pondered:

Even if they were lucky and got out of this plight, it would be years before he was on his feet again. He would not be able to support himself, let alone a wife. It might be months, years before his luck turned again. Would she wait?

Suddenly his brow darkened. He clenched his fist, and the veins on his temple swelled up like whipcord. Had she waited? He remembered Bill's scoffing words. Could it be true of Laura? Was she false to him? The possibility of such a thing had never entered his head before, but now he was tortured with the agonies and doubts of insensate, unreasoning jealousy. Maybe she had found it harder than she anticipated. Compelled to economize, deprived of luxuries that had become necessities, perhaps she had repented her bargain and gone back to that scoundrel Brockton. Possibly at that very moment she was in the broker's arms. The thought was maddening. A cold sweat broke out all over him at the very thought of it. What would he do if he found her false? What would he do if he found his happiness destroyed, the future a hopeless blank, his faith in womankind forever shattered. There was only one thing to be done. Stern justice—the swift, savage justice of the cold, desolate, blizzard-swept plains. He would shoot them both, and himself afterward.

He ceased working, the pick fell from his nerveless hands. The hunger pains were gnawing at his vitals. He felt dizzy and sick. A death chill invaded his entire being. It suddenly grew dark; there was a buzzing in his ears. His knees gave way beneath him. He stumbled and fell. He was still conscious, but he knew he was very ill—if only he could call Branigan.

Suddenly his ear caught an unfamiliar sound. Instinctively, ill as he was, he started up. It was the sound of human voices. With difficulty he raised himself on one elbow. A party of hunters and Indians were coming in his direction. Some were carrying a stretcher formed with rifles and the branches of trees.

"Gold! Gold!" they shouted wildly, as they ran toward him.

Half a dozen trappers crowded round John's prostrate form. On the stretcher lay Bill Branigan, asleep. The leader of the party, a big, muscular chap, with a great blond beard, pushed a whiskey flask between Madison's clenched teeth.

"Poor devil!" he exclaimed. "We're just in time. He was about all in." Addressing Madison,

who, with eyes starting from his head, stared up at the newcomers with amazement, as if they were phantoms from another world, he said:

"We picked your mate up yonder in the mountains. He's found the biggest gold nugget ever found in this section. There's gold everywhere."

"Damn the gold! Give me some food!" gasped Madison.

Then he fainted.

CHAPTER XV.

The Pomona, on West — Street, was well known among those swell apartment houses of Manhattan which find it profitable to cater to the liberal-spending demi-monde, and therefore are not prone to be too fastidious regarding the morals of their tenants. Many such hostelries were scattered throughout the theatre district of New York, and as a rule they prospered exceedingly well. Invariably they were of the same type. There was the same monotonous sameness in the gaudy decorations and furnishings; the same hilarious crowd in the café downstairs; the same overdressed, over-rouged women in the elevator and halls. They enjoyed in common the same class of patronage—blonde ladies with lengthy visiting-lists of gentlemen callers.

Willard Brockton occupied a suite on the sixth floor, and it was one of the handsomest and most expensive in the hotel. It consisted of ten large rooms and three baths. The large sitting-room in white and gold had two windows overlooking fashionable Fifth Avenue. The furnishings were expensive and rich, but lacked that good taste which would naturally obtain in rooms occupied by people a little more particular concerning their reputation and mode of life. At one end of the room a large archway hung with tapestries led to the sleeping chambers. At the other end a door opened onto a small private hall, which, in turn, had another door communicating with the main corridor. The apartment was expensively and elaborately furnished. The inlaid floors were strewn with handsome Oriental rugs, the chairs and sofas were heavy gilt, upholstered in crimson silk, while here and there were Louis XV writing desks, teakwood curio cabinets, costly bronzes and statuary. The walls were covered with valuable paintings and engravings. Near the window stood a superb full-length Empire cheval glass, the kind that women love to dress by and survey their beauty.

Two months had sped quickly by since that cold, stormy day in February, when Laura, distracted, half-starved, her spirit broken, despairing of aid from Madison or any other decent quarter, threatened with eviction even from Mrs. Farley's miserable lodgings, weakly surrendered, listened to the call which summoned her back to her former life, and once more became Brockton's mistress.

At first the sudden transition from misery and absolute want to all the comforts and extravagant luxuries that unlimited means can command was so gratifying that she saw no reason to repent of the step she had taken. On the contrary, she rejoiced that she was still pretty enough, still young and clever enough to hold a man of Brockton's influence and wealth. Decidedly, she thought to herself, Elfie was right. Virtue was all very well for nice, good girls who did not mind doing chores, practicing painful economy, wearing shabby clothes, and tiring themselves out for small wages in petty, humiliating occupations, but she could never stand it. She would die rather. Life would not be worth living if she were to be always denied the sweets of life, and to her that meant champagne suppers, gorgeous gowns, and all that goes with them. So, banishing from her mind any unpleasant memories or regrets, she plunged headlong into the boiling vortex of gay metropolitan life. Thanks to Brockton, she secured one of the best parts of the expiring theatrical season, and made such a hit that her name was in everybody's mouth. The newspapers interviewed her, society women copied her, toothpaste and perfume manufacturers solicited her testimonials. In a word, she was famous overnight. Burgess, the manager, was now eager to sign for five years, but Laura laughed, and tore up the contract before his face. What did she care now? She had the whip hand. The managers had neglected and despised her long enough; they could do the running after contracts now.

Meantime she drained the cup of pleasure to the very dregs. It was one continual round of gaiety. She seemed insatiable. With Elfie St. Clair and others, she formed an intimate circle of friends, a little coterie of the swiftest men and women in town, and entertained them lavishly, spending wilfully, recklessly. Her extravagances were soon the talk of New York. A thousand dollars for a single midnight supper, \$700 for a new gown, \$200 for a hat were as nothing. Once more she reigned as the belle of Broadway. Almost each night, after the play, she was the centre of an admiring throng in the pleasure resorts, and none ventured to dispute the claim that she was the prettiest as well as the best-dressed woman in town. Dressmakers, attracted by her matchless figure and eager to profit by her vogue, turned out

for her their latest creations; milliners designed for her hats that were the despair of every other woman. She had her carriages, her automobiles, and her saddle horse, her town apartment and her bungalow by the sea, and for a time set a pace so swift that no other woman of her acquaintance could keep up with her. All this cost money, and a lot of it, but Brockton gave her free rein. The broker did not care. He smiled indulgently and footed her enormous bills without protest. On the contrary, he was delighted. Never had she proved so fascinating a companion or attracted so much attention in public. He was getting plenty of other people's money in the Wall Street game, so why should he care if his mistress spent a few thousands a year more or less? It amused him to see her plunging, as he put it. Besides, he was proud of his protégée. It flattered him when they entered a theatre or restaurant, Laura wearing her \$200 picture hat, to hear people whisper: "That's Brockton's girl. Isn't she stunning?"

She drank more champagne than was good for her, and when this happened, Brockton himself would chide her. But she only laughed at him, and, disregarding his rebuke, turned to the waiter and imperiously ordered another bottle. Not that she liked the golden, hissing stuff. It made her sick and gave her a bad headache the next morning, but still she must drink it, drink it unceasingly. It was the only way she could deaden that terrible, accusing conscience which persistently demanded an accounting. With her knowledge of her own guilt and her tendency to introspective brooding, it was only natural that her sensitive nature suffered atrociously. All day and all night her conscience tortured her. Incessantly it put the agonizing question: Have you been true, true to yourself and to the man to whom you gave your word? And always came the damning answer: "No—I've been false, miserably false, both to myself and him."

In her quieter moods—the moods she dreaded most—she allowed her mind to dwell on the past. She wondered what John was doing and where he was. Had he succeeded or had he failed? For a long time she had received no word. On leaving Mrs. Farley's, she had left no address and had taken no pains to have her mail forwarded. No doubt his letters had been returned to him. Sometimes she regretted having burned the message of farewell which Brockton had dictated. It would have been fairer, more honest, to have told him the truth frankly. Brockton had wanted to do the right thing, and she had lied, making him believe she had done it.

That was why she despised herself, and that was why she drank champagne—so she might forget. Sometimes she took too much. One night Elfie St. Clair celebrated her birthday by giving a supper in her apartment. It was a jolly gathering, and they made merry until the late hours of the morning. Laura had been particularly high spirited and hilarious until, toward the end, her face grew deathly white. Seized with a sudden dizziness, she had to be wrapped in furs and carried down to her carriage. Brockton, embarrassed, declared it to be due to the heat. Everybody present knew it was the champagne.

But gaiety that is forced and only artificially stimulated cannot be kept up long. One day the reaction inevitably comes, and then the awakening is terrible, disastrous. At times, when, in company of others, she was laughing loudly and appearing to be thoroughly enjoying herself, she would suddenly become serious, talk no more, and go away in the corner by herself. Her companions teased her about it, and called such symptoms "Laura's tantrums." The truth was that each day the girl realized more the hollowness and rottenness of the life she was leading. She was filled with repulsion and disgust, both for herself and her associates. While she was weak and luxury-loving, she was not entirely devoid of character. There was enough sentimentality and emotion in her moral fibre to make her see the impossibility of continuing to live this irregular, vicious kind of existence. Women of Elfie St. Clair's type could do it, because they had no innate refinement of feeling, but she could not, and, in her saner moments, when she thought of what she had lost, when she remembered how she had been regenerated, purified, by her disinterested love for a good man, she looked wistfully back on those weeks at Mrs. Farley's boarding-house. Her attic, miserable as it was, was a haven of happiness and respectability compared with her present degradation.

Then, again, she had an uncomfortable idea that there was an accounting still to be made. In her sleep she saw John Madison approaching, stern, terrible, exacting some awful penalty, like an implacable judge. She had a premonition of an approaching catastrophe, a feeling, vague but nevertheless palpable, that something was going to happen. The idea obsessed her, haunted her; she could not shake it off. She became nervous of her own shadow. Gradually, too, she grew to dislike Brockton. Instead of feeling gratitude for all the luxuries he gave her, she blamed him for having made her what she was. She classed him as the type of man who preys on woman's virtue and exults in the number of souls he is able to destroy. She looked upon him as responsible for all her troubles, for her degradation and sacrifice of her womanhood. He was the eternal enemy of her sex, the arch tempter, the anti-christ. Her mind became obsessed with this idea, and a savage, unreasoning hate for him and all his kind sprang up in her heart.

Meantime, things pursued the even tenor of their way, at least outwardly. Brockton was careless, indifferent, good natured as usual. Laura was seemingly as gay and carefree as ever. None saw the ripples on the apparently serene surface, except, perhaps, one pair of black eyes which, always spying, never missed anything. Annie guessed her mistress'

thoughts, but was shrewd enough to hold her tongue. The negress, promoted from the rank of maid of all work at Mrs. Farley's establishment, had been elevated to the dignity of lady's maid. Laura never liked the negress, but well aware of the difficulty she might have in finding a servant, she accepted her voluntary offer to follow when she went with Brockton. The woman knew her ways, and in some respects was a good servant—at least as faithful and honest as any she could expect to get, which was not, of course, saying a great deal. But smart as she was, the negress never quite succeeded in deceiving her young mistress. Laura never trusted her further than she could see her. A hundred times, her patience tried to the limit, she had discharged her.

"You'll go in the morning, Annie."

"Yassum!"

But somehow Annie always stayed.

CHAPTER XVI.

Late one morning Laura and Brockton were seated at the little table in the parlor, having breakfast together. They had been out the night before, at a big supper given by some friends, and had only got home in the small hours. Laura, attired in an expensive negligée gown, sat at one side of the table, pouring out the coffee; Brockton, in a gray business suit, sat opposite, carelessly scanning the *Wall Street Messenger*. Neither spoke and both looked tired and out of sorts. Brockton was as fond of champagne suppers as anyone, but he was not getting any younger. They did not agree with his constitution as they used to, with the result that he was generally out of humor the next day.

While he and his companion toyed listlessly with the silver-plated dishes in front of them, Annie busied herself about the room, trying to put it in order. Everything lay about just as it had been thrown the night before. The place looked as if a cyclone had devastated a second-hand clothing store. In the alcove a man's dress coat and vest were thrown carelessly on the cushions; a silk hat, badly rumped, was near it. An opera cloak had been flung on the sofa, and on a chair was a huge picture hat with costly feathers. A pair of women's gloves were thrown over the cheval glass. The curtains in the bay window were half-drawn, filling the room with a rather dim light. Laura preferred it so. She did not wish Brockton to see the ravages which late hours and overabundance of rich foods were making on her complexion. She still had some feminine vanity left.

With a grunt and gesture of annoyance, Brockton threw his paper aside. Looking around, he demanded impatiently:

"Have you seen the *Recorder*, Laura?"

His companion was engrossed in the theatrical gossip of the *Morning Chronicle*. Without looking up, she replied indifferently:

"No."

"Where is it?" he growled.

"I don't know," she answered calmly, still intent on her own paper.

Brockton began to lose his temper, as he did easily when not feeling just right. Not daring to vent his ill humor on his *vis à vis*, he looked around for the colored maid. Loudly he called:

"Annie—! Annie—!! Annie!!!" In a savage undertone, half directed at Laura, he growled: "Where the devil is that lazy nigger?"

Laura looked up, a mild expression of indignant surprise on her face. Quietly she said:

"I suppose she's gone to get her breakfast."

"Well, she ought to be here," he snapped.

"Did it ever occur to you," said Laura quickly, "that she has got to eat, just the same as you have?"

"She's your servant, isn't she?" he barked.

"My maid," she corrected, with difficulty controlling herself.

"Well, what have you got her for—to eat, or to wait on you?" Again he thundered: "Annie!"

"Don't be so cross," protested Laura. "What do you want?"

"I want the paper," he growled, pouring out one half-glass of water from a bottle.

"I will get it for you," she said, with quiet dignity.

Wearily she got up and went to the table where there were other morning papers. Taking the *Recorder*, she handed it to him, and, returning to her seat, reopened the *Chronicle*. He relapsed into a sulky silence, and for a few minutes there was peace. Suddenly Annie entered the room from the sleeping apartments.

"Do yuh want me, suh?" she asked, with the ludicrous grin characteristic of her race.

"Yes!" snapped the broker. "I did want you, but don't now. When I'm at home I have a man to look after me, and I get what I want——"

Laura looked up angrily. Her patience was exhausted.

"For Heaven's sake, Will, have a little patience!" she said. "If you like your man so well, you had better live at home, but don't come around here with a grouch and bulldoze everybody——"

"Don't think for a moment that there's much to come around here for. Annie, this room's stuffy."

"Yassuh."

"Draw those *portières*. Let those curtains up. Let's have a little light. Take away those clothes and hide them. Don't you know that a man doesn't want to see the next morning anything to remind him of the night before? Make the place look a little respectable."

Annie stood in considerable awe of Brockton. In fact, she was afraid of him, so she did not stand on the order of going. She scurried around, and after picking up the coat and vest, opera cloak and other things, threw them over her arm without any idea of order.

"Be careful!" angrily shouted the irate broker, who was watching her. "You're not taking the wash off the line."

"Yassuh!"

The negress literally flew out of the room. Laura put down her newspaper.

"I must say you're rather amiable this morning," she said pointedly.

Brockton turned his head away.

"I feel like h—ll," he growled.

"Market unsatisfactory?" she inquired.

"No, head too big." Lighting a cigar, he took a puff and then made a wry face. Putting the offending weed into the empty cup, he said, with another grimace: "Tastes like punk."

"You drank a lot," she said unconcernedly.

He nodded.

"Yes—we'll have to cut out these parties. I can't do those things any more. I'm not as young as I was, and in the morning it makes me sick." Looking up at her, he added. "How do you feel?"

She rose from the breakfast table and sat down at a small *escritoire*.

"A little tired, that's all," she said languidly.

"You didn't touch anything, did you?"

"No."

"That's right—you've been taking too much lately. It was a great old party, though, wasn't it?"

Laura yawned and gazed listlessly out of the window.

"Do you think so?"

Not noticing her expression of wearied disgust, he went on:

"Yes, for that sort of a blow-out. Not too rough, but just a little easy. I like them at night,

but I hate them in the morning. Were you bored?"

Picking up his newspaper, he started to glance over it carelessly. Still staring idly into the street, she answered laconically:

"I'm always bored by such things as that."

"You don't have to go."

"You asked me."

"Still, you could say no."

Rising, she stooped and picked up a newspaper which had fallen on the floor. Placing it on the breakfast table, she returned to her seat at the desk.

"But you asked me," she insisted.

"What did you go for if you didn't want to?"

"*You* wanted me to."

"I don't quite get you," he said impatiently.

"Well, it's just this, Will—you have all my time when I'm not in the theatre, and you can do with it just what you please. You pay for it. I'm working for you."

He looked up at her quickly. Something in the tone of her voice warned him that there was a scene coming, and he hated scenes. But he could not resist inquiring sarcastically:

"Is that all I've got—just your time?"

"That and—the rest," she replied bitterly.

Looking at her curiously, he said:

"Down in the mouth, eh? I'm sorry."

"No," she retorted, her mouth quivering at the corners; "only, if you want me to be frank, I'm a little tired. You may not believe it, but I work awfully hard over at the theatre. Burgess will tell you that. I know I'm not so very good as an actress, but I try to be. I'd like to succeed myself. They're very patient with me. Of course, they've got to be—that's another thing you're paying for; but I don't seem to get along except this way."

Brockton shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"Oh, don't get sentimental," he said testily. "If you're going to bring up that sort of talk, Laura, do it some time when I haven't got a hang-over, and then, don't forget, talk never does count for much."

Rising and going to the mirror, Laura picked up a hat from a box, put it on, and looked at herself in the mirror. She turned around and looked at her companion steadfastly for a moment without speaking. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him the truth there and then, tell him she had lied about mailing the letter to Madison, and that she had been miserable ever since; tell him that this rotten, artificial life disgusted and degraded her, that she was sick of it and of him. But she had not the courage.

Meantime, Brockton, left to himself, went on perusing the paper more carefully. Suddenly he stopped and looked at his watch.

"What time is it?" inquired Laura.

"After ten."

"Aren't you ever going out?" she demanded crossly.

Deeply engrossed in his paper, the broker made no answer. His eye had just been attracted to an item which particularly interested him. It was a despatch from Chicago, and read as follows:

"A story has reached here of an extraordinary gold find just made in Nevada by two lucky prospectors. The men set out from Goldfield several weeks ago, and got lost in the mountains. After enduring terrible privations, and almost perishing in the blizzard, they were found in last extremity by a party of hunters. They had actually discovered gold, having accidentally stumbled on one of the richest ore deposits in the gold region. A nugget of enormous size was brought in by the rescuing party in support of their well-nigh incredible story. The prospectors quickly recovered from their terrible experience, and one of them,

named John Madison, is now on his way East for the purpose of organizing a syndicate which will begin at once large operations in the Nevada gold fields. Rumor has it that Mr. Madison will also bring back a bride."

Brockton caught his breath and looked sharply over at Laura. Did she know about this? Was it the explanation of her petulance and discontented attitude? That fellow Madison was now a man of means. The coincidence of the despatch brought back to the broker's mind the night scene on the terrace in Denver, and later their conversation at the boarding house in New York, and with the subtle intuition of the shrewd man of the world, he at once connected the two. Eyeing his companion keenly and suspiciously, he said:

"I don't suppose, Laura, that you'd be interested now in knowing anything about that young fellow out in Colorado? What was his name—Madison?"

The girl started and changed color.

"Do you know anything?" she said quickly.

"No, nothing particularly," he replied, with affected carelessness. "I've been rather curious to know how he came out. He was a pretty fresh young man, and did an awful lot of talking. I wonder how he's doing and how he's getting along. I don't suppose by any chance you have ever heard from him?"

She shook her head.

"No, no; I've never heard."

"I presume he never replied to that letter you wrote?"

"No."

"It would be rather queer, eh, if this young fellow should happen to come across a lot of money—not that I think he ever could, but it would be funny, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, yes," she said quickly; "it would be unexpected. I hope he does. It might make him happy."

"Think he might take a trip East and see you act? You know you've got quite a part now."

Laura tossed back her head impatiently. Petulantly she said:

"I wish you wouldn't discuss him. Why do you mention it now? Is it because you were drinking last night, and lost your sense of delicacy? You once had some consideration for me. What I've done I've done. I'm giving *you* all that I can. Please, please, don't hurt me any more than you can help. That's all I ask."

Brockton rose, and, going over to her, placed his hands on her shoulders and his cheek close to the back of her head. He was sorry he had spoken so sharply. In his gruff way he was as fond of her as ever, but he could not help it if he sometimes felt under the weather.

"You know, dearie," he said kindly, "I do a lot for you because you've always been on the level with me. I'm sorry I hurt you, but there was too much wine last night, and I'm all upset. Forgive me."

He tried to kiss her, to make up, but she averted her head. Holding herself aloof, she shuddered. A feeling of repulsion passed through her. Perhaps never so much as now had she realized that this kind of life was becoming more intolerable every hour.

In order to avoid his caresses, Laura had leaned forward. Her hands clasped between her knees, she gazed straight past him, with a cold, impassive expression. Brockton looked at her silently for a moment. The man was really fond of her; he wanted to try and comfort her, but of late a wall seemed to have risen between them. He realized now that she had slipped away from the old environment and conditions. He had brought her back, but he had regained none of her affection. With all his money, their old *camaraderie* was gone forever. These and other thoughts hurt him as such things always hurt a selfish, egotistical man, inclining him to be brutal and inconsiderate.

As they both remained there in silence, the front door bell rang, first gently and then more violently. Brockton went to open. Before he could reach it there was another ring. The caller, whoever it was, seemed in a good deal of a hurry.

"D—n that bell!" exclaimed the broker.

He opened the parlor door and passed out into the private hall, so he could open the door leading into the public corridor. Laura remained seated where she was, immovable and impassive, with the same cold, hard expression on her face. When, she pondered, would she be able to summon up courage enough to tell Brockton the truth—that she detested him and

his set and loathed herself? Why had he mentioned John just now? Could he have read her thoughts and guessed of whom she had been thinking?

Presently the outer door slammed loudly, and Brockton re-entered the room, holding a telegram in his hand.

"A wire," he said briefly.

Laura started forward.

"For me?" she exclaimed.

"Yes."

She looked surprised.

"From whom, I wonder? Perhaps Elfie, with a luncheon engagement."

"I don't know," he said indifferently, handing her the closed yellow envelope.

As she broke it open and hastily read the contents, he watched her face closely. She gasped involuntarily as she caught sight of the signature, but by a great effort managed to control herself. Outwardly calm and self-possessed, she silently read the message, which was dated Buffalo, the night before, and ran as follows:

"MY OWN DARLING:

"I have been through the shadow of the valley, but have won out. To-day I am rich. Isn't it glorious? I am the happiest man on earth. I shall be in New York before noon to-morrow. I am coming to marry you, and I'm coming with a bank-roll. I wanted to keep it secret, and have a big surprise for you, but I can't hold it any longer, because I feel just like a kid with a new top. Don't go out. I'll be with you early.

"JOHN."

She crushed the telegram up in her hand, and crossed the room so he should not see her face. John was coming back—a rich man. He was coming back to claim her. Great God! What could she say to him?

"No bad news, I hope?" said Brockton suspiciously.

"No, no—not bad news," she replied hastily.

"I thought you appeared startled."

"No, not at all," she stammered.

Brockton sat down and picked up the newspaper again. Carelessly he asked:

"From Elfie?"

"No—just a friend."

"Oh!"

He sat down again, making himself comfortable in the armchair. Laura, in an agony of suspense, growing momentarily more nervous, watched him sideways, wondering how she could get rid of him, hoping he would soon go out. It would never do for John to come and find him there. With two men of such violent temper, already jealous to the breaking point, there was no telling what terrible tragedy might happen. Besides, she was anxious to be alone, so she might think out some plan of action. Something must be done at once. It was near eleven already. John would reach New York about noon; he would probably seek her out at once. She could reasonably expect him that very afternoon. A cold chill ran through her at the thought. What would she say to him? Get rid of Brockton she must at all costs. Timidly she asked:

"Won't you be rather late getting down town, Will?"

Without lifting his head, he answered carelessly:

"Doesn't make any difference. I don't feel much like the office now. Thought I might order the car and take a spin through the park. The cold air will do me a lot of good. Like to go?"

"No, not to-day," she replied hastily. A silence followed, and then she went on: "I thought your business was important; you said so last night."

"No hurry," he answered. Suddenly turning and looking up at her, he asked searchingly: "Do you—er—want to get rid of me?"

"Why should I?" she demanded, with pretended surprise.

"Expecting some one?" he demanded.

"No—not exactly," she replied hesitatingly.

Turning her back on him, she went to the window, and stood there, gazing out into the street. Brockton watched her for a moment; then, with a covert smile, he said dryly:

"If you don't mind, I'll stay here."

Laura left the window, and coming back into the room, sat down at the piano.

"Just as you please," she said, realizing that he was watching her, and trying her utmost to appear unconcerned. After playing a few bars, she stopped and said in a more conciliatory tone:

"Will?"

"Yes."

"How long does it take to come from Buffalo?"

"Depends on the train," he answered laconically.

"About how long?" she persisted.

"Between eight and ten hours, I think." Looking up, he asked: "Some one coming?"

Ignoring his question, she asked:

"Do you know anything about the trains?"

"Not much. Why don't you find out for yourself? Have Annie get the timetable."

"I will," she said.

Leaving the piano, she went to the door and called:

"Annie! Annie!"

The negress appeared on the threshold.

"Yassum!"

"Go ask one of the hall-boys to bring me a New York Central timetable."

"Yassum!"

The maid crossed the room, and disappeared through another door. Laura, with forced nonchalance, seated herself on the arm of the sofa, humming a popular air. Brockton turned and faced her.

"Then you *do* expect some one, eh?" he exclaimed.

Her heart was in her throat, but she remained outwardly calm as she replied carelessly:

"Only one of the girls who used to be in the same company with me. But I'm not sure that she's coming here."

"Then the wire was from her?"

"Yes."

"Did she say what train she was coming on?"

"No."

"Well, there are a lot of trains. About what time did you expect her in?"

"She didn't say."

"Do I know her?"

"I think not. I met her while I worked in 'Frisco."

"Oh!"

He resumed reading his paper, and the next moment Annie re-entered with a timetable.

"Thanks," said Laura, taking it. Then, pointing to the breakfast table, she said: "Now take those things away, Annie."

The maid started in to gather up the dishes, while her mistress became engrossed in a deep study of the timetable. Soon Annie left the room with the loaded tray, and Laura looked up in despair.

"I can't make this out," she cried.

Brockton looked up and held out his hand.

"Give it here; maybe I can help you."

She rose, and, approaching the table, handed him the timetable, a diabolical labyrinth of incomprehensible figures and words specially compiled by railroad managers to puzzle and befog the traveling public. But Brockton, from long practice, seemed familiar with its mysteries.

"Where is she coming from?" he demanded, as he quickly turned over the leaves.

"The West," she answered promptly. "The telegram was from Buffalo. I suppose she was on her way when she sent it."

Brockton had found the right page, and was busy calculating the time made by the different trains.

"There's a train comes in here at nine-thirty—that's the Twentieth Century. That doesn't carry passengers from Buffalo. Then there's one at eleven-forty-one. One at one-forty-nine. Another at three-forty-five. Another at five-forty and another at five-forty-eight. That's the Lake Shore Limited, a fast train; and all pass through Buffalo. Did you think of meeting her?"

"No, she'll come here when she arrives."

"She knows where you live?"

"She has the address."

"Ever been to New York before?"

"I think not."

He passed back the timetable.

"Well, that's the best I can do for you."

"Thank you."

She took the timetable and placed it in the desk. Brockton, who had taken up his paper again, gave an exclamation of surprise.

"By George—this is funny."

"What?" she demanded, looking impatiently at the clock.

"Speak of the devil, you know."

"Who?"

"Your old friend—John Madison."

Laura started involuntarily. She became deathly pale, and put her head on the chair-back to steady herself. Controlling her agitation by a supreme effort, she said:

"What—what about him?"

"He's been in Chicago."

"How do you know?"

Brockton held out the newspaper.

"Here's a dispatch about him."

She came quickly forward and looked over the broker's shoulder. Her voice was trembling with suppressed excitement, as she said:

"What—where—what's it about?"

Brockton chuckled. Holding out the paper so she could see, and watching her face closely, he went on:

"I'm damned if he hasn't done what he said he'd do—see! He's been in Chicago, and is on his way to New York. He's struck it rich in Nevada, and is coming with a pot of money. Queer, isn't it? Did you know anything about it?"

"No, no; nothing at all," she said, laying the paper aside and returning to her former place near the piano. Her face was drawn and white, and there was a hard, metallic note perceptible in her voice.

"Lucky for him, eh?" said the broker.

"Yes, yes; it's very nice."

"Too bad he couldn't get this a little sooner, eh, Laura?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said, with a forced laugh. "I don't think it's too bad. What makes you say that?"

"Oh, nothing. I suppose he ought to be here to-day. Are you going to see him if he looks you up?"

"No, no," she replied quickly; "I don't want to see him. You know that, don't you—that I don't want to see him? What makes you ask these questions?"

Brockton shrugged his shoulders.

"Just thought you might meet him, that's all. Don't get sore about it."

"I'm not."

She still held John's telegram crumpled in one hand. Brockton put down his paper, and regarded her curiously. She saw the expression on his face, and, reading its meaning, averted her head in order not to meet his eye.

"What are you looking at me that way for?" she demanded hotly.

"I wasn't conscious that I was looking at you in any particular way. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I guess I'm nervous, too."

"I dare say you are."

"Yes, I am."

Brockton rose slowly from his chair. Crossing over to where she sat, he stood with folded arms, looking her squarely in the face. There was a hard look in his eyes, a determined expression around his mouth. He was in one of his obstinate, ungovernable tempers, and Laura knew at once by his manner that a critical moment was at hand. He began ominously:

"You know I don't want to delve into a lot of past history at this time, but I've got to talk to you for a moment."

She rose quickly, and, going to the other side of the room, pretended to be busy. Nervously, she said:

"Why don't you do it some other time? I don't want to be talked to just now."

He followed her, and, in the same, hard, determined tone, said firmly:

"But I've got to do it, just the same."

Trying to affect an attitude of resigned patience and resignation, Laura shrugged her shoulders and resumed her seat on the sofa.

"Well, what is it?" she said.

He looked at her in silence for a moment, as if not quite sure how to begin. Then, quietly, he said:

"You've always been on the square with me, Laura. That's why I've liked you a lot better than the other women——"

She stirred restlessly on her seat, and began to polish her finger-nails. Peevishly, she said:

"Are you going into all that again this morning. I thought we understood each other."

"So did I," he replied bitterly; "but somehow, I think that we *don't* quite understand each

other."

She looked up, as if surprised.

"In what way?"

Looking steadily at her, he went on:

"That letter I dictated to you the day that you came back to me and left for you to mail—did you mail it?"

For a sixteenth of a second she hesitated. Should she go on lying, or stop right now and confess everything? She dare not. She had not the courage. Positively, decisively, almost indignantly, she answered:

"Yes—of course. Why do you ask?"

He eyed her keenly, trying to penetrate her thoughts.

"You're quite sure?"

"Yes, I'm quite sure." With an effrontery that surprised herself, she added: "I wouldn't say so if I wasn't."

"And you didn't know Madison was coming East until you read about it in that newspaper?"

"No—no—I didn't know."

"Have you heard from him?"

Again an opportunity presented itself to tell the truth, and again her courage failed her.

"No—no—I haven't heard from him." Peevishly, she exclaimed: "Don't talk to me about this thing. Why can't you leave me alone? I'm miserable enough, as it is."

She walked away, with the idea of leaving the room, but quickly he intercepted her. Sternly, he said:

"But I've got to talk to you. Laura, you're lying to me."

"What!"

She made a valiant effort to seem angry, but Brockton was too old a bird to be deceived. Raising his voice in anger he exclaimed:

"You're lying to me, and you've been lying to me all along! Like a fool I've trusted you. Show me that telegram!"

"No," she said defiantly.

She retreated into a far corner. He followed her.

"Show me that telegram!" he commanded.

"You've no right to ask me," she exclaimed hotly.

Before he could prevent it, she had torn the telegram in half and run to the window. Before she could throw the pieces out, he had caught her by the arm. Livid with rage, he almost shouted:

"Are you going to make me take it away from you? I've never laid my hands on you yet."

"It's my business!" she cried in desperation.

"Yes, and it's mine!" he retorted, trying to seize the fragments.

Her face flushed from the struggle, now furiously angry, she fought him with all her strength. They battled all over the room. Finally he backed her against the dresser, and she was powerless to resist further. He put out his hand to seize the torn pieces of the telegram, which she had stuffed inside her waist.

"That telegram's from Madison," he cried hotly. "Give it here!"

"No!" she exclaimed, white as death, and still defiant.

"I'm going to find out where I stand," he cried. "Give me that telegram, or I'll take it away from you."

"No!"

"Come on!" he said savagely, his teeth clenched, his face white from furious jealousy.

The struggle was unequal. He was the stronger. Further resistance was futile.

"All right," she said breathlessly; "I'll give it to you."

Slowly, she drew the pieces out of her bosom, and handed them to him. He took them, and, keeping his eyes fixed on hers, slowly smoothed them out, and pieced them together so that he could read the dispatch. When, at last, he began to read, she staggered back apprehensively.

He read it slowly, deliberately. When he had finished, he looked up. Sternly, he said:

"Then you knew?"

"Yes," she faltered.

"But you didn't know he was coming until he arrived?"

"No."

"And you didn't mail the letter, did you?"

"No——"

His face turned livid with rage. Clenching his fists menacingly, he advanced towards her.

"What did you do with it?" he thundered.

Shrinking from him, afraid of his violence, she replied faintly:

"I—I burned it."

"Why?" he shouted, in a fury.

Dazed, bewildered, almost hysterical, Laura was unable to answer. He advanced until he almost stood over her, his arm raised threateningly, as if about to strike her. She cowered before him.

"Why—why?" he repeated hoarsely.

Almost in tears, she murmured weakly:

"I—I couldn't help it. I simply couldn't help it."

Folding his arms he looked down at her with an expression in which pity was mingled with contempt. A straightforward man himself, he had no patience with lying. He could forgive her lying—it was natural to her—but she had made him appear a liar. With a sweeping gesture of his hand, which took in the whole room, and its luxurious contents, he said:

"And he doesn't know about us?"

"No."

Thoroughly exasperated, he again advanced towards her, his face distorted with rage.

"By God!" he exclaimed. "I never beat a woman in my life, but I feel as though I could wring your neck!"

White-faced, trembling, she stared at him helplessly. Hysterically, she cried:

"Why don't you? You have done everything else. Why don't you?"

"Don't you know," he continued furiously, "that I gave Madison my word that if you came back to me I'd let him know? Don't you know that I like that young fellow, and I wanted to protect him, and did everything I could to help him? And do you know what you've done to me? You've made me out a liar—you've made me lie to a man—a man—you understand! What are you going to do now? Tell me—what are you going to do now? Don't stand there as if you've lost your voice—how are you going to square me?"

Summoning up all her courage, she faced him, calmly, defiantly.

"I'm not thinking about squaring *you*," she said ironically. "What am I going to do for *him*?"

"Not what *you* are going to do for him," he retorted. "What am *I* going to do for him? Why, I wouldn't have that young fellow think that I tricked him into this thing for you or all the rest of the women of your kind on earth. Good God! I might have known that you, and the others like you, couldn't be square."

She made no answer. The attitude of hostility and defiance had gone. She looked at him silently, pleadingly, like some helpless dumb animal trying to placate its master's wrath. Brockton glanced at his watch, walked over to the window and then came back to where she stood. Shaking his fist at her, he muttered:

"You've made a nice mess of it, haven't you?"

"There isn't any mess," she answered weakly. "Please go away. He'll be here soon. Please let *me* see him—please do that."

"No," he replied doggedly, "I'll wait. This time I'm going to tell him myself, and I don't care how tough it is."

Frightened at this suggestion, which might be so full of dire consequences, she was instantly galvanized into action. Starting up again, she cried:

"No, you mustn't do that!" Approaching him, she said pleadingly: "Oh, Will, I'm not offering any excuse. I'm not saying anything, but I'm telling you the truth. I couldn't give him up—I couldn't do it. I love him."

Shrugging his shoulders he made an ironical exclamation:

"Huh!"

"Don't you think so?" she went on piteously. "I know you can't see what I see, but I do. And why can't you go away? Why can't you leave me this? It's all I ever had. He doesn't know. No one will ever tell him. I'll take him away. It's the best for him—it's the best for me. Please go."

He laughed, and, going back to the armchair, deliberately reseated himself. Ignoring her tearful pleading, he said scornfully:

"Why—do you think that I'm going to let you trip him the way you tripped me? No. I'm going to stay right here until that man arrives, and I'm going to tell him that it wasn't my fault. You alone were to blame."

She listened blankly, staring at him in a bewildered, dazed sort of way. Her face was white as death, and her hands twisted convulsively. Slowly, with a half-stifled sob, she cried:

"Then you are going to let him know?" she said slowly. "You're not going to give me a single, solitary chance?"

The plaintive tone in her voice touched him. He hated such scenes, and would willingly have overlooked anything to avoid one. But there was a limit to a man's patience. Perhaps, however, he had been a bit brutal. He did not trust himself to look up, but his voice was less harsh as he replied:

"I'll give you every chance that you deserve when he knows. Then he can do as he pleases, but there must be no more deception, that's flat."

Approaching the chair in which he sat, she laid a hand on his shoulder. Gently, she said:

"Then you must let me tell him."

Brockton turned away impatiently. She sank down on her knees beside him.



SHE SANK DOWN ON HER KNEES BESIDE HIM.

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"Yes—you must," she went on imploringly. "If I didn't tell him before I'll do it now. You must go. If you ever had any regard for me—if you ever had any affection—if you ever had any friendship, please let me do this now. I want you to go—you can come back. Then you'll see—you'll know—only I want to try to make him understand that—that maybe if I'm weak I'm not vicious. I want to let him know that I didn't want to do it, but I couldn't help it. Just give me the chance to be as good as I can be——"

Brockton turned and looked straight at her. She did not flinch under his severe, critical gaze. Impulsively, coaxingly, she went on:

"Oh, I promise you I will tell him, and then—then I don't care what happens—only he must learn everything from me—please—please, let me do this—it's the last favor I shall ever—ever ask of you. Won't you?"

This last appeal, uttered hysterically, was followed by a flood of weeping. She had controlled herself as long as she could, but at last her nerves could not stand the strain, and she broke down completely. Brockton rose, and for a moment stood watching, as if mentally debating himself what was the best thing to do. Finally, he said:

"All right; I won't be unkind. I'll be back early this afternoon, but remember—this time you'll have to go right through to the end." With a significant warning gesture, he added: "Understand?"

Drying her eyes, she said hastily:

"Yes, I'll do it—all of it Won't you please go—now?"

"All right," he replied.

The broker disappeared into the bedroom and almost immediately entered again with overcoat on his arm and hat in hand. He went towards the door without speaking. At the threshold he halted and, looking back at her, said firmly:

"I am sorry for you, Laura, but remember—you've got to tell the truth."

"Please go," she cried almost hysterically.

He went out, closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER XVII.

With a sigh of intense relief, Laura sank utterly exhausted into the armchair which Brockton had vacated.

Everything had come so suddenly that the girl's brain was all awlirl. John might arrive any moment. She must decide at once on what was to be done. What could she say to him? How much did she wish to say; how much would he believe? Was it possible that Providence had relented, and that, after all, she was to be truly happy, marry the only man she had ever truly, unselfishly loved, and still have all those luxuries which she could not live without? John was now a rich man. That made all the difference in the world. It would not make her love him any the more, but, as a rich man's wife, as *his* wife, she knew she would be truly happy. She might have married him, even if he had been unsuccessful and returned to her penniless, but would their happiness have lasted, could their love have survived all the hardships which poverty brings in its train? Of course, she could not tell him about Brockton. He was not the kind of man she dare tell it to. He would never forgive her; he might even kill her. No, she must go on lying to the end, until she was safely married, and then she would turn over a new leaf altogether. While she sat there, her elbows between her knees, her chin on her hands, engrossed in thought, Annie entered and began to dust the room. Laura watched her in moody silence for a few minutes. Then she said:

"Annie!"

"Yassum."

"Do you remember in the boarding-house—when we finally packed up—what you did with everything?"

"Yassum."

"You remember that I used to keep a pistol?"

"Yo' mean dat one yo' say dat gemman out West gave yuh once?"

"Yes."

"Yassum, Ah 'membuh it."

"Where is it now?"

"Last Ah saw of it was in dis heah draw' in de writin'-desk."

Crossing to the other side of the room, the negress opened the desk and began to fumble among a lot of old papers. Finally she drew out a small, thirty-two calibre revolver, which she held out gingerly.

"Is dis it?"

Laura turned and looked.

"Yes," she said quickly. "Put it back. I thought that perhaps it was lost."

Annie had no sooner replaced the weapon in the drawer when the front door-bell rang. Laura turned pale and started to her feet. Could that be John? Instinctively, she gathered her negligée gown closer to her frail, trembling figure, and, hurrying to the mirror, put those little finishing touches to her hair which no woman, jealous of her personal appearance, would think of neglecting, even though the house was on fire. She was so unstrung and agitated that she could hardly stand; she had to hold the table with one hand to maintain her balance. She could not articulate; her voice stuck in her throat.

"See—who—that is—and let me know," she gasped.

"Yassum."

The maid went out into the private hall and opened the door. Immediately was heard the voice of Elfie St. Clair.

"Hello, Annie. Folks in?"

"Yassum; she's in."

Laura breathed more freely, and ran to greet her friend, who bounced in, smiling and good-natured. Elfie was beautifully gowned in a morning dress, with an over-abundance of trimmings and all the furbelows that generally accompany the extravagant raiment affected by women of her type. Advancing effusively, she exclaimed:

"Hello, dearie!"

"Hello, Elfie!" said Laura, unable to conceal how genuinely glad she was to see her friend.

"It's a bully day out," said Elfie, looking at herself in the mirror. "I've been shopping all morning long; just blew myself until I'm broke, that's all. My goodness, don't you ever get dressed? Listen—talk about cinches! I copped out a gown, all ready made. It fits me like the paper on the wall for thirty-seven and one-half dollars. Looks like it might have cost \$200. Anyway, I had them charge \$200 on the bill, and I kept the change. There are two or three more down there, and I want you to go down and look them over. Models, you know, being sold out. My—how you look this morning! You've got great black circles round your eyes. I don't blame you for not getting up earlier."

Sitting down at the table without noticing Laura further, she rattled on:

"That was some party last night! I know you didn't drink a great deal, but gee! what an awful tide Will had on! How do you feel?" Stopping short in her prattle, and looking at her friend, she exclaimed with concern: "What's the matter, are you sick? You look all in. What you want to do is this—put on your duds and go out for an hour. It's a perfectly grand day out. My Gaud! How the sun does shine! Clear and cold. Well, much obliged for the conversation. Don't I get a 'Good-morning,' or a 'How-dy-do,' or a something of that sort?"

"I'm tired, Elfie, and blue—terribly blue."

The caller rose, and, going up to her friend, said:

"Well, now, you just brace up and cut out all that emotional stuff. I came down to take you for a drive. You'd like it; just through the park. Will you go?"

"Not this morning, dear; I'm expecting somebody."

"A man?"

In spite of herself, Laura could not restrain a smile.

"No—a gentleman," she corrected.

"Same thing. Do I know him?"

"I think you do."

"Well, don't be so mysterious. Who is he?"

Ignoring the question, Laura asked anxiously:

"What is your time, Elfie?"

The girl looked at her watch. "Five minutes past eleven."

"I'm slow," exclaimed Laura. "I didn't know it was so late. Just excuse me, won't you, while I get some clothes on. He may be here any moment." Going to the end of the room, where the heavy *portières* separated the parlor from the sitting-room, she called out: "Annie!"

"Who is it?" insisted Elfie.

"I'll tell you when I get dressed. Make yourself at home, won't you, dear?"

"I'd sooner hear," replied Elfie. "What is the scandal, anyway?"

"I'll tell you in a moment," laughed Laura; "just as soon as Annie gets through with me."

She went out, leaving her visitor alone. Elfie, left to herself, wandered about the room. Finding a candy box on the desk, she helped herself to the sugared contents. Aloud, she said:

"Do you know, Laura, I think I'll go back on the stage?"

"Yes?" came the answer from the inner room.

"Yes," went on Elfie, "I'm afraid I'll have to. I think I need a sort of a boost to my popularity."

"How a boost?"

"I think Jerry is getting cold feet. He's seeing a little too much of me nowadays."

"What makes you think that?"

"I think he is getting a relapse of that front-row habit. There's no use in talking, Laura, it's

a great thing for a girl's credit when a man like Jerry can take two or three friends to the theatre, and when you make your entrance delicately point to you with his forefinger, and say: 'The third one from the front on the left belongs to muh.' The old fool's hanging around some of these musical comedies lately, and I'm getting nervous every time rent day comes."

Laura laughed incredulously. She had too high an opinion of her friend's business ability to believe the danger very serious. Pointedly, she said:

"Oh, I guess you'll get along all right."

Elfie rose, and, going to the mirror, gave her hat and hair a few deft little touches, after which she surveyed herself critically. With serene self-satisfaction, she said:

"Oh, that's a cinch! But I like to leave well enough alone, and if I had to make a change right now it would require a whole lot of thought and attention, to say nothing of the inconvenience, and I'm so nicely settled in my flat." Suddenly her eye lighted on the pianola. Going to it, she exclaimed: "Say, dearie, when did you get the piano-player? I got one of them phonographs, but this has got that beat a city block. How does it work? What did it cost?"

"I don't know," laughed Laura.

"Well, Jerry's got to stake me to one of these." Looking over the rolls on top, she mumbled to herself: "Tannhauser, William Tell, Chopin." Louder, she said: "Listen, dear. Ain't you got anything else except all this high-brow stuff?"

"What do you want?"

"Oh, something with a regular tune to it." Looking at the empty box on the pianola, she exclaimed: "Oh, here's one; just watch me tear this off."

The roll was the ragtime tune of "*Bon-Bon Buddy—My Chocolate Drop*." She started to play. Pushing wide open the *tempo* lever she worked the pedals with the ingenuous delight and enthusiasm of a child.

"Ain't it grand?" she cried.

"Gracious, Elfie, don't play so loud!" exclaimed Laura, who reëntered. "What's the matter?"

Her visitor stopped playing. Smiling, she explained:

"I shoved over that thing marked 'swell.' I sure will have to speak to Jerry about this. I'm stuck on this 'swell' thing. Hurry up!" Noticing Laura's white, anxious-looking face, she exclaimed sympathetically: "Gee! you look pale! I'll just bet you and Will had a fight. He always gets the best of you, doesn't he, dearie? Listen. Don't you think you can ever get him trained? I almost threw Jerry down the stairs the other night, and he came right back with a lot of American beauties and a cheque. I told him if he didn't look out, I'd throw him downstairs every night. He's getting too d—d independent, and it's got me nervous." Sinking into a seat, she exclaimed, with a sigh: "Oh, dear, I s'pose I will have to go back on the stage."

"In the chorus?" inquired Laura quietly.

Elfie looked up in mock indignation.

"Well, I should say not. I'm going to give up my musical career. Charlie Burgess is putting on a new play, and he says he has a part in it for me if I want to go back. It isn't much, but very important—sort of a pantomime part. A lot of people talk about me and just at the right moment I walk across the stage and make an awful hit. I told Jerry that if I went on he'd have to come across with one of those Irish crochet lace gowns. He fell for it. Do you know, dearie, I think he'd sell out his business just to have me back on the stage for a couple of weeks, just to give box parties every night for my entrance and exits."

Laura went over to the sofa, picked up the candy box, placed it on the desk, and took the telegram from the table. Then, taking her friend by the hand, she led her over to the sofa.

"Elfie," she said seriously.

"Yes, dear."

"Come over here and sit down."

"What's up?"

"Do you know what I'm going to ask of you?"

Elfie took a seat opposite. With a wry face, she said:

"If it's a touch, you'll have to wait until next week."

"No," smiled Laura; "just a little advice."

Her friend looked relieved.

"Well, that's cheap," she laughed; "and the Lord knows you need it. What's happened?"

Laura took the crumpled and torn telegram which Brockton had left on the table, and handed it to her companion. Elfie put the two pieces together, and read it very carefully. When she reached the middle of the despatch she gave an exclamation of surprise and looked up quickly at her companion. Then, finishing it, she laid it down.

"Well?" she demanded.

Rather at a loss how to explain, Laura flushed and stammered:

"Will suspected. There was something in the paper about Mr. Madison—the telegram came—then we had a row."

"Serious?"

"Yes. Do you remember what I told you about that letter—the one Will made me write—I mean to John—telling him what I had done?"

"Yes, you burned it."

"I tried to lie to Will—he wouldn't have it that way. He seemed to know. He was furious."

"Did he hit you?"

"No, he made me admit that John didn't know, and then he said he'd stay here and tell him himself that I'd made him lie, and he said something about liking the other man and wanting to save him."

"Save him?" exclaimed Elfie derisively. "Shucks! He's jealous!"

"I told him if he'd only go I'd—tell John myself when he came, and now, you see, I'm waiting—and I've got to tell—and—and I don't know how to begin—and—and I thought you could help me—you seem so sort of resourceful, and it means—it means so much to me. If John turned on me now I couldn't go back to Will, and, Elfie—I don't think I'd care to—stay here any more."

"What!" exclaimed Elfie.

Impulsively, she took Laura in her arms.

"Dearie," she said earnestly, "get that nonsense out of your head and be sensible. I'd just like to see any two men who could make me think about—well—what you seem to have in your mind."

"But I don't know what to do," went on Laura. "Can't you see, Elfie, I don't know what to do. If I don't tell him, Will will come back and he'll tell him. I know John, and maybe——" Fearfully she added: "Do you know, I think John would kill him!"

"Nonsense!" laughed the girl. "Don't waste your time worrying about that. Now, let's get down to cases. We haven't much time. Business is business, and love is love. You're long on love, and I'm long on business, and, between the two of us, we ought to straighten this thing out. Now, evidently John is coming on here to marry you."

"Yes."

"And you love him?"

"Yes."

"And, as far as you know, the moment that he comes in here, it's quick to the justice and a wedding?"

"Yes; but you see how impossible it is——"

"I don't see that anything is impossible. From all you've said to me about this fellow, there is only one thing to do."

"What is that?"

"To get married—quick. You say he has the money, and you have the love. You're sick of Brockton, and you want to switch and do it in the decent, respectable, conventional way, and he's going to take you away. Haven't you got sense enough to know that once you're married

to Mr. Madison that Will Brockton wouldn't dare go to him? Even if he did, Madison wouldn't believe him. A man will believe a whole lot about his girl, but nothing about his wife."

Laura turned and looked at her. There was a long pause.

"Elfie—I—I—don't think I could do that to John. I don't think—I could deceive him."

Her companion made a gesture of impatience. Rising, she cried:

"You make me sick! You're only a novice! Lie to all men—they all lie to you. Protect yourself. You seem to think that your happiness depends on this. Now do it. Listen: Don't you realize that you and me, and all the girls that are shoved into this life, are practically the common prey of any man who happens to come along? Don't you know that they've got about as much consideration for us as they have for any pet animal around the house, and the only way that we've got it on the animal is that we've got brains? This is a game, Laura, *not a sentiment*. Do you suppose that Madison—now don't get sore—hasn't turned these tricks himself before he met you, and I'll gamble he's done it since. A man's natural trade is a heartbreaking business. Don't tell me about women breaking men's hearts. The only thing they can ever break is their bankroll. And, besides, this is not Will's business; he has no right to interfere. You've been decent with him, and he's been nice to you; but I don't think that he's given you any the best of it. Now, if you want to leave, and go your own way, and marry any Tom, Dick or Harry that you want to, it's nobody's affair but yours."

"But you don't understand—it's John. I can't lie to him," cried Laura.

"Well, that's too bad about you. I used to have that truthful habit myself, and the best I ever got was the worst of it. All this talk about love and loyalty and constancy is fine and dandy in a book, but when a girl has to look out for herself, take it from me, whenever you've got that trump card up your sleeve, just play it, and rake in the pot." Taking Laura's hand, she added affectionately: "You know, dearie, you're just about the only one in the world I've left to care for."

"Elfie!" cried Laura, taking her companion's hand, sympathetically.

Her eyes filled with tears, Elfie put her handkerchief up to her face to conceal her emotion. Under the coarseness and flippancy of the courtesan were glimpses of an unhappy woman, a human being conscious of her own irretrievable degradation. For the first time in years, she was making another the confidant of her life's tragedy, the sad, commonplace story of a woman's ruin. Recovering herself, she went on quickly:

"Since I broke away from the folks up-State, and they've heard things, there ain't any more letters coming to me with an Oswego postmark. Ma's gone, and the rest don't care. You're all I've got in the world, Laura, and I'm making you do this only because I want to see you happy. I was afraid this complication would arise. The thing to do now is to grab your happiness, no matter how you get it, nor where it comes from. There ain't a whole lot of joy in this world for you and me and the others we know, and what little you get you've got to take when you're young, because when those gray hairs begin to show and the make-up isn't going to hide the wrinkles, unless you're well fixed, it's going to be h—ll. You know what a fellow doesn't know doesn't hurt him. He'll love you just the same, and you'll love him. As for Brockton, let him get another girl. There are plenty around. Why, if this chance came to me, I'd tie a can to Jerry so quick that you could hear it rattle all the way down Broadway!"

She rose, and, leaning over the back of Laura's chair, put her arms lovingly around her neck. Tenderly, she said: "Promise me, dearie, that you won't be a d—d fool. Will you promise?"

Laura looked up at her, and smiled faintly: "I promise."

Elfie took her gloves and parasol.

"Well, good-by, dear; I must be going. Ta-ta, dearie. Give my regards to your charmer."

Laura accompanied her to the door.

"Good-by, dear."

Left alone, Laura returned to the parlor. Drawing aside the portieres that shut off the maid's quarters, she called out:

"Annie!"

"Yassum!"

"I'm expecting a gentleman, Annie. When he comes, ask him in."

CHAPTER XVIII.

The New York Central Railroad terminus in Manhattan is not exactly a spot which one would be apt to select for a rest cure, although a famous nerve specialist has expressed the learned opinion that such little disturbances in the atmospheric envelope as the shrieking of steam whistles, the exploding of giant firecrackers, the bursting of pneumatic tires, the blasting with dynamite, the uproar of street traffic, the shouts of men and boys, the screams of women and the wailing of babes are soothing, rather than harmful, to the human nervous system. All these sounds and others even more discordant, greeted the tired passengers of the Buffalo express, as, arriving from the West, they emerged from the train-shed into the deafening turmoil of Forty-second Street.

John Madison, tanned and weather-beaten, suitcase in hand, stood hesitating on the curb, as if dazed. After long months spent amid the loneliness and comparative quiet of the Nevada desert, the rush and bustle of the colossal metropolis was bewildering and confusing. A hackman hailed him.

"Cab, sir?"

"Yes," he answered, throwing his traveling grip on the seat. "Drive to the Waldorf."

As the jehu flourished his whip, and the hack rattled along on its way to the hotel, Madison gazed idly out of the windows, watching with interest the luxurious shops and the crowds of busy people hurrying along the sidewalks. How different it all looked to-day than when he was last in New York! Now, he viewed the scene with different eyes. Then he was a penniless reporter, obliged to stint and count before he ventured to spend a dollar. To-day he was a successful miner, one of those lucky individuals to whom Fortune has been more than kind. He was suddenly possessed of more money than he knew what to do with. He could stop at the best hotels, throw gold around him by the handfuls. For the first time in his life he was tasting the sweets of wealth. Every one treated him with deference, all were eager to render service. People who formerly affected to be ignorant of his very existence, now fawned upon him and asked him to their houses. He was a rich man. It meant not only immediate creature comforts, but freedom from care, independence for life. And what he prized most of all, it meant happiness, both for himself and the girl he loved, the girl who had waited so faithfully and so patiently. He could hardly restrain his impatience to see her. What rapture would it be to clasp her to his heart and cry: "Your long wait is over! I've come to make you happy! Henceforth you won't have to work. You'll leave the stage for good." And in his mind's eye, he saw Laura's joy, and heard her happy, girlish laugh, as he sat down before her and signed a blank cheque, telling her to fill in the rest for any amount she wished to spend. Yes—that was the greatest joy of success and being rich—the power of making happy the girl you loved. Thank God, he had won out! To-day, he was a rich man.

He had entirely forgotten the doubts and morbid fancies which had seized him in the wilderness. When he had recovered from his terrible experiences, he wondered how he could ever have permitted his mind to haunt such strange, unpleasant paths. The suffering and mental torture he went through was doubtless responsible for his unreasoning suspicions. He would never tell Laura; she must never know that he had harbored such thoughts. She would never forgive him. How delighted she would be to see him! Probably she was already anxiously on the lookout. By this time she had certainly received his telegram, which he had sent in care of her manager. He wondered where she was stopping. His last letter to her had been returned by the post office authorities marked "address unknown." She was in New York. He was sure of that, for he had read in the Chicago papers of her success in the new play. He was glad she had made good at last, because it meant more comforts for her. No doubt she had left the boarding-house, of which she wrote him discouraging accounts early in the winter, and was now installed in some fashionable hotel. The best and quickest way to find her would be to telephone the Burgess office. He wondered if she would be willing to throw up at once everything—the theatre, her future contracts and all—to marry him without delay. If he could have his way, he would like to return West with her that same day. They could leave on the Limited and get married in Chicago.

In less than fifteen minutes the Waldorf was reached, a room engaged, and Madison already had the office of Burgess & Co. on the telephone.

"Hello! Can you give me the private address of Miss Laura Murdock?"

"We don't give private addresses," was the curt reply.

This difficulty Madison had not foreseen, but his quick wit came to his aid, and in his most persuasive tone, he said:

"I'm sure you will, when you know the circumstances. I am a personal friend—I might say, relative, of Miss Murdock. I've just got in from Chicago. She expects me, but I've mislaid her address."

"Oh—that's different," said the voice more civilly. "There's so many Johnnies around that we have to be careful. Miss Murdock is at the Pomona, West — Street."

Madison did not wait to eat or anything else. Jumping into the first taxicab he saw, he said:

"West — Street."

A few minutes later the cab drew up before the rather imposing entrance of the Pomona Apartments. Dismissing the taxi, he turned to the uniformed attendant, who stood surveying the weather-tanned six-footer with some respect. Judging by his clothes, the new arrival looked as if he had done some traveling.

"Is Miss Murdock in?"

"I'll see, sir. Who shall I say?"

"Mr. Madison." Airily, he added: "Miss Murdock expects me."

A moment later the man returned, and politely ushered him into an elevator lined with mirrors, and luxuriously upholstered in red satin. At the fifth floor, the smooth-running car stopped, and the attendant pointed to an apartment across the corridor. Before Madison could reach the door, it was thrown wide open. There was a wild rush of rustling silks and white lace, a woman's stifled sob, and Laura was in his arms.

"Oh, John!" she cried almost hysterically, as the door closed behind him. "I'm so happy!"

For a moment he held her clasped tightly to him, as if afraid some one else might appear in this strange apartment to rob him of her. This was the supreme moment for which he had toiled and waited all these cruel, weary months. When at last, all red under his kisses, she released herself from his embrace, he took her face in his hands and held it up towards his. Tenderly, he said:

"I'm not much on the love-making business, Laura, but I never thought I'd be as happy as I am now. I've been counting mile-posts ever since I left Chicago, and it seemed like as if I had to go round the world before I got here."

Following close behind, as she went into the sitting room, he gave an exclamation of surprise as he took in the beautiful gilded furniture and rich furnishings. His eye seemed to ask questions he found no words for. She caught the look, and she trembled. Nervously waving him to a seat, she said:

"You never told me about your good fortune. If you hadn't telegraphed, I wouldn't even have known you were coming."

"I didn't want to," he replied, smiling. "I'd made up my mind to sort of drop in here and give you a great big surprise—a happy one, I knew—but the papers made such a fuss in Chicago that I thought you might have read about it—did you?"

"No, tell me," she said eagerly.

He sat down and began the story of his wanderings. He told her of his adventures in the search for gold, of his sufferings, and his narrow escape from death. In those dark hours, he had only had one thought, one hope—that he might be spared to see her once again.

"It's been pretty tough sledding out there in the mining country," he said. "It did look as if I never would make a strike; but your spirit was with me, and I knew if I could only hold out that something would come my way. I had a pal—a fine fellow. We started out to find gold. The first thing we knew we were lost—lost in the howling wilderness. We nearly perished of cold and hunger. It was a close call, little girl. I never thought I should see you again. But one day, when we were about all in, we struck gold—quantities of it, nuggets as big as my fist. We staked our claims in two weeks, and I went to Reno to raise enough money for me to come East. Now, things are all fixed, and it's just a matter of time."

He took the girl's delicate hand in his big brown ones, and looked fondly into her eyes.

"So you're very, very rich, dear?" she murmured.

He released her hand, and leaned back carelessly in his chair.

"Oh, not rich; just heeled. I'm not going down to the Wall Street bargain counter and buy the Union Pacific, or anything like that; but we won't have to take the trip on tourists' tickets, and there's enough money to make us comfortable all the rest of our lives."

"How hard you must have worked and suffered!"

He smiled, and, rising from his chair, stood looking down at her from the other side of the table.

"Nobody else ever accused me of that, but I sure have to plead guilty to you. Why, dear, since the day you came into my life, hell-raising took a sneak out the back door, and God poked His toe in the front, and ever since then I think He's been coming a little closer to me. I used to be a fellow without much faith, and kidded everybody who had it, and I used to say to those who prayed and believed, 'You may be right, but show me a message.' You came along, and brought that little document in your sweet face and your dear love. Laura, you turned the trick for me, and I think I'm almost a regular man now."

She turned her head away, unwilling that he should see her face, afraid that he might read there the whole miserable truth. As he spoke, his words brought to her a full realization of all she was to this man, and she became more and more unnerved. It was more than she could bear. Feebly she murmured:

"Please, John, don't. I'm not worth it."

Rising suddenly from the sofa, she went to the window. The air of the room was hot and stifling. She felt herself growing faint.

"Not worth it?" he exclaimed lightly, going up to her. "Why, you're worth that and a whole lot more. And see how you've got on! Brockton told me you never could get along in your profession, but I knew you could."

He walked around the room, inspecting the furnishings and knickknacks. Finally, he turned, and, with an interrogative note in his voice, said:

"Gee! fixed up kind o' scrumptious, ain't you? I guess you've been almost as prosperous as I have."

She forced a laugh. With affected carelessness, she said:

"You can get a lot of gilt and cushions in New York at half-price, and, besides, I've got a pretty good part now."

"Of course, I know that," he smiled; "but I didn't think it would make you quite so comfortable. Great, ain't it?"

"Yes."

Taking her by the shoulders, and shaking her playfully, he went on:

"I knew what you had in you, and here you are. You succeeded, and I succeeded, but I'm going to take you away; and after a while, when things sort of smooth out, we're going to move back here, and go to Europe, and just have a great time, like a couple of kids."

She turned and looked up at him. Slowly, she said:

"But if I hadn't succeeded, and if things—things weren't just as they seem—would it make any difference to you, John?"

He took her in his arms and kissed her, drawing her onto the sofa beside him.

"Not the least in the world. Now, don't get blue. I should not have surprised you this way. It's taken you off your feet."

Looking at his watch, he jumped up, and, going behind the sofa, he got his overcoat. "But we've not any time to lose. How soon can you get ready?"

Laura knelt on the sofa, leaning over the back.

"You mean to go at once?" she asked.

"Nothing else."

"Take all my things?"

"All your duds," he smiled. "Can't you get ready?"

"Why, my dear, I can get ready most any time."

He came over and stood by her chair, looking down at her affectionately. With a smile, he said:

"Well, are you ready?"

She looked up quickly, a faint flush on her pale face.

"For what, dear?"

"You know what I said in the telegram?"

"Yes."

Her head dropped forward on his shoulder. In a low tone, she murmured:

"Yes."

"Well, I meant it," he said tenderly.

"I know," she whispered.

He took a seat on the other side of the table facing her.

"I've got to get back, Laura, just as soon as ever I can. There's a lot of work to be done out in Nevada, and I stole away to come to New York. I want to take you back. Can you go?"

"Yes—when?"

"This afternoon. We'll take the eighteen-hour train to Chicago, late this afternoon, and connect at Chicago with the Overland, and I'll soon have you in a home." He hesitated a moment; then he said: "And here's another secret."

"What, dear?"

"I've got that home all bought and furnished, and while you wouldn't call it a Fifth Avenue residence, still it has got something on any other one in town."

Looking into the bedroom, he asked: "Is that your maid?"

"Yes—Annie."

"Well, you and she can pack everything you want to take; the rest can follow later." Putting his coat on, he went on: "I planned it all out. There's a couple of boys downtown, one's Glenn Warner—you know him—he introduced me to you that night—the other is a newspaper man. I telephoned them when I got in, and they're waiting for me. I'll just get down there as soon as I can. I won't be gone long."

"How long?" she demanded.

"I don't know just how long, but we'll make that train. I'll get the license. We'll be married, and we'll be off on our honeymoon this afternoon. Can you do it?"

She went up to him, put her hands in his, and they confronted each other.

"Yes, dear," she said. "I could do anything for you."

He took her in his arms and kissed her again. Looking at her fondly, he said:

"That's good. Hurry now. I won't be long. Good-by."

"Hurry back, John."

"Yes. I won't be long."

The next instant the door banged behind him.

CHAPTER XIX.

For several minutes after John's departure, Laura stood motionless. Every vestige of color had left her face; her large lustrous eyes stared blankly into vacancy. She looked as if she had been suddenly petrified into stone. Yet, inert as she seemed, her brain was working hard. Perhaps all was not yet lost! John knew nothing, suspected nothing. She might still be happy. Why should he know what had occurred during his absence? There was no one to enlighten him. A life of happiness with the one man she truly loved, might still be hers. Instantly she was galvanized into action. There was no time to be lost. She must get away from New York and be safely married before Brockton or any one else had a chance to ruin her life. She must pack her things at once, so as to be ready for John when he returned. Feverishly, she began her preparations. Going rapidly over to the dresser, she picked up a large jewel case, and, taking down a doll that was hanging on the dresser, put them on her left arm. With her disengaged hand, she picked up her black cat and carried it over to the center-table. Then, opening the door leading to the kitchen, she called out:

"Annie! Annie! Come here."

The negress entered the room.

"Yassum."

"Annie, I'm going away, and I've got to hurry."

"Going away!" exclaimed the maid in blank astonishment.

Her mistress had already begun to pile things in the center of the room. Hurriedly, Laura said:

"Yes—I want you to bring both my trunks out here—I'll help you—and start to pack. We can't take everything, but bring all the clothes out, and we'll hurry as fast as we can."

They entered the sleeping apartments together, and in a short time reappeared, carrying a large trunk between them. Pushing the sofa back, they laid it down in the center of the room.

"Look out for your feet, Miss Laura!" exclaimed the maid.

"I think I'll take two trunks," said her mistress thoughtfully.



LAURA COMMENCED TO PACK THE TRUNK.

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The negress pushed the table out of the way, and, in her flurry, nearly fell over the armchair.

"Golly, such excitement!" she exclaimed. "Wheah yuh goin', Miss Laura?"

"Never mind where I'm going," snapped her mistress. "I haven't any time to waste now talking. I'll tell you later. This is one time, Annie, that you've got to move. Hurry up!"

Giving the maid a push, she hustled her out of the room, and followed closely behind herself. Presently they returned with a smaller trunk.

"Look out fo' yo' dress, Miss Laura," exclaimed the maid.

The trunks were set down, side by side. Laura opened one and commenced to throw the things out, while Annie stood watching her. Soon the actress was down on her knees in front of the trunk, humming "*Bon Bon Buddy*" packing for dear life, while the maid watched her in amazement.

"Ah nevah see you so happy, Miss Laura."

"I never was so happy!" cried Laura almost hysterically. Giving the girl a push, she exclaimed impatiently: "For Heaven's sake, girl, go get something! Don't stand there looking at me. I want you to hurry."

Thus admonished, Annie ran helter-skelter in the direction of her mistress' room.

"I'll bring out all de fluffy ones first," she cried as she disappeared.

"Yes, everything!" cried Laura, who was on her knees busy laying the things neatly away in the trunk.

Presently the maid returned laden with an armful of dresses and a hat-box. The box she placed on the floor, the dresses on top of the trunk. Going out again for more, she asked:

"Yuh goin' to take dat opera cloak?"

"Yes, everything—everything!" answered Laura, breathless from the speed at which she was working.

Annie reëntered with more dresses. There seemed no end to them, each more beautiful and costly than the other. The maid put them on the sofa; then, picking up the opera cloak, she laid it out on top of the dresses in the trunk. Even the humble colored menial was spellbound by the beauty of these adjuncts of feminine loveliness.

"My, but dat's a beauty! I jest love dat crushed rosey one."

Laura looked up impatiently. The girl's chatter made her nervous. Sharply, she said:

"Annie, go and put the best dresses on the foot of the bed. I'll get them myself. You heard what I said?"

The girl ran. She stood in awe of her mistress when she was in ill-humor.

"Yassum!"

While the negress was in the inner room taking the garments from the cupboards, Laura continued busily arranging the contents of the trunk, placing garments here, and some there, sorting them out. While she was thus engaged, with her back to the door, the door leading to the outer corridor opened, and Brockton appeared. He entered quietly, without disturbing Laura, and for a minute or two stood watching her in silence. Then, suddenly, he said:

"Going away?"

Startled, Laura jumped up and confronted him.

"Yes," she said, with some confusion.

"In somewhat of a hurry, I should say," he said dryly.

"Yes."

"What's the plan?" he inquired.

"I'm just going—that's all," she said calmly.

"Madison been here?" he asked in the same even tone.

"He's just left," she answered.

"Of course you are going with him?"

"Yes."

"West?"

"To Nevada."

"Going—er—to get married?" he demanded.

"Yes, this afternoon."

He looked at her keenly, and said significantly:

"So he didn't care then?"

Flushing, she flared up:

"What do you mean, when you say 'He didn't care'?"

"Of course you told him about the letter, and how it was burned up, and all that sort of thing, didn't you?"

"Why, yes," she replied, averting her eyes.

"And he said it didn't make any difference?"

"He—he didn't say anything. We're just going to be married, that's all."

"Did you mention my name, and say that we'd been—rather companionable for the last two months?"

"I told him—you'd been—a very good friend to me."

She spoke with hesitation, at moments with difficulty, as if seeking to gain time, to find answers for his awkward questions. But she did not deceive him. Brockton was too much the man of the world to be easily hoodwinked. He knew she was lying, and his face flushed with anger.

"How soon do you expect him back?" he demanded.

"Quite soon," she replied, with an effort to be calm. "I don't know just exactly how long he'll be."

She turned her back and proceeded with her packing. He came nearer and stood overlooking the trunk.

"And you mean to tell me that you kept your promise and told him the truth?" he persisted.

She stammered confusedly, and then, her patience exhausted, she broke out into open defiance.

"What business have you got to ask me that? What business have you got to interfere, anyway?"

Rising and going to the bed in the alcove, she took the dresses and carried them to the sofa. Brockton followed her, his fists clenched.

"Then you've lied again!" he cried furiously. "You lied to him, and you just tried to lie to me now. You're not particularly clever at it, although I don't doubt but that you've had considerable practice."

With a contemptuous shrug of his shoulders, he walked over to the chair at the table and sat down, still holding his hat in his hand, and without removing his overcoat. Laura came back laden with more things. Seeing Brockton sitting, she stopped, and, turning on him, laid the dresses down.

"What are you going to do?" she demanded.

"Sit down here and rest a few moments; maybe longer," he replied coolly.

She looked at him in dismay.

"You can't do that!" she exclaimed.

"I don't see why not. This is my own place."

"But don't you see that he'll come back here soon and find you here?"

"That's just exactly what I want him to do."

Laura looked at him helplessly. With suppressed emotion, almost on the verge of hysteria, she broke out:

"I want to tell you this. If you do this thing, you'll ruin my life. You've done enough to it already. Now, I want you to go. I don't think you've got any right to come here now, in this way, and take this happiness from me. I've given you everything I've got, and now I want to live right and decently. He wants me to marry him. We love each other. Now, Will Brockton, it's come to this. You've got to leave this place, do you hear? You've got to leave this place. Please get out!"

Brockton was white and determined looking. For the first time in his life, he was really angry. Leaving his chair and advancing towards her, he said menacingly:

"Do you think I'm going to let a woman make a liar out of me? I'm going to stay right here. I like that boy, and I'm not going to let you put him to the bad."

"I want you to go!" she cried.

Shutting the trunk-lid down, she went over to the dresser and opened the drawer, to get more things out.

"And I tell you I won't go," he retorted furiously. "I'm going to show you up. I'm going to tell him the truth. It isn't you I care for—he's got to know."

Slamming the drawer shut, she turned and faced him, almost tiger-like in her anger.

"You don't care for me?" she cried.

"No."

"It isn't me you're thinking of?"

"No."

"Who's the liar now?"

"Liar?"

"Yes, liar. You are! You don't care for this man, and you know it."

"You're foolish."

"Yes, I am foolish, and I've been foolish all my life, but I'm getting a little sense now."

Kneeling in the armchair facing him, her voice shaking with anger, she went on:

"All my life, since the day you first took me away, you've planned and planned and planned to keep me, and to trick me and bring me down with you. When you came to me I was happy. I didn't have much, just a little salary and some hard work."

He shrugged his shoulders, and smiled skeptically. Ironically, he said:

"But, like all the rest, you found that wouldn't keep you, didn't you?"

Ignoring his taunt, she went on:

"You say I'm bad, but who's made me so? Who took me out night after night? Who showed me what these luxuries were? Who put me in the habit of buying something I couldn't afford? You did."

"Well, you liked it, didn't you?"

"Who got me in debt, and then, when I wouldn't do what you wanted me to, who had me discharged from the company, so I had no means of living? Who followed me from one place to another? Who, always entreating, tried to trap me into this life? I didn't know any better."

"Didn't know better?" he echoed derisively.

"I knew it was wrong—yes; but you told me everybody in this business did that sort of thing, and I was just as good as any one else. Finally you got me and you kept me. Then, when I went away to Denver, and for the first time found a gleam of happiness, for the first time in my life—"

"You're crazy," he said contemptuously.

"Yes, I am crazy!" she cried hysterically.

Her patience was at an end. She felt that if he stayed there another minute to taunt and torture her, she would go stark, raving mad. A choking sensation rose in her throat. Seized with a sudden fury, she swept the table cover off the table, and, making one stride to the dresser, knocked all the bottles off. Then she turned on him furiously. Almost screaming, she shouted:

"You've made me crazy! You followed me to Denver, and then when I got back you bribed me again. You pulled me down, and you did the same old thing until this happened. Now, I want you to get out, you understand? I want you to get out!"

He turned to pacify her. More gently, he said:

"Laura, you can't do this."

But she refused to listen. Walking up and down the room, gesticulating wildly, she kept crying:

"Go—do you hear—go!"

He took a seat on a trunk. Instantly she turned on him like an infuriated tigress, attempting to push him off by sheer strength.

"No, you won't," she screamed; "you won't stay here! You're not going to do this thing again. I tell you, I'm going to be happy. I tell you, I'm going to be married. You won't see him! I tell you, you won't tell him! You've got no business to. I hate you! I've hated you for months! I hate the sight of your face! I've wanted to go, and now I'm going. You've got to go, do you hear? You've got to get out—get out!"

Such an exhibition of rage in this usually mild girl was something so strange and uncanny that it suddenly aroused in him a feeling of disgust. After all, why should he care? He ought to be glad to get out and be through with her. As she pushed him again, he rose, and threw her off, causing her to stagger to a chair. With a gesture of impatience, he went towards the door.

"What the hell is the use of fussing with a woman?" he exclaimed.

The door slammed noisily behind him. Sinking down on her knees, Laura started to pack with renewed vigor, crying hysterically:

"I want to be happy! I'm going to be married, I'm going to be happy!"

CHAPTER XX.

Two hours later, Laura, fully dressed for a journey, sat on a trunk, nervously watching the clock, patiently awaiting John's return. Annie was still on her knees, struggling with the key of an obstinate suitcase.

A remarkable transformation had been effected in the apartment. The entire place had been dismantled, and the elegantly appointed sitting room was now littered with trunks, grips, umbrellas and the usual paraphernalia that accompanies a woman when she is making a permanent departure from her place of living.

All the *bric à brac* had been removed from the sideboard and tables. Some of the dresser drawers were half open, and pieces of tissue paper and ribbons were hanging out. On the armchair was a small alligator bag, containing toilet articles and a bunch of keys. The writing-desk had all its contents removed, and was open, showing scraps of torn-up letters. Lying on the floor, where it had been dropped, was a New York Central timetable. Between the desk and the bay-window stood a milliner's box, inside of which was a huge picture hat. Under the desk were a pair of old slippers, a woman's shabby hat and old ribbons. The picture frames and basket of flowers had been removed from the pianola, while the music-stool was on top of the instrument, turned upside down. Between the legs of this stool was an empty *White Rock* bottle, with a tumbler turned over it. The big trunk stood in front of the sofa, all packed, and it had a swing-tray, in which lay a fancy evening gown. On top of the lid was an umbrella, a lady's traveling-coat, hat, and gloves. On the sofa was a large Gladstone bag, packed and fastened, and close by a smaller trunk-tray with lid. In the end of the tray was a revolver wrapped in tissue paper. The trunk was closed, and apparently locked. The room had the general appearance of having been stripped of all personal belongings. Old magazines and newspapers were scattered all over the place.

Pale and perturbed, Laura sat nervously, starting at each little sound she heard from the street. Every now and then she consulted the small traveling clock which she held in her hand. Why didn't John come. She was all ready. Everything was packed. All they had to do now was to call a cab and drive to the railroad station. Thank God, she had got rid of Brockton! That danger, at least, was removed. John knew nothing, could hear nothing now until they were safely married. If afterwards he heard things and demanded an explanation, she would tell him everything and he would forgive her.

"Ain't yuh goin' to let me come to yuh at all, Miss Laura?" asked the maid with a pout.

"I don't know yet, Annie. I don't even know what the place is like that we're going to. Mr. Madison hasn't said much. There hasn't been time."

"Why, Ah've done ma best for yuh, Miss Laura; yes, Ah have. Ah've jest been with yuh ev'ry moment of ma time, an' Ah worked for yuh an Ah loved yuh, an, Ah doan wan' to be left 'ere all alone in dis town er New York."

Laura turned to the door for a moment, and, while her back was turned Annie stooped, grabbed up a ribbon, and hid it behind her back.

"Ah ain't the kind of culled lady knows many people. Can't yuh take me along wid yuh,

Miss Laura? Yuh all been so good to me."

Getting up from the trunk, Laura went to the outer door and listened. Hearing nothing, she returned with a gesture of disappointment. With some irritation, she said:

"Why, I told you to stay here and get your things together, and then Mr. Brockton will probably want you to do something. Later I think he'll have you pack up, just as soon as he finds I'm gone. I've got the address that you gave me. I'll let you know if you can come on."

Hiding the ribbon inside her waist, the negress said suddenly:

"Ain't yuh goin' to give me anything at all, jes' to remembuh yuh by? Ah've been so honest ___"

"Honest?" echoed her mistress scornfully.

"Honest, Ah have."

"You've been about as honest as most colored girls are who work for women in the position that I am in. You haven't stolen enough to make me discharge you, but I've seen what you've taken."

"Now, Miss Laura!" protested the girl.

"Don't try to fool me!" cried Laura indignantly. "What you've got you're welcome to, but for Heaven's sake don't prate around here about loyalty and honesty. I'm sick of it."

"Ain't yuh goin' to give me no recommendation?"

Laura shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"What good would my recommendation do? You can always go and get another position with people who've lived the way I've lived, and my recommendation to the other kind wouldn't amount to much."

Overcome by emotion and disappointment, Annie collapsed on a trunk.

"Ah can just see wheeah Ah'm goin'!" she cried; "back to dat boa'din-house fo' me."

"Now, shut your noise," cried Laura impatiently. "I don't want to hear any more. I've given you twenty-five dollars for a present. I think that's enough."

"Ah know," replied the negress, putting on a most aggrieved appearance, "but twenty-five dollars ain't a home, and I'm losin' my home. Dat's jest my luck—every time I save enough money to buy my weddin' clothes to get married, I lose my job."

Laura paced nervously from window to door, from door to window, listening for every footstep.

"I wonder why he doesn't come," she murmured anxiously. "We'll never be able to make that train!"

Picking the timetable off the floor, she sat down in a chair and began to study it intently. While thus engaged, she heard the elevator stop on their floor. She jumped to her feet. There he was! After a few seconds' interval, the bell rang. Yes—that was he. Without waiting for Annie, she rushed to open the door, and fell back, visibly disappointed. It was not John, after all.

"How-dy-do, Miss Laura?"

The visitor was her old friend, Jim Weston. The advance agent was neatly dressed in black, and he had about him an appearance of prosperity which she was not accustomed to see. He looked different, more staid and respectable, but his drollness of speech and kindly manner were the same as ever. He held out his hand to Laura, who invited him in. He came at an inopportune time, but she could not forget his kindness to her during those terrible days at Mrs. Farley's.

"I'm mighty glad to see you, Jim," she said cordially.

"Looks as if you were going to move," he grinned, looking around.

"Yes, I am going to move, and a long ways, too. How well you're looking—fit as a fiddle."

"Yes; I am feelin' fine. Where yer goin'? Troupin'?"

"No, indeed."

"Thought not. What's comin' off now?"

"I'm going to be married this afternoon," she said proudly.

"Married?" he exclaimed in astonishment.

"And then I'm going West."

Leaving the trunks, which he had been inspecting, he walked toward her and held out his hands.

"Now, I'm just glad to hear that," he said warmly. "Ye know when I heard how—how things was breakin' for ye—well, I ain't knockin' or anythin' like that, but me and the missis have talked ye over a lot. I never did think this feller was goin' to do the right thing by yer. Brockton never looked to me like a fellow who would marry anybody, but now that he's going through just to make you a nice, respectable wife, I guess everything must have happened for the best."

He looked at her, and paused, as if expecting she would take him more into her confidence, but she made no reply, and averted her eyes. Sitting on the trunk beside her, he went on:

"Ye see, I wanted to thank you for what you did a couple of weeks ago. Burgess wrote me a letter, and told me I could go ahead of one of his big shows if I wanted to come back, and offered me considerable money. He mentioned your name, Miss Laura, and I talked it over with the missis, and—well, I can tell ye now when I couldn't if ye weren't to be hooked up—we decided that I wouldn't take that job, comin' as it did from you, and the way I knew it was framed up."

"Why not?" she asked in surprise.

"Well, ye see," he said with some embarrassment, "there are three kids, and they're all growing up, all of them in school, and the missis, she's just about forgot the show business, and she's playing star part in the kitchen, juggling dishes and doing flip-flaps with pancakes; and we figured that as we'd always gone along kinder clean-like, it wouldn't be good for the kids to take a job comin' from Brockton—because you—you—well—you—you—"

Laura rose hastily, and her face reddened.

"I know. You thought it wasn't decent. Is that it?"

"Oh, not exactly; only—well, you see I'm gettin' along pretty good now. I got a little one-night stand theatre out in Ohio—manager of it, too. The town is called Gallipolis."

"Gallipolis?" she echoed, puzzled.

"Oh, that ain't a disease," he smiled. "It is the name of a town. Maybe you don't know much about Gallipolis, or where it is."

"No."

"Well, it looks just like it sounds. We got a little house, and the old lady is happy, and I feel so good that I can even stand her cookin'. Of course, we ain't makin' much money, but I guess I'm getting a little old-fashioned around theatres, anyway. The fellows from newspapers and colleges have got it on me. Last time I asked a man for a job he asked me what I knew about the Greek drama, and when I told him I didn't know the Greeks had a theatre in New York, he slipped me a laugh and told me to come in again on some rainy Tuesday. Then Gallipolis showed on the map, and I beat it for the West."

Noticing that his words had hurt her, he stopped, and in an embarrassed kind of way went on:

"Sorry if I hurt ye—didn't mean to; and now that yer goin' to be Mrs. Brockton, well, I take back all I said, and while I don't think I want to change my position, I wouldn't turn it down for—for that other reason, that's all."

"But, Mr. Weston, I'm not going to be Mrs. Brockton!" she cried hastily, with a note of defiance in her voice.

"No?" he exclaimed in surprise.

"No."

"Oh—oh—"

"I'm going to marry another man, and a good man."

"The h—ll you are!"

She rose and put her hand on his shoulder. Gently, she said:

"It's going to be altogether different. I know what you meant when you said about the missis and the kids, and that's what I want—just a little home, just a little peace, just a little comfort, and—and the man has come who's going to give it to me. You don't want me to say any more, do you?"

"No, I don't," he said emphatically, in a tone of hearty approval; "and now I'm just going to put my mit out and shake yours and be real glad. I want to tell ye it's the only way to go along. I ain't never been a rival to Rockefeller, nor I ain't never made Morgan jealous, but since the day my old woman took her make-up off for the last time and walked out of that stage door to give me a little help and bring my kids into the world, I knew that was the way to go along; and if you're goin' to take that road, by Jiminy, I'm glad of it, for you sure do deserve it. I wish yer luck."

"Thank you."

"I'm mighty glad you sidestepped Brockton," he went on. "You're young, and you're pretty, and you're sweet, and if you've got the right kind of a feller, there ain't no reason on earth why you shouldn't jest forgit the whole business and see nothin' but laughs and a good time comin' to you, and the sun sort o' shinin' every twenty-four hours in the day. You know the missis feels just as if she knew you, after I told her about them hard times we had at Farley's boarding-house, so I feel that it's paid me to come to New York, even if I didn't book anything but 'East Lynne' and 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'." Rising and moving towards the door, he added: "Now, I'm goin'. Don't forget—Gallipolis's the name, and sometimes the mail does get there. I'd be awful glad if you wrote the missis a little note tellin' us how you're gettin' along, and if you ever have to ride on the Kanawha and Michigan, just look out of the window when the train passes our town, because that is about the best you'll get."

"Why?"

"They only stop there on signal. And make up your mind that the Weston family is with you, forty ways from the Jack, day and night. Good-by, and God bless you!"

"Good-by, Jim," she said, with some emotion. "I'm so glad to know you're happy."

"You bet," he grinned. "Never mind, I can get out all right. Good-by again."

"Good-by," she said very softly.

The door closed behind him, and once more she took up her solitary vigil at the window. If John would only come! The precious minutes were slipping away. They would never be able to make that train. She wondered what had detained him. Suddenly, a cold chill ran through her. Suppose he had met some one downtown who had told him about her and Brockton. Then he would never come back again, or, if he did, it would be only to wreak his vengeance. In spite of herself she trembled at the mere idea. To change her thoughts, she began to busy herself about the room, collecting the small packages, counting the trunks, showing Annie how to close the apartment when they had gone. Suddenly the front doorbell rang. She gave a joyful exclamation.

"Hurry, Annie—there's Mr. Madison!"

The girl passed into the corridor and a moment later her voice was heard saying:

"She's waitin' for yuh, Mr. Madison."

Laura hastened forward to greet him. John came in, hat in hand, followed by Annie. He stopped short as he entered, and looked long and searchingly at Laura, who had hurried joyously to embrace him. Instinctively she felt that something had happened. That look of suspicion and distrust was not in his eyes when he left her that morning. She trembled but remained firm. Annie disappeared and Laura took his hat and coat and placed them on a trunk.

"Aren't you a little late, dear?" she said timidly.

He remained gloomily silent for a moment. Then, he said:

"I—I was detained downtown a few minutes. I think that we can carry out our plan all right."

"Has anything happened?" she inquired, trying to conceal her anxiety.

"No," he replied hesitatingly. "I've made all the arrangements. The men will be here in a few minutes for your trunks." Feeling in his pocket, he added: "I've got the railroad tickets and everything else, but——"

"But what, John?"

He went over to her. Instinctively she understood that she was about to go through an ordeal. She seemed to feel that he had become acquainted with something which might

interfere with the realization of her long-cherished dream. He looked at her long and searchingly. Evidently he, too, was much wrought up, but when he spoke it was with a calm dignity and force which showed the character of the man.

"Laura," he began.

"Yes?" she answered timidly.

"You know when I went downtown I said I was going to call on two or three of my friends in Park Row."

"I know."

"I told them who I was going to marry."

"Well?"

"They said something about you and Brockton, and I found that they'd said too much, but not quite enough."

"What did they say?"

"Just that—too much and not quite enough. There's a minister waiting for us over on Madison Avenue. You see, then you'll be my wife. That's pretty serious business, and all I want now from you is the truth."

She looked at him inquiringly, fearfully—not knowing what to say.

"Well?" she stammered.

"Just tell me what they said was just an echo of the past—that it came from what had been going on before that wonderful day out there in Colorado. Tell me that you've been on the level. I don't want their word, Laura—I just want yours."

The girl shrank back a moment before his anxious face, then summoned up all her courage, looked frankly into his eyes, and with as innocent an expression as she was able to put on, said:

"Yes, John, I have been on the level."

He sprang forward with a joyful exclamation:

"I knew that, dear, I knew it!" he cried.

Taking her in his arms, he kissed her hotly. She clung to him in pitiful helplessness. His manner had suddenly changed to one of almost boyish happiness.

"Well," he went on joyfully, "now everything's all ready, let's get on the job. We haven't a great deal of time. Get your duds on."

"When do we go?"

"Right away. The idea is to get away."

"All right," she said gleefully. Getting her hat off the trunk, she crossed to the mirror and put it on.

He surveyed the room and laughed.

"You've got trunks enough, haven't you? One might think we're moving a whole colony. And, by the way, to me you are a whole colony—anyway, you're the only one I ever wanted to settle with."

"That's good," she laughed lightly.

Taking her bag off the bureau, she went to the trunk and got her purse, coat and umbrella, as if ready to leave. Hurriedly gathering her things together and adjusting her hat, she said, almost to herself, in a low tone:

"I'm so excited. Come on!"

Madison went to get his hat and coat, and both were about to leave, when suddenly they heard the outer door slam. Instinctively both halted and waited. Who could it be? John looked questioningly at Laura, who stood, pale as death and as motionless as if changed into marble. A moment later Brockton entered leisurely, with his hat on and his coat, half-drawn off, hanging loosely on his arm. He paid no attention to either of them, but walked straight through the room, without speaking, and disappeared through the *portières* into the sleeping apartments beyond. His manner was that of a man who knows he is at home and has no account to render to anyone either for the manner of his entrance or what rooms he

may enter. Laura, who at first had made a quick movement forward, as if to bar his further progress, fell back, terrified. Putting her coat, bag and umbrella down on a chair, she stood, dazed and trembling, powerless to avert the crisis which she realized was at hand. Madison, who had watched the broker's actions with amazement, suddenly grew rigid as a statue. His square jaw snapped with a determined click, and one hand slipped stealthily into his hip pocket. No one spoke. The tense silence was ominous and painful.

It seemed like an hour, but less than a minute had elapsed when Brockton reëntered, with coat and hat off. Carelessly picking up a newspaper, he took a seat in the armchair, and, leisurely crossing his legs, looked over at the others, who still stood motionless, watching him. Greeting John lightly, he said:

"Hello, Madison, when did you get in?"

Slowly John seemed to recover himself. Suddenly his hand went swiftly to his hip pocket and he drew out a revolver. Eyeing the broker with savage determination, he deliberately and slowly covered him with the deadly weapon. Brockton, who had seen the movement, sprang quickly to his feet. Laura, terror stricken, screamed loudly and threw herself right in the line of fire.

"Don't shoot!" she pleaded hoarsely.

Madison kept his rival covered, but he did not shoot. There was an uncertain expression in his face, as if he was wavering in his own mind as to whether he would kill this man or not. Slowly his whole frame relaxed. He lowered the pistol and quietly replaced it in his pocket, much to the relief of Brockton, who, notwithstanding the danger that confronted him, had stood his ground like a man. Turning to Laura, the Westerner said slowly:

"Thank you. You said that just in time."

There was an awkward silence, broken only by the sound of Laura weeping half hysterically. Finally Brockton, who had recovered his self-possession, said:

"Well, you see, Madison—what I told you that time in Denver——"

John made another threatening gesture which brought him face to face with the broker.

"Look out, Brockton," he said. "I don't want to talk to you——"

"All right," rejoined the broker, with a shrug of his shoulders.

Madison turned to Laura. Peremptorily he said:

"Now get that man out of here."

"John—I——" she protested cheerfully.

"Get him out!" he almost shouted. "Get him out before I lose my temper, or they'll—or they'll take him out without his help!"

The girl laid a supplicating hand on the broker's arm.

"Go—go! Please go!" she pleaded.

"All right," he replied. "If that's the way you want it, I'm willing."

He turned and went into the inner room to get his hat and coat, while John and Laura stood facing each other, without speaking. Brockton soon reëntered, and without a word moved in the direction of the door. The others remained motionless. As the broker put his hand on the door, Laura started forward. Turning to Madison, she pointed at the man who was leaving.

"Before he goes," she cried, "I want to tell you how I learned to despise him. John, I know you don't believe me, but it's true—it's true. I don't love anyone in the world but just you. I know you don't think that it can be explained—maybe there isn't any explanation. I couldn't help it. I was so poor, and I had to live. He wouldn't let me work. He's let me live only one way, and I was hungry. Do you know what that means? I was hungry and didn't have clothes to keep me warm, and I tried, oh, John! I tried so hard to do the other thing—the right thing—but I couldn't."

He listened in silence. There was no anger in his eyes, no menace in his attitude. He merely appeared dumbfounded, crushed; there was in his face a look of mute, helpless astonishment, as a child might look when it saw an edifice of sand carefully and lovingly erected, levelled to the ground by the first careless wave. Almost apologetically he said:

"I—I know I couldn't help much, and perhaps I could have forgiven you if you hadn't lied to me. That's what hurt."

He turned fiercely on Brockton, and approaching close so he could look him straight in the eyes, he said contemptuously:

"I expected you to lie; you're that kind of a man. You left me with a shake of the hand, and you gave me your word, and you didn't keep it. Why should you keep it? Why should anything make any difference to you? Why, you pup, you've no right to live in the same world with decent folks. Now you make yourself scarce, or take it from me, I'll just kill you, that's all!"

"I'll leave, Madison," replied the broker coolly; "but I'm not going to let you think that I didn't do the right thing with you. She came to me voluntarily. She said she wanted to come back. I told you she'd do that when I was in Colorado; you didn't believe me. I told you that when she did this sort of thing I'd let you know. I dictated a letter to her to send to you, and I left it, sealed and stamped, in her hands to mail. She didn't do it. If there's been a lie, she told it. I didn't."

Madison looked at Laura, who hung her head in mute acknowledgment of her guilt. As he suddenly realized how she had tricked him he turned pale, and with a smothered cry sank down on one of the trunks. Until this very moment he still believed in her. He could have forgiven her returning to Brockton, everything; but she had deliberately lied to him and deceived him. That he could never forgive. There was a moment's silence, and Brockton advanced towards him.

"You see! Why, my boy, whatever you think of me or the life I lead, I wouldn't have had this come to you for anything in the world. No, I wouldn't. My women don't mean a whole lot to me because I don't take them seriously. I wish I had the faith and the youth to feel the way you do. You're all in and broken up, but I wish I could be broken up just once. I did what I thought was best for you because I didn't think she could ever go through the way you wanted her to. I'm sorry it's all turned out bad. Good-bye."

He looked at John for a moment, as if expecting some reply, but the big Westerner maintained a dogged silence. With a shrug of his shoulders and without so much as glancing at Laura, Brockton strode to the door and slammed it shut behind him.



JOHN STOOD LOOKING AT HER IN SILENCE.

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Madison stood looking at her in silence. There was nothing more to say or do. The broker was right. He had been a poor fool; he had taken this woman too seriously. She was no better than all of her kind. Yet it seemed as if there was something wrong somewhere. It had

ended so differently to what he expected. He would never believe in womankind again. Slowly he made his way toward the door, while she, her heart breaking, her face white as death, the hot tears streaming down her cheeks, stood still, not daring to say a word or make a movement. His drawn face and haunted eyes looked as though some great grief had suddenly come into his life, a grief he could not understand. But he gave her no chance to speak. He seemed to be feeling around for something to say, some way to get out and away without further delay. He went towards the door, and with a pitiful gesture of his hand, seemed to be saying farewell forever. With a stifled sob, she darted forward.

"John, I——"

He turned and looked at her sternly.

"I'd be careful what I said if I were you. Don't try to make excuses. I understand."

"It's not excuses," she sobbed. "I want to tell you what's in my heart, but I can't; it won't speak, and you don't believe my voice."

"You'd better leave it unsaid."

"But I must tell," she cried hysterically. "I can't let you go like this."

Going over to him, she made a weak attempt to put her arms around him; but calmly, dispassionately, he took her hands and put them down. Wildly, pleadingly, she went on:

"I love you! I—how can I tell you—but I do, I do, and you won't believe me."

He remained silent for a moment, and then taking her by the hand, he led her over to the chair and placed her in it. He drew back a few steps, and in a gentle but firm tone, tinged with grief which carried tremendous conviction with it, he said:

"I think you do as far as you are able; but, Laura, I guess you don't know what a decent sentiment is. You're not immoral, you're just unmoral, kind o' all out of shape, and I'm afraid there isn't a particle of hope for you. When we met neither of us had any reason to be proud, but I believed that you would see in this the chance of salvation which sometimes comes to a man and a woman fixed as we were then. What had been had been. It was all in the great to-be for us, and now, how you've kept your word! What little that promise meant, when I thought you handed me a new lease of life!"

She cowered before him, unable to say a word in her own defense, almost wishing he would beat her.

"You're killing me—killing me!" she cried in anguish.

He shrugged his shoulders skeptically.

"Don't make such a mistake," he replied ironically. "In a month you'll recover. There will be days when you will think of me, just for a moment, and then it will be all over. With you it is the easiest way, and it always will be. You'll go on and on until you're finally left a wreck, just the type of the common woman. And you'll sink until you're down to the very bed-rock of depravity. I pity you."

Laura quickly raised her head and looked at him. Her eyes were swollen, her face haggard and drawn. Madison found himself wondering how he could ever have thought her even good looking. Her voice was metallic and hard.

"You'll never leave me to do that. I'll kill myself!" she cried hoarsely.

"Perhaps that's the only thing left for you to do," he replied cynically; "but you'll not do it. It's easier to live."

He went to get his hat and coat. Then he turned and looked at her. Laura rose at the same time. There was an unnatural glitter in her eyes. She breathed hard. Her bosom rose and fell spasmodically.

"John," she cried exaltedly, "I said I'd kill myself, and I mean every word of it. If it's the only thing to do, I'll do it, and I'll do it before your very eyes!"

Quickly she snatched up the satchel, opened it, and took out the revolver. Then she stood facing him, waiting.

"You understand," she cried hysterically, "that when your hand touches that door I'm going to shoot myself. I will, so help me God!"

He halted and looked back at her, a covert smile of contempt hovering about his mouth.

"Kill yourself—before me!" he exclaimed ironically. "You'll wait a minute, won't you?" Returning to the inner room, he called out: "Annie! Annie!"

The colored maid came running in.

"Yessuh!"

Madison pointed to Laura.

"You see your mistress there has a pistol in her hand?"

The girl, frightened out of her wits, could only gurgle an incoherent:

"Yessuh!"

"She wants to kill herself," said Madison. "I just called you to witness that the act is entirely voluntary on her part." Turning to the frenzied, hysterical woman, he said indifferently: "Now go ahead!"

In a state bordering on collapse, Laura dropped the pistol on the floor.

"John, I—can't—"

Madison waved the maid away.

"Annie, she's evidently changed her mind. You may go."

"But, Miss Laura, Ah—"

"You may go!" he cried peremptorily.

Bewildered and not understanding, the negress disappeared through the *portières*. In the same gentle tone, but carrying with it an almost frigid conviction, he went on:

"You didn't have the nerve. I knew you wouldn't. For a moment you thought the only decent thing for you to do was to die, and yet you couldn't go through. I am sorry for you—more sorry than I can tell."

He took a step toward the door.

"You're going—you're going?" she wailed.

"Yes," he replied firmly.

She wept softly. Between her sobs she cried:

"And—and—you never thought that perhaps I'm frail, and weak, and a woman, and that now, maybe, I need your strength, and you might give it to me, and it might be better. I want to lean on you—lean on you, John. I know I need some one." Coaxingly she entreated him; in her tenderest, most seductive tones she made a last desperate effort to win him back. "Aren't you going to let me? Won't you give me another chance?" she pleaded tearfully.

He repelled her coldly.

"I gave you your chance, Laura," he replied.

"Give me another!" she cried, throwing her arms around his neck.

He struggled with her, disentangling himself from her frantic embrace. Pulling away, he said determinedly:

"You leaned the wrong way. Good-bye."

Going quickly to the door before she could again stop him, he opened the door and disappeared. An instant later she heard the outer corridor door slam. He was gone—forever!

She uttered a shrill scream of despair.

"John—John—I—"

Only a dead silence answered her frenzied, pitiful call. John was no longer there to hear her. He was gone from her—forever. She would never look on his face again. She could not blame him. She alone was at fault. But what a blow! Her dream of a life of happiness with the man she loved, her dream of self-redemption and regeneration, all that was blasted at one stroke! And now Will Brockton was gone also. She had lost them both. Abandoned and despised by the man she loved and also by the man to whom she owed everything, her future life was a blank. She must begin her career all over again. She had sunk to what she was before. For several minutes she crouched motionless on the trunk, her entire body shaken by convulsive sobbing. Then suddenly she sat up and looked wildly around her. Rising in a dazed fashion from the trunk, she staggered a few steps across the room. All at once her eyes caught the gleam of the pistol lying on the floor. With a loud cry of mingled despair and anger, she picked the weapon up, and, crossing to the bureau, threw it in a drawer. Then,

with a sigh of intense relief, she called out loudly:



SHE CROUCHED DOWN MOTIONLESS ON THE TRUNK.
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"Annie! Annie!"

The negress put her head through the *portières*, her eyes as big as saucers. She had heard the loud talking, but had been afraid to come near the room. Looking at her mistress with blank astonishment, she exclaimed:

"Ain't yuh goin' away, Miss Laura?"

By a supreme effort, Laura pulled herself together. She was a fool to show such weakness. Why should she allow these men to interfere with her and dictate to her? Defiantly she cried:

"No, I'm not! I'm going to stay right here. Open these trunks. Take out those clothes. Get me my prettiest dress. Hurry up!" Going to the mirror, while Annie obeyed her orders, she added: "Get my new hat! Dress up my body and paint up my face—it's all they've left of me." In a lower, agonized tone, to herself, she added bitterly: "They've taken my soul away with them!"

"Yes'm, yes'm," cried Annie, happy at anything which promised a change.

Opening the big trunk, the negress took out the handsome dresses which had been so carefully packed only a few moments before. Then unfastening a box, she lifted out the large picture hat with plumes which her mistress took from her. As Laura stood in front of the mirror, putting her hat on and touching up her complexion to hide the traces of recent tears, she forced herself to hum.

"Doll me up, Annie!" she cried lightly, as if by sheer force of will power compelling herself to be light hearted and gay.

"Yuh goin' out, Miss Laura?"

"Yes, I'm going to Broadway to make a hit, and to h—ll with the rest!"

As she spoke, a hurdy-gurdy in the street under her window began to play the tune of "*Bon-bon Buddy, My Chocolate Drop*." Laura stopped her humming and listened. There was something in this rag-time melody which at that moment particularly appealed to her. It was

peculiarly suggestive of the low life, the criminality and prostitution that constitute the night excitement of that section of New York City known as "The Tenderloin." The common tune and its vulgar associations was like the spreading before her eyes of a vivid panorama showing with terrific realism the inevitable depravity that awaited her. Rudely torn from every ideal which she had so weakly endeavored to grasp, she had been, thrown back into the mire and slime at the very moment when her emancipation seemed to be assured. Standing before the tall mirror, with her flashy dress on one arm and her equally exaggerated type of picture hat in the other, she recognized in herself the type of woman depicted by the vulgar street melody, and the full realization of her ignominy came to her now, perhaps for the first time.

The negress, in the happiness of continuing to serve her mistress in her questionable career, picked up the tune as she started to unpack the finery which only a short time before had been so carefully and lovingly laid away in the trunk. Shaken by convulsive sobs, resigned to what she was powerless to prevent, Laura turned and tottered towards the bedroom. Then, as the true significance of her pitiful position dawned upon her, she sank, limp and helpless, on the sofa, gasping pathetically:

"Oh, God! Oh, my God!"

In the street below the hurdy-gurdy continued grinding out "*Bon-bon Buddy, My Chocolate Drop*," with the negress idly accompanying it.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE EASIEST WAY: A STORY OF METROPOLITAN LIFE ***

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