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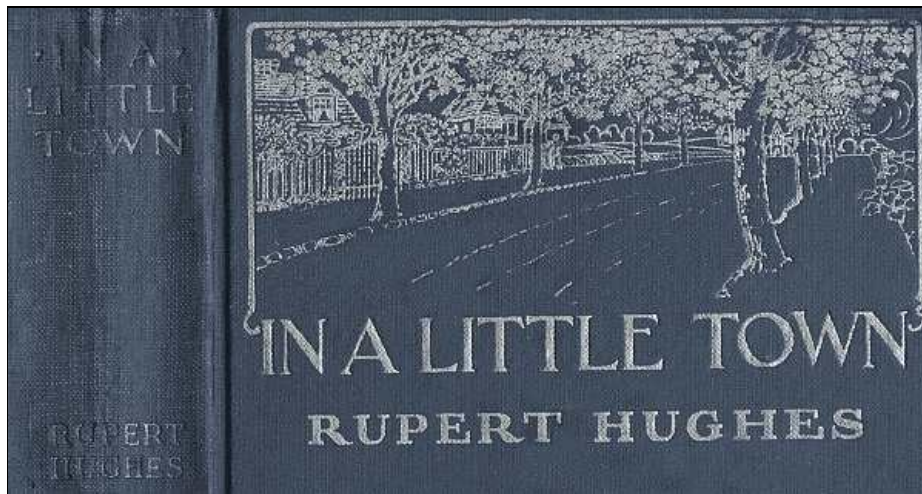
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## IN A LITTLE TOWN

BOOKS BY

### RUPERT HUGHES

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HARPER & BROTHERS, NEW YORK



She would be so absorbed in the petty chronicles of Drury's life that she would stroll into people. Once she marched plump into the parson's horrified bosom.

## In a Little Town



BY

**RUPERT HUGHES**



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TO  
**FREDERICK ATHERTON DUNEKA**  
AS AN I-O-U OF

## HEARTFELT ESTEEM

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### FOREWORD

There are two immortal imbecilities that I have no patience for.

The other one is the treatment of little towns as if they were essentially different from big towns. Cities are not "Ninevehs" and "Babylons" any more than little towns are Arcadias or Utopias. In fact we are now unearthing plentiful evidence of what might have been safely assumed, that Babylon never was a "Babylon" nor Nineveh a "Nineveh" in the sense employed by poets and praters without number. Those old cities were made up of assorted souls as good and as bad and as mixed as now.

They do small towns a grievous injustice who deny them restlessness, vice, ostentation, cruelty; as they do cities a grievous injustice who deny them simplicity, homeliness, friendship, and contentment. It is one of those undeniable facts (which everybody denies) that a city is only a lot of small towns put together. Its population is largely made up of people who came from small towns and of people who go back to small towns every evening.

A village is simply a quiet street in the big city of the world. Quaint, sweet happenings take place in the avenues most thronged, and desperate events come about in sleepy lanes. People are people, chance is chance.

My novels have mainly concerned themselves with New York, and I have tried therein to publish bits of its life as they appear to such eyes and such mind as I have. Though several of my short stories have been published in single volumes, this is the first group to be issued. They are all devoted to small-town people. In them I have sought the same end as in the city novels: to be true to truth, to observe with sympathy and explain with fidelity, to find the epic of a stranger's existence and shape it for the eyes of strangers—to pass the throb of another heart through my heart to your heart.

The scene of these stories lies pretty close to the core of these United States, in the Middle West, in the valley of the Mississippi River. I was born near that river and spent a good deal of my boyhood in it.

Though it would be unfair, false, and unkind to fasten these stories on any definite originals, they are centered in the region about the small city of Keokuk, Iowa, from which one can also see into Illinois, and into Missouri, where I was born. Comic poets have found something comic in the name of Keokuk, as in other town names in which the letter "K" is prominent. Why "K" should be so humorous, I can't imagine. The name of Keokuk, however, belonged to a splendid Indian chief who was friendly to the early settlers and saved them from massacre. The monument over his bones in the park, on the high bluff there, now commands one of the noblest views in the world, a great lake formed in the Mississippi River by a dam which is as beautiful as if the Greeks had built it. It was, in fact, built by a thousand Greeks who camped there for years. As an engineering achievement it rivals the Assouan dam and as a manufacturer of electricity it is a second to Niagara Falls. But it has not yet materially disturbed the rural quality of the country.

The scenery thereabout is very beautiful, but I guarantee you against landscape in these stories. I cannot, however, guarantee that the stories are even based on fact. Yet I hope that they are

truth.

The characters are limited to a small neighborhood, but if they are not also faithful to humanity in general, then, as we would say out there, "I miss my guess."

RUPERT HUGHES.

## IN A LITTLE TOWN

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### DON'T YOU CARE!

[Pg 1]

#### I

When she was told it was a girl, Mrs. Govers sighed. "Well, I never did have any luck, anyway; so I d' know's I'm suprised."

Later she wept feebly:

"Girls are easier to raise, I suppose; but I kind of had my heart set on namin' him Launcelot." After another interval she rallied to a smile: "I was prepared for the worst, though; so I picked out Ellaphine for a name in case he was a her. It's an awful pirty name, Ellaphine is. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, yes," said the nurse, who would have agreed to anything then.

After a time Mrs. Govers resumed: "She'll be an awful pirty girl, I hope. Is that her makin' all that noise? Give me a glimpse of her, will you? I got a right, I guess, to see my own baby. Oh, Goshen! Is that how she looks?" A kind of swoon; then more meditation, followed by a courageous philosophy: "Children always look funny at first. She'll outgrow it, I expect. Ellaphine is such an elegant name. It ought to be a kind of inducement to grow up to. Don't you think so?"

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The nurse, who was juggling the baby as if it were red-hot, mumbled through a mustache of safety-pins that she thought so. Mrs. Govers echoed, "I thought so, too." After that she went to sleep.

Ellaphine, however, did not grow up elegant, to fit the name. The name grew inelegant to fit her. During her earliest years the witty little children called her Elephant until they tired of the ingenuity and allowed her to lapse indolently from Ellar to El.

Mrs. Govers for some years cherished a dream that her ugly duckling would develop into a swan and fly away with a fabulously wealthy prince. Later she dwindled to a prayer that she might capture a man who was "tol'able well-to-do."

The majority of ugly ducklings, however, grow up into uglier ducks, and Mrs. Govers resigned herself to the melancholy prospect of the widowed mother of an old maid perennial.

To the confusion of prophecy, among all the batch of girls who descended on Carthage about the time of Ellaphine's birth—"out of the nowhere into the here"—Ellaphine was the first to be married! And she cut out the prettiest girl in the township—it was not such a small township, either.

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Those homely ones seem to make straight for a home the first thing. Ellaphine carried off Eddie Pouch—the very Eddie of whom his mother used to say, "He's little, but oh, my!" The rest of the people said, "Oh, my, but he's little!"

Eddie's given name was Egbert. Edward was his taken name. He took it after his mother died and he went to live at his uncle Loren's. Eddie was sorry to change his name, but he said his mother was not responsible at the time she pasted the label Egbert on him, and his shy soul could not endure to be called Egg by his best friends—least of all by his best girl.

His best girl was the township champion looker, Luella Thickers. From the time his heart was big enough for Cupid to stick a child's-size arrow in, Eddie idolized Luella. So did the other boys; and as Eddie was the smallest of the lot, he was lost in the crowd. Even when Luella noticed him it was with the atrocious contempt of little girls for little boys they do not like.

Eddie could not give her sticks of candy or jawbreakers, for his uncle Loren did not believe in spending money. And Eddie had no mother to go to when the boys mistreated him and the girls ignored him. A dismal life he led until he grew up as far as he ever grew up.

Eddie reached his twenty-second birthday and was working in Uncle Loren's factory—one of the largest feather-duster factories in the whole State—when he observed a sudden change in Luella's manner.

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She had scared him away from paying court to her, save from a distance. Now she took after him, with her aggressive beauty for a club and her engaging smiles for a net. She asked him to take her to the Sunday-school picnic, and asked him what he liked best for her to put in for him. She informed him that she was going to cook it for herself and everybody said she could fry chicken something grand. So he chose fried chicken.

He was so overjoyed that it was hard for him to be as solemn about the house as he ought to have been, in view of the fact that Uncle Loren had been taken suddenly and violently ill. Eddie was the natural heir to the old man's fortune.

Uncle Loren was considered close in a town where extravagance was almost impossible, but where rigid economy was supposed to pile up tremendous wealth. Hitherto it had pained Uncle Loren to devote a penny to anything but the sweet uses of investment. Now it suddenly occurred to the old miser that he had invested nothing in the securities of New Jerusalem, Limited. He was frightened immeasurably.

In his youth he had joined the Campbellite church and had been baptized in the town pond when there was a crust of ice over it which the pastor had to break with a stick before he immersed Loren. Everybody said the crust of ice had stuck to his heart ever since. [Pg 5]

In the panic that came on him now he craftily decided to transfer all his savings to the other shore. The factory, of course, he must leave behind; but he drafted a hasty will presenting all his money to the Campbellite church under conditions that he counted on to gain him a high commercial rating in heaven.

Over his shoulder, as he wrote, a shadow waited, grinning; and the old man had hardly folded his last testament and stuffed it into his pillow-slip when the grisly hand was laid on his shoulders and Uncle Loren was no longer there.

## II

His uncle's demise cut Eddie out of the picnic with Luella; but she was present at the funeral and gave him a wonderful smile. Uncle Loren's final will was not discovered until the pillow-slip was sent to the wash; and at the funeral Eddie was still the object of more or less disguised congratulations as an important heir.

Luella solaced him with rare tact and tenderness, and spoke much of his loneliness and his need of a helpmate. Eddie resolved to ask her to marry him as soon as he could compose the speech.

Some days later Uncle Loren's farewell will turned up, and Eddie fell from grace with a thump. The town laughed at him, as people always laugh when a person—particularly so plump a person as Eddie was—falls hard on the slippery sidewalk of this icy world. [Pg 6]

In his dismay he hastened to Luella for sympathy, but she turned up missing. She jilted him with a jolt that knocked his heart out of his mouth. He stood, as it were, gaping stupidly, in the middle of the highway.

Then Ellaphine Govers came along, picked his heart out of the road, dusted it, and offered it back. He was so grateful that he asked her to keep it for him. He was so pitiable an object that he felt honored even by the support of Ellar Govers.

He went with Ellar quite a lot. He found her very comfortable company. She seemed flattered by his attention. Other people acted as if they were doing him a favor by letting him stand around.

He had lost Uncle Loren's money, but he still had a small job at the factory. Partly to please Ellar and partly to show certain folks that he was not yet dead, he took her out for a drive behind a livery-stable horse. It was a beautiful drive, and the horse was so tame that it showed no desire to run away. It was perfectly willing to stand still where the view was good.

He let Ellar drive awhile, and that was the only time the horse misbehaved. It saw a stack of hay, nearly went mad, and tried to climb a rail fence; but Ellar yelled at it and slapped the lines at it and got it past the danger zone, and it relapsed into its usual mood of despair. [Pg 7]

Eddie told Ellar the horse was "attacked with haydophobia." And she nearly laughed herself to death and said:

"You do say the funniest things!"

She was a girl who could appreciate a fellow's jokes, and he saw that they could have awful good times together. He told her so without difficulty and she agreed that they could, and they were as good as engaged before they got back as far as the fair-grounds. As they came into the familiar streets Eddie observed a remarkable change in the manner of the people they passed. People made an effort to attract his eye. They waived him salutes from a distance. He encountered such a lifting of hats, elaborateness of smiles and flourish of hands, that he said to Ellaphine:

"Say, Pheeny, I wonder what the joke is!"

"Me, I guess," sighed Ellaphine. "They're makin' fun of you for takin' me out buggy-ridin'."

"Ah, go on!" said Eddie. "They've found out something about me and they're pokin' fun."

He was overcome with shame and drove to Ellaphine's house by a side street and escorted the horse to the livery-stable by a back alley. On his way home he tried in vain to dodge Luella Thickers, but she headed him off with one of her Sunday-best smiles. She bowled him over by an effusive manner.

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"Why, Eddie, you haven't been round to see me for the longest time! Can't you come on over 'safternoon? I'd just love to see you!"

He wondered whether she had forgotten how she had ground his meek heart under her heel the last time he called.

She was so nice to him that she frightened him. He mumbled that he would certainly call that afternoon, and got away, wondering what the trick was. Her smile seemed less pretty than it used to be.

### III

A block farther on Eddie met a man who explained the news, which had run across the town like oil on water. Tim Holdredge, an idle lawyer who had nothing else to do, looked into the matter of Uncle Loren's will and found that the old man, in his innocence of charity and his passion for economy, had left his money to the church on conditions that were not according to the law. The money reverted to the estate. Eddie was the estate.

When Tim Holdredge slapped Eddie on the shoulder and explained the result of what he called "the little joker" in Uncle Loren's will, Eddie did not rejoice, as Tim had a right to expect.

Eddie was poisoned by a horrible suspicion. The logic of events ran through his head like a hateful tune which he could not shake off:

"When Luella thought I was coming into a pile of money she was nice to me. When she heard I wasn't she was mean to me. Now that my money's coming to me, after all, she's nice again. Therefore—" But he was ashamed to give that ungallant *ergo* brain room.

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Still more bewildering was the behavior of Ellaphine. As soon as he heard of his good fortune he hurried to tell her about it. Her mother answered the door-bell and congratulated him on his good luck. When he asked for Ellar, her mother said, "She was feelin' right poorly, so she's layin' down." He was so alarmed that he forgot about Luella, who waited the whole afternoon all dressed up.

After supper that night he patrolled before Ellaphine's home and tried to pluck up courage enough to twist that old door-bell again. Suddenly she ran into him. She was sneaking through the front gate. He tried to talk to her, but she said:

"I'm in a tur'ble hurry. I got to go to the drug-store and get some chloroform liniment. Mamma's lumbago's awful bad."

He walked along with her, though she tried to escape him. The first drowsy lamp-post showed him that Ellaphine had been crying. It was the least becoming thing she could have done. Eddie asked whether her mother was so sick as all that. She said "No"—then changed to "Yes"—and then stopped short and began to blubber uncouthly, dabbing her eyes alternately with the backs of her wrists.

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Eddie stared awhile, then yielded to an imperious urge to clasp her to his heart and comfort her. She twisted out of his arms, and snapped, "Don't you touch me, Eddie Pouch!"

Eddie mumbled, inanely, "You didn't mind it this mornin', buggy-ridin'."

Her answer completely flabbergasted him:

"No; because you didn't have all that money then."

"Gee whiz, Pheeny!" he gasped. "What you got against Uncle Loren's money? It ain't a disease, is it? It's not ketchin', is it?"

"No," she sobbed; "but we—Well, when you were so poor and all, I thought you might—you might really like me because I could be of some—of some use to you; but now you—you needn't think I'm goin' to hold you to any—anything against your will."

Eddie realized that across the street somebody had stopped to listen. Eddie wanted to throw a rock at whoever it was, but Ellaphine absorbed him as she wailed:

"It 'd be just like you to be just's nice to me as ever; but I'm not goin' to tie you down to any homely old crow like me when you got money enough to marry anybody. You can get Luella Thickers back now. You could marry the Queen of England if you'd a mind to."

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Eddie could find nothing better to say than, "Well, I'll be dog-on'd!"

While he gaped she got away.

### IV

Luella Thickers cast her spells over Eddie with all her might, but he understood them now and escaped through their coarse meshes. She was so resolute, however, that he did not dare trust himself alone in the same town with her unless he had a chaperon.

He sent a note to Ellaphine, saying he was in dire trouble and needed her help. This brought him the entree to her parlor. He told her the exact situation and begged her to rescue him from Luella.

Ellaphine's craggy features grew as radiant as a mountain peak in the sunrise. The light made beautiful what it illumined. She consented at last to believe in Eddie's devotion, or at least in his need of her; and the homely thing enjoyed the privilege of being pleaded for and of yielding to the prayers of an ardent lover.

She assumed that the marriage could not take place for several years, if ever. She wanted to give Eddie time to be sure of his heart; but Eddie was stubborn and said:

"Seein' as we're agreed on gettin' married, let's have the wedding right away and get it over with."

When Ellaphine's mother learned that Ellaphine had a chance to marry an heir and was asking for time, Mrs. Govers delivered an oration that would have sent Ellaphine to the altar with almost anybody, let alone her idolized Eddie.

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The wedding was a quiet affair. Everybody in Carthage was invited. Few came. People feared that if they went they would have to send wedding-presents, and Eddie and Ellar were too unimportant to the social life of Carthage to make their approval valuable.

Eddie wore new shoes, which creaked and pinched. He looked twice as uncomfortable and twice as sad as he had looked at his uncle Loren's obsequies; and he suffered that supreme disenchantment of a too-large collar with a necktie rampant.

In spite of the ancient and impregnable theory that all brides are beautiful, was there ever a woman who looked her best in the uniform of approaching servitude? In any case, Ellaphine's best was not good, and she was at her worst in her ill-fitting white gown, with the veil askew. Her graceless carriage was not improved by the difficulty of keeping step with her escort and the added task of keeping step with the music.

The organist, Mr. Norman Maugans, always grew temperamental when he played Mendelssohn's "Wedding March," and always relieved its monotonous cadence with passionate accelerations and abrupt retardations. That made walking difficult.

When the minister had finished with the couple and they moved down the aisle to what the paper called the "Bridle March, by Lohengrin," Mr. Maugans always craned his neck to see and usually put his foot on the wrong pedal, with the startling effect of firing a cannon at the departing guests.

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He did not crane his neck, however, to see Mr. and Mrs. Pouch depart. They were too commonplace entirely. He played the march with such doleful indifference that Eddie found the aisle as long as the distance from Marathon to Athens. Also he was trying to walk so that his pinching shoes would not squeak.

At the end of the last pew Eddie and Ellaphine encountered Luella Thickers leaning out into the aisle and triumphantly beautiful in her finest raiment. Her charms were militant and vindictive, and her smile plainly said: "Uh-huh! Don't you wish you'd taken me instead of that thing you've hitched up with for life?"

Eddie gave her one glance and found her hideous. Ellaphine lowered her eyelids in defeat and slunk from the church, thinking:

"Now he's already sorry that he married me. What can he see in me to love? Nothing! Nothing!"

When they clambered into the carriage Eddie said, "Well, Mrs. Pouch, give your old husband a kiss!"

Ellaphine shrank away from him, however, crying again. He was hurt and puzzled until he remembered that it is the business of brides to cry. He held her hand and tried to console her for being his victim, and imagined almost every reason for her tears but the true one.

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The guests at the church straggled to Mrs. Govers's home, drawn by the call of refreshments. Luella was the gayest of them all. People wondered why Eddie had not married her instead of Ellaphine. Luella heard some one say, "What on earth can he see in her?"

Luella answered, "What on earth can she see in him?" It was hardly playing fair, but Luella was a poor loser. She even added, to clinch it, "What on earth can they see in each other?"

That became the town comment on the couple when there was any comment at all. Mainly they were ignored completely.

Eddie and Ellar were not even honored with the usual outburst of the ignoblest of all sports—bride-baiting. Nobody tied a white ribbon to the wheel of the hack that took them to the depot. Old shoes had not been provided and rice had been forgotten. They were not pelted or subjected to immemorial jokes. They were not chased to the train, and their elaborate schemes for

deceiving the neighbors as to the place of their honeymoon were wasted. Nobody cared where they went or how long they stayed.

They returned sheepishly, expecting to run a gantlet of humor; but people seemed unaware that they had been away. They settled down into the quiet pool of Carthage without a splash, like a pair of mud-turtles slipping off a log into the water. Even the interest in Eddie's inheritance did not last long, for Uncle Loren's fortune did not last long—not that they were spendthrift, for they spent next to nothing; but money must be fed or it starves to death. Money must grow or wither.

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## V

Eddie found that his uncle's reputation for hard dealing had been a condition of his success. He soon learned that the feather-duster factory could be run at a profit only by the most microscopic care. Wages must be kept down; hours kept up; the workers driven every minute, fined if they were late, nagged if they dawdled. Profit could be wrung from the trade only by ugly battles with dealers and purchasers. Raw material had to be fought down, finished product fought up; bills due fought off, accounts fought in; the smallest percentage of a percentage wrestled for.

Eddie was incapable of such vigilant hostility toward everybody. The factory almost immediately ceased to pay expenses. Eddie was prompt to meet debts, but lenient as a collector. The rest of his inheritance fared no better. Eddie was an ideal mortgagee. The first widow wept him out of his interest in five tears. Having obliged her, he could hardly deny the next person, who had money but wanted more, "to carry out a big deal."

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Eddie first gained a reputation for being a kind-hearted gentleman and a Christian, and later a notoriety for being an easy mark. Eddie overheard such comment eventually, and it wounded him as deeply as it bewildered him. Bitterer than the contempt for a hard man is the contempt for a soft man who is betrayed by a vice of mercy. Eddie was hopelessly addicted to decency.

Uncle Loren had been a miser and so close that his nickname had implied the ability to skin a flint. People hated him and raged against him; but it suddenly became evident that they had worked hard to meet their bills payable to him. They had sat up nights devising schemes to gain cash for him. He was a cause of industry and thrift and self-denial. He paid poor wages, but he kept the factory going. He squeezed a penny until the eagle screamed, but he made dusters out of the tail feathers, and he was planning to branch out into whisk brooms and pillows when, in the words of the pastor, he was "called home." The pastor liked the phrase, as it did not commit him to any definite habitat.

Eddie, however, though he worked hard and used thrift, and, with Ellaphine's help, practised self-denial, found that he was not so big a man as the small man he succeeded. He increased the wages and cut down the hours, and found that he had diminished the output of everything except complaints. The men loafed shamelessly, cheated him of the energy and the material that belonged to him, and whined all the time. His debtors grew shiftless and contemptuous.

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It is the irony, the meanness, of the trade of life that virtue may prove vicious in effect; and viciousness may produce good fruit. Figs do grow from thistles.

For a time the Pouch couple attracted a great deal of attention from the people of Carthage—the sort of attention that people on shore devote to a pair of capsized canoeists for whom nobody cares to risk his life.

Luella Thickins had forced the note of gaiety at the wedding, but she soon grew genuinely glad that Eddie had got away. She began to believe that she had jilted him.

## VI

People who wondered what Mr. and Mrs. Pouch saw in each other could not realize that he saw in her a fellow-sufferer who upheld him with her love in all his terrors. She was everything that his office was not—peace without demand for money; glowing admiration and raptures of passion.

What she saw in him was what a mother sees in a crippled child that runs home to her when the play of the other boys is too swift or too rough. She saw a good man, who could not fight because he could not slash and trample and loot. She saw what the Belgian peasant women saw—a little cottage holder staring in dismay at the hostile armies crashing about his homestead.

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The only comfort Eddie found in the situation was the growing realization that it was hopeless. The drowsy opiate of surrender began to spread its peace through his soul. His torment was the remorse of proving a traitor to his dead uncle's glory. The feather-dustery that had been a monument was about to topple into the weeds. Eddie writhed at that and at his feeling of disloyalty to the employees, who would be turned out wageless in a small town that was staggering under the burden of hard times.

He made a frantic effort to keep going on these accounts, but the battle was too much for him. He could not imagine ways and means—he knew nothing of the ropes of finance. He was like a farmer with a scythe against sharpshooters. Ellaphine began to fear that the struggle would break him down. One night she persuaded him to give up.



She watched him anxiously the next morning as his fat little body, bulging with regrets, went meekly down the porch steps and along the walk. The squeal of the gate as he shoved through sounded like a groan from his own heart. He closed the gate after him with the gentle care he gave all things. Then he leaned across it to wave to his Pheeny. It was like the good-by salute of a man going to jail.

Ellaphine moped about the kitchen, preparing him the best dinner she could to cheer him when he came home at noon. To add a touch of grace she decided to set a bowl of petunias in front of him. He loved the homely little flowers in their calico finery, like farmers' daughters at a picnic. Their cheap and almost palpable fragranciness delighted him when it powdered the air. She hoped that they would bring a smile to him at noon, for he could still afford petunias.

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She was squatting by the colony aligned along the walk, and her big sunbonnet hid her unbeautiful face from the passers-by and theirs from her, when she caught a glimpse of Luella Thickins coming along, giggling with the banker's son. Luella put on a little extra steam for the benefit of Ellaphine, who was glad of her sunbonnet and did not look up.

Later there came a quick step, thumping the boardwalk in a rhythm she would have recognized but for its allegriety. The gate was opened with a sweep that brought a shriek from its old rheumatic hinge, and was permitted to swing shut with an unheeded smack. Ellaphine feared it was somebody coming with the haste that bad news inspires. Something awful had happened to Eddie! Her knees could not lift her to face the evil tidings. She dared not turn her head.

Then she heard Eddie's own voice: "Pheeny! Pheeny, honey! Everything's all right!"

Pheeny spilled the petunias and sat down on them. Eddie lifted her up and pushed his glowing face deep into her sunbonnet, and kissed her.

Luella Thickins was coming back and her giggling stopped. She and the banker's son, who were just sauntering about, exchanged glances of disgust at the indecorous proceeding. Later Luella resumed her giggle and enjoyed hugely her comment:

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"Ellar looks fine in a sunbonnet! The bigger it is, the better she looks."

## VII

Meantime Eddie was supporting his Pheeny into the house. His path was strewn with petunias and she supposed he had some great victory to announce. He had; but he was the victim.

The conqueror was the superintendent of the factory, Jabez Pittinger, who had survived a cycle of Uncle Loren's martinetism with less resentment than a year of Eddie's lenience. But Eddie is telling Ellaphine of his glorious achievement:

"You see, I went to the fact'ry feeling like I was goin' to my grave."

"I know," she said; "but what happened?"

"I just thought I'd rather die than tack up the notice that we were going to shut down and turn off those poor folks and all."

"I know," said Ellaphine; "but tell me."

"Well, finally," Eddie plodded along, "I tried to draw up the 'nouncement with the markin'-brush; but I just couldn't make the letters. So I called in Jabe Pittinger and told him how it was; and I says to him: 'Jabe, I jest naturally can't do it m'self. I wisht you'd send the word round that the factory's goin' to stop next Sat'd'y.' I thought he'd show some surprise; but he didn't. He just shot a splash of tobacco-juice through that missin' tooth of his and says, 'I wouldn't if I's you.' And I says, 'Goodness knows I hate to; but there's no way out of it.' And he wopped his cud round and said, 'Mebbe there is.' 'What do you mean?' I says. And he says, 'Fact is, Eddie'—he always called me Mr. Pouch or Boss before, but I couldn't say anything to him, seein'—"

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"I know!" Ellaphine almost screamed. "But what'd he say? What's the upshot?"

Eddie went on at his ox-like gait. "'Well,' he he says, 'fact is, Eddie,' he says, 'I been expectin' this, and I been figgerin' if they wasn't a way somewhere to keep a-runnin',' says he; 'and I been talkin' to certain parties that believes as I do, that the fault ain't with the feather-duster business, but with the way it's run,' he says. 'People gotter have feather dusters,' he says; 'but they gotter be gave to 'em right.' O' course I knew he was gettin' at me, but I was in no p'sition to talk back."

"Oh, please, Eddie!" Ellaphine moaned. "Please tell me! I'm goin' crazy to know the upshot of it, and I smell the pie burnin'—it's rhubob, too."

"You got rhubob pie for dinner to-day?" Eddie chortled. "Oh, crickety, that's fine!"

He followed her into the kitchen and helped her carry the things to the dining-room, where they waited on each other in alternate dashes and clashes of "Lemme get it!" and "You set right still!"

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Eventually he reached the upshot, which was that Mr. Pittinger thought he might raise money to run the factory if Eddie would give him the control and drop out. Eddie concluded, with a burst of rapture: "I'm so tickled I wisht I could telegraft poor Uncle Loren that everything's all right!"

## VIII

It was an outrageous piece of petty finance on high models, and it euchred Eddie out of everything he had in the world except his illusion that Jabez was working for the good of the factory.

Eddie always said "The Fact'ry" in the tone that city people use when they say "The Cathedral."

Ellaphine saw through the wiles of Jabez and the measly capitalists he had bound together, and she was ablaze with rage at them and with pity for her tender-hearted child-husband; but she did not reveal these emotions to Eddie.

She encouraged him to feast on the one sweetmeat of the situation: that the hands would not be turned off and the factory would keep open doors. In fact, when doubt began to creep into his own idle soul and a feeling of shame depressed him, as the butt of the jokes and the pity that the neighbors flung at him, Ellaphine pretended to be overjoyed at the triumph he had wrested from defeat.

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And when he began to chafe at his lack of occupation, and to fret about their future, she went to the factory and invaded the office where the usurper, Jabez Pittinger, sat enthroned at the hallowed desk, tossing copious libations of tobacco-juice toward a huge new cuspidor. She demanded a job for Eddie and bullied Jabez into making him a bookkeeper, at a salary of forty-five dollars a month.

Thus, at last, Eddie Pouch found his place in the world. There are soldiers who make ideal first sergeants and are ruined and ruinous as second lieutenants; and there are soldiers who are worthless as first sergeants, but irresistible as major-generals. Eddie was a born first sergeant, a routine man, a congenital employee—doomed, like fire, to be a splendid servant and a disastrous master.

Working for himself, he neglected every opportunity. Working for another, he neglected nothing. Meeting emergencies, tricking creditors and debtors, and massacring competitors were not in his line; but when it came to adding up columns of figures all day, making out bills, drawing checks for somebody else to sign, and the Santa Claus function of stuffing the pay-roll into the little envelopes—Eddie was there. Shrewd old Jabez recognized this. He tried him on a difficult collection once—sent him forth to pry an ancient debt of eighteen dollars and thirty-four cents out of the meanest man in town, vice Uncle Loren. Eddie came back with a look of contentment.

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"Did you git it?" said Jabez.

"Well, you see, it was like this: the poor feller—"

"Poor heller! Did you git it?"

"No; he was so hard up I lent him four dollars."

"What!"

"Out of my own pocket, o' course."

Jabez remarked that he'd be hornswoggled; but he valued the incident and added it to the anecdotes he used when he felt that he had need to justify himself for playing Huerta with his dreamy Madero.

## IX

After that the most Jabez asked of Eddie was to write "Please remit" or "Past due" on the mossier bills. Eddie preferred an exquisite poem he had copied from a city creditor: "This account has no doubt escaped your notice. As we have several large obligations to meet, we should greatly appreciate a check by return mail."

Eddie loved that. There was a fine chivalry and democracy about it, as one should say: "We're all debtors and creditors in this world, and we big fellows and you little fellows must all work together."

Life had a regularity now that would have maddened a man more ambitious than Eddie or a woman more restless than Ellaphine. Their world was like the petunia-garden—the flowers were not orchids or telegraph-pole-stemmed roses; but the flower faces were joyous, their frocks neat, and their perfume savory.

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Eddie knew just how much money was coming in and there was no temptation to hope for an increase. They knew just how much time they had, and one day was like another except that along about the first of every month Eddie went to the office a little earlier and went back at night to get out the bills and adjust his balances.

On these evenings Ellaphine was apt to go along and sit with him, knitting thick woolen socks for the winter, making him shirts or nightgowns, or fashioning something for herself or the house. Her loftiest reach of splendor was a crazy quilt; and her rag carpets were highly esteemed.

On Sundays they went to church in the morning and again in the evening. Prayer-meeting night saw them always on their way to the place where the church bell called: "Come! Come!"

Sometimes irregular people, who forgot it was prayer-meeting night, would be reminded of it by seeing Eddie and Ellar go by. They went so early that there was time for the careless to make haste with their bonnets and arrive in time.

It was a saying that housewives set their kitchen clocks by Eddie's transits to and from the factory. At any rate, there was no end to the occasions when shiftless gossips, dawdling on their porches, were surprised to see Eddie toddle homeward, and scurried away, cackling:

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"My gracious! There goes Eddie Pouch, and my biscuits not cut out!"

## X

The whole year was tranquil now for the Pouches, and the halcyon brooded unalarmed in the waveless cove of their life. There were no debtors to be harassed, no creditors to harass them. They paid cash for everything—at least, Ellaphine did; for Eddie turned his entire forty-five dollars over to her. She was his banker and his steward.

She could not persuade him to smoke, or to buy new clothes before the old ones grew too shabby for so nice a man as a bookkeeper is apt to be. He did not drink or play cards or billiards; he did not belong to any lodge or political organization.

The outgo of money was as regular as the income—so much for the contribution-basket on Sundays; so much for the butcher; so much for the grocer; so much for the coal-oil lamps. The baker got none of their money and the druggist little.

A few dollars went now and then to the dry-goods store for dress goods, which Pheeny made up; and Eddie left an occasional sum at the Pantatorium for a fresh alpaca coat, or for a new pair of trousers when the seat of the old ones grew too refulgent or perilously extenuate. As Eddie stood up at his tall desk most of the time, however, it was rather his shoes than his pantaloons that felt the wear and tear of attrition.

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And yet, in spite of all the tender miserhood of Ellaphine and the asceticism of Eddie, few of the forty-five dollars survived the thirty days' demands. Still, there was always something for the savings-bank, and the blessing on its increment was that it grew by exactions from themselves—not from their neighbors.

The inspiration of the fund was the children that were to be. The fund had ample time for accretion, since the children were as late as Never is.

Such things are not discussed, of course, in Carthage. And nobody knew how fiercely they yearned. Nobody knew of the high hopes that flared and faded.

After the first few months of marriage Eddie had begun to call Pheeny "Mother"—just for fun, you know. And it teased her so that he kept it up, for he liked a joke as well as the next fellow. Before people, of course, she was "Pheeny," and, on very grand occasions, "the wife." "Mrs. Pouch" was beyond him. But once, at a sociable, he called across the room, "Say, mother!"

He was going to ask her whether she wanted him to bring her a piece of the "chalklut" cake or a hunk of the "cokernut," but he got no farther. Nobody noticed it; but Eddie and Pheeny were consumed with shame and slunk home scarlet. Nobody noticed that they had gone.

Time went on and on, and the fund grew and grew—a little coral reef of pennies and nickels and dimes. The amusements of the couple were petty—an occasional church sociable was society; a revival period was drama. They never went to the shows that came to the Carthage Opera House. They did not miss much.

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Eddie wasted no time on reading any fiction except that in the news columns of the evening paper, which a boy threw on the porch in a twisted boomerang every afternoon, and which Eddie untwisted and read after he had wiped the dishes that Pheeny washed.

Ellaphine spent no money on such vanities as novels or short stories, but she read the edifying romances in the Sunday-school paper and an occasional book from the Sunday-school library, mainly about children whose angelic qualities gave her a picture of child life that would have contrasted strongly with what their children would have been if they had had any.

Their great source of literature, however, was the Bible. Soon after their factory passed out of their control and their evenings ceased to be devoted to riddles in finance, they had resolved to read the Bible through, "from kiver to kiver." And Eddie and Ellaphine found that a chapter read aloud before going to bed was an excellent sedative.

They had not invaded Genesis quite three weeks before the evening when it came Eddie's turn to read aloud the astonishing romance of Abram, who became Abraham, and of Sarai, who became Sarah. It was very exciting when the child was promised to Sarah, though she was "well stricken in age." Eddie smiled as he read, "Sarah laughed within herself." But Pheeny blushed.

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Ellaphine was far from the ninety years of Sarah, but she felt that the promise of a son was no laughing matter. These poignant hopes and awful denials and perilous adventures are not permitted to be written about or printed for respectable eyes. If they are discussed it must be with laughing ribaldry.

Even in their solitude Eddie and Pheeny used modest paraphrases and breathed hard and looked

askance, and made sure that no one overheard. They whispered as parents do when their children are abed up-stairs.

The neighbors gave them hardly thought enough to imagine the lofty trepidation of these thrilling hours. The neighbors never knew of the merciless joke Fate played on them when, in their ignorance, they believed the Lord had sent them a sign. They dwelt in a fools' paradise for a long time, hoarding their glorious expectations.

At length Pheeny grew brazen enough to consult the old and peevish Doctor Noxon; and he laughed her hopes away and informed her that she need never trouble herself to hope again.

That was a smashing blow; and they cowered together under the shadow of this great denial, each telling the other that it did not matter, since children were a nuisance and a danger anyway.

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They pretended to take solace in two current village tragedies—the death of the mayor's wife in childbed and the death of the minister's son in disgrace; but, though they lied to each other lovingly, they were neither convincing nor convinced.

## XI

Year followed year as season trudged at the heel of season. The only difference it made to them was that now Ellaphine evicted weeds from the petunia-beds, and now swept snow from the porch and beat the broom out on the steps; now Eddie carried his umbrella up against the sun or rain and mopped his bald spot, and now he wore his galoshes through the slush and was afraid he had caught a cold.

The fund in the bank went on growing like a neglected garden, but it was growing for nothing. Eddie walked more slowly to and from the office, and Pheeny took a longer time to set the table. She had to sit down a good deal between trips and suffered a lot of pain. She said nothing about it to Eddie of evenings, but it grew harder to conceal her weakness from him when he helped her with the Sunday dinner.

Finally she could not walk to church one day and had to stay at home. He stayed with her, and their empty pew made a sensation. Eddie fought at Pheeny until she consented to see the doctor again—on Monday.

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The doctor censured her for being foolish enough to try to die on her feet, and demanded of Eddie why they did not keep a hired girl. Eddie had never thought of it. He was horrified to realize how heartless and negligent he had been. He promised to get one in at once.

Pheeny stormed and wept against the very idea; but her protests ended on the morning when she could not get up to cook Eddie's breakfast for him. He had to get his own and hers, and he was late at the office for the first time in years. Two householders, seeing him going by, looked at their clocks and set them back half an hour.

Jabez spoke harshly to Eddie about his tardiness. It would never do to ignore an imperfection in the perfect. Eddie was Pheeny's nurse that night and overslept in the morning. It would have made him late again if he had stopped to fry an egg or boil a cup of coffee. He ran breakfastless to his desk.

After that Pheeny consented to the engagement of a cook. They tried five or six before they found one who combined the traits of being both enduring and endurable.

Eddie was afraid of her to a pitiful degree. She put too much coffee in his coffee and she made lighter bread than Pheeny did.

"There's no substance to her biscuits!" Eddie wailed, hoping to comfort Pheeny, who had leisure enough now to develop at that late date her first acquaintance with jealousy.

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## XII

The cook was young and vigorous, and a hired man on a farm might have called her good-looking; but her charms did not interest Eddie. His soul was replete with the companionship of his other self—Pheeny; and if Delia had been as sumptuous a beauty as Cleopatra he would have been still more afraid of her. He had no more desire to possess her than to own the Kohinoor.

And Delia, in her turn, was far more interested in the winks and flatteries of the grocer's boy and the milkman than in any conquest of the fussy little fat man, who ate whatever she slammed before him and never raised his eyes.

Pheeny, however, could not imagine this. She could not know how secure she was in Eddie's heart, or how she had grown in and about his soul until she fairly permeated his being.

So Pheeny lay up in the prison of her bed and imagined vain things, interpreting the goings-on down-stairs with a fantastic cynicism that would have startled Boccaccio. She did not openly charge Eddie with these fancied treacheries. She found him guilty silently and silently acquitted him of fault, abjectly asking herself what right she had to deny him all acquaintance with beauty, hilarity, and health.

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She remembered her mother's eternal moan, "All men are alike." She dramatized her poor mouse

of a husband as a devastating Don Juan; and then forgave him, as most of the victims of Don Juan's ruthless piracies forgave him.

She suffered hideously, however. Eddie, seeing the deep, sad look of her eyes as they studied him, wondered and wondered, and often asked her what the matter was; but she always smiled as a mother smiles at a child that is too sweet to punish for any mischief, and she always answered: "Nothing! Nothing!" But then she would sigh to the caverns of her soul. And sometimes tears would drip from her brimming lids to her pillow. Still, she would tell him nothing but "Nothing!"

Finally the long repose repaired her worn-out sinews and she grew well enough to move about the house. She prospered on the medicine of a new hope that she should soon be well enough to expel the third person who made a crowd of their little home.

And then Luella Thickins came back to town. Luella had married long before and moved away; but now she came back a widow, handsome instead of pretty, billowy instead of willowy, seductive instead of spony, and with that fearsome menace a widow carries like a cloud about her.

Eddie spoke of meeting her "down-town," and in his fatuous innocence announced that she was "as pirty as ever." If he had hit Pheeny with a hatchet he would have inflicted a less painful wound.

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### XIII

Luella's presence cast Pheeny into a profounder dismay than she had ever felt about the cook. After all, Delia was only a hired girl, while Luella was an old sweetheart. Delia had put wicked ideas into Eddie's head and now Luella would finish him. As Ellaphine's mother had always said, "Men have to have novelty."

The Lord Himself had never seen old Mr. Govers stray an inch aside from the straight path of fidelity; but his wife had enhanced him with a lifelong suspicion that eventually established itself as historical fact.

Pheeny could find some excuse for Eddie's Don Juanity with the common clay of Delia, especially as she never quite believed her own beliefs in that affair; but Luella was different. Luella had been a rival. The merest courtesy to Luella was an unpardonable affront to every sacred right of successful rivalry.

The submerged bitternesses that had gathered in her soul like bubbles at the bottom of a hot kettle came showering upward now, and her heart simmered and thrummed, ready to boil over if the heat were not removed.

One day, soon, Luella fastened on Eddie as he left the factory to go home to dinner. She had loitered about, hoping to engage the eye of Jabez, who was now the most important widower in town. Luella had elected him for her next; but he was away, and she whetted her wits on Eddie. She walked at his side, excruciating him with her glib memories of old times and the mad devotion he had cherished for her then.

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He felt that it was unfaithful of him even to listen to her, but he could not spur up courage enough to bolt and run. He welcomed the sight of his own gate as an asylum of refuge. To his horror, Luella stopped and continued her chatter, draping herself in emotional attitudes and italicizing her coquetries. Her eyes seemed to draw languorous words that her lips dared not voice; and she committed the heinous offense of plucking at Eddie's coat-sleeve and clinging to his hand. Then she walked on like an erect cobra.

Eddie's very back had felt that Pheeny was watching him from one of the windows or from all the windows; for when, at last, he achieved the rude victory of breaking away from Luella and turned toward the porch, every window was a somber eye of reproach.

He would not have looked so guilty if he had been guilty. He shuffled into the house like a boy who comes home late from swimming; and when he called aloud "Pheeny! Oh, Pheeny!" his voice cracked and his throat was uncertain with phlegm.

He found Pheeny up-stairs in their room, with the door closed. He closed it after him when he went in. He feigned a care-free joy at the sight of her, and stumbled over his own foot as he crossed the room and put his arms about her, where she sat in the big rocking-chair; but she brushed his arms aside and bent her cheek away from his pursed lips. This startled him, and he gasped:

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"Why, what's the matter, honey? Why don't you kiss me?"

"You don't want to kiss me," she muttered.

"Why don't I?" he exclaimed.

"Because I'm not pirty. I'm not young. I'm not round or tall. I haven't got nice clothes or those terrible manners that men like in women. You're tired of me. I don't blame you; but you don't have to kiss me, and you don't want to."

It was a silly sort of contest for so old a couple; but their souls felt as young as childhood, or

younger, and this debate was all-important. He caught at her again and tried to drag her head to his lips, pleading inately:

"Of course I want to kiss you, honey! Of course I do! Please—please don't be this way!"

But she evaded him still, and glared at him as from a great distance, sneering rather at herself than him and using that old byword of Luella's:

"What can you see in me?" Suddenly she challenged him: "Who do you kiss when you kiss me?"

He stared at her for a while as if he were not sure who she was. Then he sat down on the broad arm of her chair and took one of her hands in his—the hand with the wedding-ring on it—and seemed to talk to the hand more than to her, lifting the fingers one after another and studying each digit as though it had a separate personality—as perhaps it had.

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#### XIV

"Who do I kiss when I kiss you? That's a funny question!"

He laughed solemnly. Then he made a very long speech, for him; and she listened to it with the attention due to that most fascinating of themes, the discussion of oneself by another.

"Pheeny, when I was about knee-high to a grasshopper I went over to play in Tim Holdredge's father's orchard; and when I started for home there was a big dawg in old Mrs. Pittinger's front yard, and it jumped round and barked at me. I guess it was just playing, because, as I remember it now, it was wagging its tail, and afterward I found out it was only a cocker spaniel; but I thought it was a wolf and was going to eat me. I begun to cry, and I was afraid to go backward or to go forward. And by and by a little girl came along and asked me what I was crying about, and I said, 'About the dawg!' And the little girl said: 'O-oh! He's big, ain't he?' And I said, 'He's goin' to eat one of us all up!' And the little girl said: 'Aw, don't you care! You take a-holt of my hand and I'll run past with you; and if he bites he'll bite me first and you can git away!' She was as scared as I was, but she grabbed my hand and we got by without being et up. Do you remember who that little girl was?"

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The hand in his seemed to remember. The fingers of it closed on his a moment, then relaxed as if to listen for more. He mused on:

"I wasn't very big for my size even then, and I wasn't very brave ever. I didn't like to fight, like the other boys did, and I used to rather take a lickin' than give one. Well, one day I was playin' marbles with another boy, and he said I cheated when I won his big taw; but I didn't. He wanted to fight, though, and he hit me; and I wouldn't hit back. He was smaller than what I was, and he give me a lot of lip and dared me to fight; and I just couldn't. He said I was afraid, and so did the other boys; and I guess I was. It seemed to me I was more afraid of hurtin' somebody else than gettin' hurt myself; but I guess I was just plain afraid. The other boys began to push me round and call me a cowardly calf, and I began to cry. I wanted to run home, but I was afraid to start to run. And then a little girl came along and said: 'What's the matter, Eddie? What you cryin' for?' And I said, 'They're all pickin' on me and callin' me cowardly calf!' And she said: 'Don't you care! You come right along with me; and if one of 'em says another word to you I'll scratch their nasty eyes out!' Do you remember that, Pheeny?"

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Her other hand came forward and embraced his wrist.

"And another time you found me cryin'. I was a little older, and I'd studied hard and tried to get my lessons good; but I failed in the exam'nations, and I was goin' to tie a rock round my neck and jump in the pond. But you said: 'Aw, don't you care, Eddie! I didn't pass in mine, either!'

"And when I wanted to go to college, and Uncle Loren wouldn't send me, I didn't cry outside, but I cried inside; and I told you and you said: 'Don't you care! I don't get to go to boardin'-school myself.'

"And when I was fool enough to think I liked that no-account Luella Thickins, and thought I'd go crazy because her wax-doll face wouldn't smile for me, you said: 'Don't you care, Eddie! You're much too good for her. I think you're the finest man in the country.'

"And when the baby didn't come and I acted like a baby myself, you said: 'Don't you care, Eddie! Ain't we got each other?'

"Seems like ev'ry time I been ready to lay down and die you've been there with your old 'Don't you care! It's going to be all right!'

"Just last night I had a turrrible dream. I didn't tell you about it for fear it would upset you. I dreamed I got awful sick at the office. I couldn't seem to add the figures right and the old desk wobbled. Finally I had to leave off and start for home, though it was only a quarter of twelve; and I had to set down on Doc Noxon's horse-block and on Holdredge's wall to rest; and I couldn't get our gate open. And you run out and dragged me in, and got me up-stairs somehow, and sent Delia around for the doctor.

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"Doc Noxon made you have a trained nurse, but I couldn't stand her; and I wouldn't take medicine from anybody but you. I don't suppose I was dreamin' more 'n a few minutes, all told; but it seemed like I laid there for weeks, till one day Doc Noxon called you out of the room. I

couldn't hear what he was saying, but I heard you let out one horrible scream, and then I heard sounds like he was chokin' you, and you kept sayin': 'Oh no! No! No!'

"I tried to go and help you, but I couldn't lift my head. By and by you come back, with your eyes all red. Doc Noxon was with you and he called the nurse over to him. You come to me and tried to smile; and you said:

"Well, honey, how are you now?"

"Then I knew what the doctor had told you and I was worse scared than when the black dawg jumped at me. I tried to be brave, but I never could seem to be. I put out my hands to you and hollered:

"Pheeny, I'm goin' to die! I know I'm goin' to die! Don't let me go! I'm afraid to die!"

Now the hands clenched his with a frenzy that hurt—but beautifully. And he kissed the wedding-ring as he finished: [Pg 41]

"And you dropped down to me on the floor by the bed and took my hands—just like that. And you whispered: 'Don't you care, honey! I'll go with you. Don't you care!'

"And the fever seemed to cool out of me, and I kind of smiled and wasn't afraid any more; and I turned my face to you and kissed you—like this, Pheeny.

"Why, you've been cryin', haven't you? You mustn't cry—you mustn't! All those girls I been tellin' you about are the girl I kiss when I kiss you, Pheeny. There couldn't be anybody as beautiful as you are to me.

"I ain't 'mounted to much; but it ain't your fault. I wouldn't have 'mounted to anything at all if it hadn't been for you, Pheeny; and I been the happiest feller in all this world—or I have been up to now. I'm awful lonesome just now. Don't you s'pose you could spare me a kiss?"

She spared him one.

Then the cook pounded on the door and called through in a voice that threatened to warp the panels: "Ain't you folks ever comin' down to dinner? I've rang the bell three times. Everything's all cold!"

But it wasn't. Everything was all warm.

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## POP

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### I

They made a handsome family group, with just the one necessary element of contrast.

Father was the contrast.

They were convened within and about the big three-walled divan which, according to the fashion, was backed up against a long library-table in what they now called the living-room. It had once been the sitting-room and had contained a what-isn't-it and a sofa like an enormous bald caterpillar, crowded against the wall so that you could fall off only one side of it.

It was a family reunion and unexpected. Father was not convened with the rest, but sat off in the shadow and counted the feet sticking out from the divan and protruding from the chairs. He counted fourteen feet, including his wife's and excluding his own. All the feet were expensively shod except his own.

Three of the children had come home for a visit, and father, glad as he was to see them, had a vague feeling that they had been brought in by some other motive than their loudly proclaimed homesickness. He was willing to wait until they disclosed it, for he had an idea what it was and he was always glad to postpone a payment. It meant so much less interest to lose. Father was a business man. [Pg 43]

Father was also dismally computing the addition to the grocery bills, the butchery bills, and livery bills, and the others. He was figuring out the added expense of the dinner, with roast beef now costing as much as peacocks' tongues. He had raised a large family and there was not a dyspeptic in the lot—not even a banter.

They had been photographed together the day before and the proof had just come home. Father was not in the picture. It was a handsome picture. They admitted it themselves. They had urged father to come along, but he had pleaded his business, as usual. As they studied the picture they would glance across at father and realize how little the picture lost by his absence. It lost nothing but the contrast.

While they were engaged each in that most fascinating of employments—studying one's own photograph—they were all waiting for the dining-room maid to appear like a black-and-white sketch and crisply announce that dinner was served. They had not arrived yet at having a man.

Indeed, that room could still remember when a frowsy, blowsy hired girl was wont to stick her head in and groan, "Supper's ready!"

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In fact, mother had never been able to live down a memory of the time when she used to put her own head in at a humbler dining-room door and call with all the anger that cooks up in a cook: "Come on! What we got's on the table!" But mother had entirely forgotten the first few months of her married life, when she would sing out to father: "Oh, honey, help me set the table, will you? I've a surprise for you—something you like!"

This family had evolved along the cycles so many families go through—from pin feathers to paradise plumes—only, the male bird had failed to improve his feathers or his song, though he never failed to bring up the food and keep the nest thatched.

The history of an American family can often be traced by its monuments in the names the children call the mother. Mrs. Grout had begun as—just one Ma. Eventually they doubled that and progressed from the accent on the first to the accent on the second ma. Years later one of the inarticulate brats had come home as a collegian in a funny hat, and Mama had become Mater. This had lasted until one of the brattines came home as a collegienne with a swagger and a funny sweater. And then her Latin title was Frenchified to *Mère*—which always gave father a shock; for father had been raised on a farm, where only horses' wives were called by that name.

Father had been dubbed Pop at an early date. Efforts to change this title had been as futile as the terrific endeavors to keep him from propping his knife against his plate. He had been browbeaten out of using the blade for transportation purposes, but at that point he had simply ceased to develop.

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Names like Pappah, Pater, and *Père* would not cling to him; they fell off at once. Pop he was always called to his face, whether he were referred to abroad as "the old man," "the governor," or "our dear father."

The evolution of the Grout family could be traced still more clearly in the names the parents had given the children. The eldest was a daughter, though when she grew up she dropped back in the line and became ever so much younger than her next younger brothers. She might have fallen still farther to the rear if she had not run up against another daughter who had her own age to keep down.

The eldest daughter, born in the grim days of early penury, had been grimly entitled Julia. The following child, a son, was soberly called by his father's given and his mother's maiden names—John Pennock Grout, or Jno. P., as his father wrote it.

A year or two later there appeared another hostage. Labeling him was a matter of deep concern. John urged his own father's name, William; but the mother wafted this away with a gesture of airy disgust. There was a hired girl in the kitchen now and mother was reading a good many novels between stitches. She debated long and hard while the child waited anonymous. At length she ventured on Gerald. She changed that two or three times and the boy had a narrow escape from Sylvester. He came perilously near to carrying Abélard through an amused world; but she harked back to Gerald—which he spelled Jerrold at times.

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Then two daughters entered the family in succession and were stamped Beatrice—pronounced Bay-ah-treat-she by those who had the time and the energy—and Consuelo, which Pop would call Counser-eller.

By this time Julia had grown up and was beginning at finishing-school. She soon saw that Julia would never do—never! She had started with a handicap, but she caught up with the rest and passed them gracefully by ingeniously altering the final *a* to an *e*, and pronouncing it Zheelee.

Her father never could get within hailing distance of the French *j* and *u*, and teetered awkwardly between Jilly and Jelly. He was apt to relax sickeningly into plain Julia—especially before folks, when he was nervous anyway. Only they did not say "before folks" now; the Grouts never said "before folks" now—they said, "In the presence of guests."

By the time the next son came the mother was shamelessly literary enough to name him Ethelwolf, which his school companions joyously abbreviated to Ethel, overlooking the wolf.

Ethelwolf was the last of the visitors. For by this time *Mère* had accumulated so many absolutely unforgivable grievances against her absolutely impossible husband that she felt qualified for that crown of comfortable martyrhood, that womanly ideal, "a wife in name only"—and only that "for the sake of the children."

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By this time the children, too, had acquired grievances against Pop. The more refined they grew the coarser-grained he seemed. They could not pulverize him in the coffee-mill of criticism. He was as hopeless in ideas as in language. It was impossible to make him realize that the best is always the cheapest; that fine clothes make fine people; that petty economies are death to "the larger flights of the soul"; and that parents have no right to have children unless they can give them what other people's children have.

If John Grout complained that he was not a millionaire the younger Grouts retorted that this was not their fault, but their misfortune; and it was "up to Pop" to do the best he could during what *Mère* was now calling their "formative years." The children had liberal ideas, artistic and refined ideals; but Pop was forever talking poor, always splitting pennies, always dolefully reiterating, "I



don't know where the money is coming from!"

It was so foolish of him, too—for it always came from somewhere. The children went to the best schools, traveled in Europe, wore as good clothes as anybody—though they did not admit this, of course, within father's hearing, lest it put false notions into his head; and the sons made investments that had not yet begun to turn out right.

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Parents cannot fool their children long, and the Grout youngsters had learned at an early date that Pop always forked over when he was nagged into it. Any of the children in trouble could always write or telegraph home a "must have," and it was always forthcoming. There usually followed a querulous note about "Sorry you have to have so much, but I suppose it costs a lot where you are. Make it go as far as you can, for I'm a little pinched just now." But this was taken as a mere detail—an unfortunate paternal habit.

That was Pop's vice—his only one and about the least attractive of vices. It was harrowing to be the children of a miser—for he must have a lot hoarded away. His poor talk, his allusions to notes at the bank and mortgages and drafts to meet, were just bogies to frighten them with and to keep them down.

It was most humiliating for high-spirited children to be so misunderstood. Pop lacked refined tastes. It was a harsh thing to say of one's parent, but when you came right down to it Pop was a hopeless plebeian.

Pop noticed the difference himself. He would have doubted that these magnificent youngsters could be his own if that had not implied a criticism of his unimpeachable wife. So he gave her all the credit. For *Mère* was different. She was well read; she entertained charmingly; she loved good clothes, up-to-the-minute hats; she knew who was who and what was what. She was ambitious, progressive. She nearly took up French once.

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But Pop was shabby. Pop always wore a suit until it glistened and his children ridiculed him into a new one. As for wearing evening dress, in the words of Gerald they "had to blindfold him and back him into his soup-and-fish, even on the night the Italian Opera Company came to town."

Pop never could take them anywhere. A vacation was a thing of horror to him. It was almost impossible to drag him to a lake or the sea, and it was quite impossible to keep him there more than a few days. His business always called him home.

And such a business! Dry-goods!—and in a small town.

And such a town, with such a name! To the children who knew their Paris and their London, their New York and their Washington, a visit home was like a sentence to jail. It was humiliating to make a good impression on acquaintances of importance and then have to confess to a home town named Waupoos.

People either said, "I beg your pardon!" as if they had not heard it right, or they laughed and said, "Honestly?"

The children had tried again and again to pry Pop out of Waupoos, but he clung to it like a limpet. He had had opportunities, too, to move his business to big cities, but he was afraid to venture. He was fairly sure of sustenance in Waupoos so long as he nursed every penny; but he could never find the courage to transplant himself to another place.

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The worst of his cowardice was that he blamed the children—at least, he said he dared not face a year or two of possible loss lest they might need something. So he stayed in Waupoos and managed somehow to keep the family afloat and the store open.

When *Mère* revolted and longed for a glimpse of the outer world he always advised her to take a trip and have a good time. He always said he could afford that much, and he took an interest in seeing that she had funds to buy some city clothes with; but he never had funds enough to go along.

That was one of mother's grievances. Pop bored her to death at home and she wanted to scream every time he mentioned his business—it was so selfish of him to talk of that at night when she had so much to tell him of the misbehavior of the servants. But, greatly as he annoyed her round the house, she cherished an illusion that she would like him in a hotel.

She had tried to get him to read a certain novel—a wonderful book mercilessly exposing the curse of modern America; which is the men's habit of sticking to their business so closely that they give their poor wives no companionship. They leave their poor wives to languish at home or to go shopping or gossiping, while they indulge themselves in the luxuries of vibration between creditor and debtor.

In this novel, and in several others she could have named, the poor wife naturally fell a prey to the fascinations of a handsome devil with dark eyes, a motor or two, and no office hours.

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*Mère* often wondered why she herself had not taken up with some handsome devil fully equipped for the entertainment of neglected wives.

If she had not been a member of that stanch American womanhood to which the glory of the country and its progress are really due, she might have startled her husband into realizing too late, as the too-late husbands in the novels realized, that a man's business is a side issue and that

the perpetuation of romance is the main task. Her self-respect was all that held *Mère* to the home; that and—whisper!—the fact that no handsome devil with any kind of eyes ever tried to lure her away.

When she reproached Pop and threatened him he refused to be scared. He paid his wife that most odious of tributes—a monotonous trust in her loyalty and an insulting immunity to jealousy. Almost worse was his monotonous loyalty to her and his failure to give her jealousy any excuse.

They quarreled incessantly, but the wrangles were not gorgeously dramatic charges of intrigue with handsome men or painted women, followed by rapturous make-ups. They were quarrels over expenditures, extravagances, and voyages.

*Mère* charged Pop with parsimony and he charged her with recklessness. She accused him of trying to tie them down to a village; he accused her of trying to drive him to bankruptcy. She demanded to know whether he wanted his children to be like children of their neighbors—clerks in small stores, starveling tradespeople and wives of little merchants. He answered that she was breeding a pack of snobs that despised their father and had no mercy on him—and no use for him except as a lemon to squeeze dry. She answered with a laugh of scorn that lemon was a good word; and he threw up his hands and returned to the shop if the war broke out at noon, or slunk up to bed if it followed dinner.

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This was the pattern of their daily life. Every night there was a new theme, but the duet they built on it ran along the same formulas.

The children sided with *Mère*, of course. In the first place, she was a poor, downtrodden woman; in the second, she was their broker. Her job was to get them things. They gave her the credit for what she got them. They gave Pop no praise for yielding—no credit for extracting somehow from the dry-soil of an arid town the money they extracted from him. They knew nothing of the myriad little agonies, the ingenuity, the tireless attention to detail, the exquisite finesse that make success possible in the *mêlée* of competition. Their souls were above trade and its petty niggings.

Jno. P., who was now known as J. Pennock, was aiming at a million dollars in New York, and his mother was sure that he would get it next time if Pop would only raise him a little more money to meet an irritating obligation or seize a glittering opportunity. Pop always raised the money and J. Pennock always lost it. Yet Pennock was a financier and Pop was a village merchant. And now Pen had come home unexpectedly. He was showing a great interest in Pop's affairs.

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Gerald was home also unexpectedly. He was an artist of the most wonderful promise. None of his promises was more wonderful than those he made his father to repay just one more loan—to tide him over until he sold his next picture; but it never sold, or it sold for a mere song. Gerald solaced himself and *Mère* solaced him for being ahead of his time, unappreciated, too good for the public. She thanked Heaven that Gerald was a genius, not a salesman. One salesman in the family was enough!

And Gerald had beaten Pen home by one train. He had greeted Pen somewhat coldly—as if Pen were a trespasser on his side of the street. And when it was learned that Julie had telegraphed that she would arrive the next day, both the brothers had frowned.

Pop had sighed. He was glad to see his wonderful offspring, but he had already put off the grocer and the butcher—and even his life-insurance premium—because he had an opportunity by a quick use of cash to obtain the bankrupt stock of a rival dealer who had not nursed his pennies as Pop had. It was by such purchases that Pop had managed to keep his store alive and his brilliant children in funds.

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He had temporarily drawn his bank account down to the irreducible minimum and borrowed on his securities up to the insurmountable maximum. It was a bad time for his children to tap him. But here they were—Jno. P., Jerry, and Julia—all very unctuous over the home-coming, and yet all of them evidently cherishing an ulterior idea.

He watched them lounging in fashionable awkwardness. They were brilliant children. And he was as proud of them as he was afraid of them—and for them.

## II

If the children looked brilliant to Pop he did not reflect their refulgence. As they glanced from the photographer's proof to Pop they were not impressed. They were not afraid of him or for him.

His bodily arrangement was pitifully gawky; he neither sat erect nor lounged—he slumped spineless. Big spectacles were in style now, but Pop's big spectacles were just out of it. His face was like a parchment that had been left out in the rain and had dried carelessly in deep, stiff wrinkles—with the writing washed off.

Ethelwolf, the last born, had no ulterior idea. He always spent his monthly allowance by the second Tuesday after the first Monday, and sulked through a period of famine and debt until the next month. It was now the third Tuesday and he was disposed to sarcasm.

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"Look at Pop!" he muttered. "He looks just like the old boy they put in the cartoons to represent The Common People."

"He's the Beau Brummel of Waupoos, all right!" said Bayahtratshe, who was soon returning to Wellesley. And Consuelo, who was preparing for Vassar, added under her breath, "Mère, can't you steal up on him and swipe that already-tied tie?"

Had Pop overheard, he would have made no complaint. He had known the time when they had thrown things at him. The reverence of American children for their fathers is almost as famous as the meekness of American wives before their husbands. Yet it might have hurt Pop a little to see Mother shake her head and hear her sigh:

"He's hopeless, children! Do take warning from my misfortune and be careful what you marry."

Poor *Mère* had absolutely forgotten how proud she had been when Johnnie Grout came courting her, and how she had extracted a proposal before he knew what he was about, and had him at the altar before he was ready to support a wife in the style she had been accustomed to hope for. She remembered only the dreams he had not brought true, the harsh realities of their struggle upward. She had worked and skimped with him then. Now she was like a lolling passenger in a jinrikisha, who berates the shabby coolie because he stumbles where the roads are rough and sweats where they are steep.

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Julie spoke up in answer to her mother's word of caution:

"There's one thing better than being careful what you marry—and that's not marrying at all!"

The rest of them were used to Julie's views; but Pop, who had paid little heed to them, almost collapsed from his chair. Julie went on:

"Men are all alike, *Mère*. They're very soft-spoken when they come to make love; but it's only a bluff to make us give up our freedom. Before we know it they drag us up before another man, a preacher, and make us swear to love, honor, and obey. They kill the love, make the honor impossible, and the obey ridiculous. Then they coop us up at home and expect us to let them run the world to suit themselves. They've been running it for thousands of years—and look at the botch they've made of it! It's time for us to take the helm."

"Go to it, sis," said Ethelwolf. "I care not who makes the laws so long as I can break them."

"Let your sister alone!" said *Mère*. "Go on, Julie!"

"I've put it all in the address I read before the Federation last week," said Julie. "It was reported at length in one of the papers. I've got a clipping in my handbag here somewhere."

She began to rummage through a little condensed chaos of handkerchiefs, gloves, powder-puff, powdery dollar bills, powdery coins, loose bits of paper, samples, thread, pins, buttons—everything—every-whichway.

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J. Pennock laughed. "Pipe what's going to run the world! Better get a few pockets first."

"Don't be a brute, Pen!" said *Mère*.

At last Julie found the clipping she sought and, shaking the powder from it, handed it to her mother.

"It's on the strength of this speech that I was elected delegate to the international convention at San Francisco," she said.

"You were!" *Mère* gasped, and Beatrice and Consuelo exclaimed, "Ripsnorting!"

"Are you going?" said *Mère* when she recovered from her awe.

"Well, it's a pretty expensive trip. That's why I came home—to see if—Well, we can take that up later. Tell me how you like the speech."

*Mère* mumbled the report aloud to the delighted audience. Pop heard little of it. He was having a chill. It was very like plain ague, but he credited it to the terror of Julie's mission home. All she wanted him to do was to send her on a little jaunt to San Francisco! The tyrant, as usual, was expected to finance the rebellion.

When *Mère* had finished reading everybody applauded Julie except Pop. *Mère* overheard his silence and rounded on him across the aristocratic reading-glass she wielded.

"Did you hear that?"

Pop was so startled that he answered, "Uh-huh!"

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"Didn't you think it was splendid?" *Mère* demanded.

"Uh-huh!" said Pop.

"What didn't you like about it?"

"I liked it all first-rate. Julie is a smart girl, I tell you."

*Mère* scented his evasion, and she would never tolerate evasions. She repeated:

"What didn't you like about it?"

"I liked all I could understand."

"Understand!" snapped *Mère*, who rarely wasted her culture on Pop. "What didn't you understand? Could anything be clearer than this? Listen!" She read in an oratorical voice:

"'Woman has been for ages man's mere beast of burden, his household drudge. Being a wife has meant being a slave—the only servant without wages or holiday. But the woman of to-day at last demands that the shackles be stricken off; she demands freedom to live her life her own way—to express her selfhood without the hampering restrictions imposed on her by the barbaric customs inherited from the time of the cave-man.'"

*Mère* folded up the clipping and glared defiance at the cave-man slumped in the uneasy chair.

"What's clearer than that?" she reiterated.

Pop was at bay. He was like a desperate rabbit. He answered:

"It's clear enough, I guess; but it's more than I can take in. Seems to me the women folks are hollering at the men folks to give 'em what the men folks have never been able to get for themselves." [Pg 59]

It was peevish. Coming from Pop, it amounted to an outburst, a riot, a mutiny. Such a tendency was dangerous. He must be sharply repressed at once—as a new servant must be taught her place. *Mère* administered the necessary rebuke, aided and abetted by the daughters. The sons did not rally to their father's defense. He was soon reduced to submission, but his apology was further irritation:

"I'm kind of rattled like. I ain't feeling as chipper as usual." "Chipper" was bad enough, but "ain't" was unendurable! They rebuked him for that and he put in another irrelevant plea: "I had a kind of sick spell at the store. I had to lay down."

"Lie down!" Beatrice corrected.

"Lie down," he accepted. "But as soon as I laid down—"

"Lay down!"

"Lay down—I had chills and shootin' pains; and I—"

"It's the weather," *Mère* interrupted, impatiently. "I've had a headache all day—such a headache as never was known! It seemed as if hammers were beating upon my very brain. It was—"

"I'm not feeling at all well myself," said Consuelo.

There was almost a tournament of rivalry in describing sufferings.

Pop felt as if he had wakened a sleeping hospital. He sank back ashamed of his own outburst. He rarely spoke of the few ailments he could afford. When he did it was like one of his new clerks pulling a bolt of goods from the shelf and bringing down a silken avalanche. [Pg 60]

The clinic was interrupted by the crisp voice of Nora: "Dinner is served!"

Everybody rose and moved to the door with quiet determination. Pop alone failed to rise. *Mère* glowered at him. He pleaded: "I don't feel very good. I guess I'd better leave my stummick rest."

The children protested politely, but he refused to be moved and *Mère* decided to humor him.

"Let him alone, children. It won't hurt him to skip a meal."

They said: "Too bad, Pop!"—"You'll be all right soon," and went out and forgot him.

Pop heard them chattering briskly. It was polite talk. If slang were used it was the very newest. He gleaned that Pen and Gerald were opposing Julie's mission to San Francisco on the ground of the expense. He smiled bitterly to hear that word from them. He heard Julie's retort:

"I suppose you boys want the money yourselves! Well, I've got first havers at Pop. I saw him first!"

At about this point the conversation lost its coherence in Pop's ears. It was mingled with a curious buzzing and a dizziness that made him grip his chair lest it pitch him to the floor. Chills, in which his bones were a mere rattlebox, alternated with little rushes of prairie fire across his skin. Throes of pain wrung him. [Pg 61]

Also, he was a little afraid—he was afraid he might not be able to get to the store in the morning. And important people were coming! He had to make the first payment on the invoice of that bankrupt stock. A semiannual premium was overdue on his life insurance. The month of grace had nearly expired, and if he failed to pay the policy would lapse—now of all times! He had kept it up all these years; it must not lapse now, for he was going to be right sick. He wanted somebody to nurse him: his mother—or that long-lost girl he had married in the far past.

His shoes irked him; his vest—what they wanted called his waistcoat—was as tight as a corset. He felt that he would be safer in bed. He'd better go up to his own room and stretch out. He rose with extraordinary difficulty and negotiated a swimming floor on swaying legs.

The laughter from the dining-room irritated him. He would be better off up-stairs, where he could

not hear it. The noise in his ears was all he could stand. He attained the foot of the stairs and the flight of steps seemed as long and as misty as Jacob's Ladder. And he was no angel!

The Grouts lingered at dinner and over their black coffee and tobacco until it was time to dress for the reception at Mrs. Alvin Mitnick's, at which Waupoos society would pass itself in review. The later you got there the smarter you were, and most people put off dressing until the last possible minute in order to keep themselves from falling asleep before it was time to start. [Pg 62]

The Grouts, however, were eager to go early and get it over with. They loved to trample on Waupoos traditions. As they drifted into the hall they found it dark. They shook their heads in dismal recognition of a familiar phenomenon, and Ethelwolf groaned:

"Pop has gone up-stairs. You can always trace Pop. Wherever he has passed by the lights are out."

"He has figured out that by darkening the halls while we are at dinner he saves nearly a cent a day," *Mère* groaned.

"If Pop were dying he'd turn out a light somewhere because he wouldn't need it." And Ethelwolf laughed.

But *Mère* groaned again: "Can you wonder that I get depressed? Now, children, I ask you—"

"Poor old *Mère*! It's awful!"—"Ghastly!"—"Maddening!"

They gathered round her lovingly, echoing her moans. They started up the dark stairway, Consuelo first and turning back to say to Beatrice:

"Pop can cut a penny into more slices than—" Then she screamed and started back.

Her agitation went down the stairway through the climbing Grouts like a cold breeze. What was it? She looked close. A hand was just visible on the floor at the head of the stairs. She had stepped on it. [Pg 63]

### III

Pop had evidently reached the upper hall, when the ruling passion burning even through his fever had led him to grope about for the electric switch. His last remaining energy had been expended for an economy and he had collapsed.

They switched the light on again; they were always switching on currents that he switched off—and paid for. They found him lying in a crumpled sprawl that was awkward, even for Pop.

They stared at him in bewilderment. They would have said he was drunk; but Pop never drank—nor smoked—nor played cards. Perhaps he was dead!

This thought was like a thunderbolt. There was a great thumping in the breasts of the Grouts.

Suddenly *Mère* strode forward, dropped to her knees and put her hand on Pop's heart. It was not still—far from that. She placed her cold palm on his forehead. His brow was clammy, hot and cold and wet.

"He has a high fever!" she said.

Then, with a curious emotion, she brushed back the scant wet hair; closed her eyes and felt in her bosom a sudden ache like the turning of a rusty iron. She felt young and afraid—a young wife who finds her man wounded. [Pg 64]

She looked up and saw standing about her a number of tall ladies and gentlemen—important-looking strangers. Then she remembered that they had once been nobodies. She felt ashamed before them and she said, quickly:

"He's going to be ill. Telephone for the doctor to come right away. And you girls get his bed ready. No, you'd better put him in my room—it gets the sunlight. And you boys fill the ice-cap—and the hot-water bag and—hurry! Hurry!"

The specters vanished. She was alone with her lover. She was drying his forehead with her best lace handkerchief and murmuring:

"John honey, what's the matter! Why, honey—why didn't you tell me?"

Then a tall gentleman or two returned and one of them said:

"Better let us get him off the floor, *Mère*."

And the big sons of the frail little man picked him up and carried him into the room and pulled off his elastic congress gaiters, and his coat and vest, and his detached cuffs, and his permanently tied tie, and his ridiculous collar.

Then *Mère* put them out, and when the doctor arrived Pop was in bed in his best nightshirt.

The doctor made his way up through the little mob of terrified children. He found Mrs. Grout vastly agitated and much ashamed of herself. She did not wish to look sentimental. She had [Pg 65]

reached the Indian-summer modesty of old married couples.

The doctor went through the usual ritual of pulse-feeling and tongue-examining and question-asking, while Pop lay inert, with a little thermometer protruding from his mouth like a most inappropriate cigarette.

The doctor was uncertain yet whether it were one of the big fevers or pneumonia or just a bilious attack. Blood-tests would show; and he scraped the lobe of the ear of the unresisting, indifferent old man, and took a drop of thin pink fluid on a bit of glass. The doctor tried to reassure the panicky family, but his voice was low and important.

#### IV

The brilliant receptions and displays that *Mère* and the children had planned were abandoned without regret. All minor regrets were lost in the one big regret for the poor old, worn-out man up-stairs.

There was a dignity about Pop now. The lowliest peasant takes on majesty when he is battling for his life and his home.

There was dismay in all the hearts now—dismay at the things they had said and the thoughts and sneers; dismay at the future without this shabby but unfailing provider.

The proofs of the family photograph lay scattered about the living-room. Pop was not there. They had smiled about it before. Now it looked ominous! What would become of this family if Pop were not there?

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The house was filled with a thick sense of hush like a heavy fog; but thoughts seemed to be all the louder in the silence—jumbled thoughts of selfish alarm; filial terror; remorse; tenderness; mutual rebuke; dread of death, of the future, of the past.

The day nurse and the night nurse were in command of the house. The only events were the arrivals of the doctor, his long stops, his whispered conferences with the nurses, and the unsatisfactory, evasive answers he gave as the family ambushed him at the foot of the stairs on his way out.

Meanwhile they could not help Pop in his long wrestle. They had drained his strength and bruised his heart while he had his power, and now that he needed their help and their youth they could not lend him anything; they could not pay a single instalment on the mortgages they had incurred.

They could only stand at the door now and then and look in at him. They could not beat off one of the invisible vultures of fever and pain that hovered over him, swooped, and tore him.

They could not even get word to him—not a message of love or of repentance or of hope. His brain was in a turmoil of its own. His white lips were muttering delirious nonsense; his soul was fluttering from scene to scene and year to year, like a restless dragon-fly. He was young; he was old; he was married; he was a bachelor; he was at home; he was in his store; he was pondering campaigns of business, slicing pennies or making daring purchases; he was retrenching; he was advertising; but he was afraid always that he might sink in the bog of competition with rival merchants, with creditors, debtors, bankers, with his wife, his children, his neighbors, his ideals, his business axioms—

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"Ain't the moon pirty to-night, honey! Gee! I'm scared of that preacher! What do I say when he says, 'Do you take this woman for your'—The pay-roll? I can't meet it Saturday. How am I going to meet the pay-roll? I don't see how we can sell those goods any cheaper, but we got to get rid of 'em. My premium! My premium! I haven't paid my premium! What'll become of the children? Three cents a yard—it's robbery! Eight cents a yard—that's givin' it away! Don't misunderstand me, Sally. It's my way of making love. I can't say pirty things like some folks can, but I can think 'em. My premium—the pay-roll—so many children! Couldn't they do without that? I ain't a millionaire, you know. Every time I begin to get ahead a little seems like one of the children gets sick or in trouble—the pay-roll! Three cents a yard—the new invoice—I can't buy myself a noo soot. The doctor's bills! I ain't complaining of 'em; but I've got to pay 'em! Let me stay home—I'd rather. I've had a hard day. My premium! Don't put false notions in their heads! The pay-roll! Don't scold me, honey! I got feelings, too. You haven't said a word of love to me in years! I'll raise the money somehow. I know I'm close; but somebody's got to be—the pay-roll—so many people depending on me. So many mouths to feed—the children—all the clerks—the delivery-wagon drivers—the advertising bills—the pay-roll—the children! I ain't as young as I was—honey, don't scold me!"

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The ceaseless babbling grew intolerable. Then it ceased; and the stupor that succeeded was worse, for it meant exhaustion. The doctor grew more grave. He ceased to talk of hope. He looked ashamed. He tried to throw the blame from himself.

And one dreadful day he called the family together in the living-room. Once more they were all there—all those expensively shod feet; those well-clothed, well-fed bodies. In the chair where Pop had slumped the doctor sat upright. He was saying:

"Of course there's always hope. While there's life there's always hope. The fever is pretty well

gone, but so is the patient. The crisis left him drained. You see he has lived this American business man's life—no exercise, no vacations, no change. The worst of it is that he seems to have given up the fight. You know we doctors can only stand guard outside. The patient has to fight it out inside himself. It's a very serious sign when the sick man loses interest in the battle. Mr. Grout does not rally. His powerful mind has given up."

In spite of themselves there was a general lifting of the brows of surprise at the allusion to Pop's poor little footling brain as a powerful mind. Perhaps the doctor saw it. He said: [Pg 69]

"For it was a powerful mind! Mr. Grout has carried that store of his from a little shop to a big institution; he has kept it afloat in a dull town through hard times. He has kept his credit good and he has given his family wonderful advantages. Look where he has placed you all! He was a great man."

When the doctor had gone they began to understand that the town had looked upon Pop as a giant of industry, a prodigal of vicarious extravagance. They began to feel more keenly still how good a man he was. While they were flourishing like orchids in the sun and air, he had grubbed in the earth, sinking roots everywhere in search of moisture and of sustenance. Through him, things that were lowly and ugly and cheap were gathered and transformed and sent aloft as sap to make flowers of and color them and give them velvet petals and exquisite perfume.

They gathered silently in his room to watch him. He was white and still, hardly breathing, already the overdue chattel of the grave.

They talked of him in whispers, for he did not answer when they praised him. He did not move when they caressed him. He was very far away and drifting farther.

They spoke of how much they missed him, of how perfect a father he had been, competing with one another in regrets and in praise. Back of all this belated tribute there was a silent dismay they did not give voice to—the keen, immediately personal reasons for regret. [Pg 70]

"What will become of us?" they were thinking, each in his or her own terrified soul.

"I can't go back to school!"

"This means no college for me!"

"I'll have to stay in this awful town the rest of my life!"

"I can't go to San Francisco! The greatest honor of my life is taken from me just as I grasped it."

"I had a commission to paint the portrait of an ambassador at Washington—it would have been the making of me! It meant a lot of money, too. I came home to ask Pop to stake me to money enough to live on until it was finished."

"My business will go to smash! I'll be saddled with debts for the rest of my life. If I could have hung on a little longer I'd have reached the shore; but the bank wouldn't lend me a cent. Nobody would. I came home to ask Pop to raise me some cash. I counted on him. He never failed me before."

"What will become of us all?"

There was a stir on the pillow. The still head began to rock, the throat to swell, the lips to twitch.

*Mère* ran to the bedside and knelt by it, laying her hand on the forehead. A miracle had been wrought in the very texture of his brow. He was whispering something. She put her ear to his lips. [Pg 71]

"Yes, honey. What is it? I'm here."

She caught the faint rustling of words. It was as if his hovering soul had been eavesdropping on their thoughts. Perhaps it was merely that he had learned so well in all these years just what each of them would be thinking. For he murmured:

"I've been figuring out—how much the—funeral will cost—you know they're awful expensive—funerals are—of course I wouldn't want anything fancy—but—well—besides—and I've been thinking the children have got to have so many things—I can't afford to—be away from the store any longer. I ain't got time to die! I've had vacation enough! Where's my clothes at?"

They held him back. But not for long. He was the most irritatingly impatient of convalescents. In due course of time the family was redistributed about the face of the earth. Ethelwolf was at preparatory school; Beatrice and Consuelo were acquiring and lending luster at Wellesley and Vassar; Gerald was painting a portrait at Washington; and J. Pennock was like a returned Napoleon in Wall Street.

Pop was at his desk in the store. All his employees had gone home. He was fretfully twiddling a telegram from San Francisco:

Julie's address sublime please telegraph two hundred more love

MERE.

Pop was remembering the words of the address: "Woman has been for ages man's mere beast of [Pg 72]

burden.... Being a wife has meant being a slave."

Pop could not understand it yet. But he told everybody he met about the first three words of the telegram, and added:

"I got the smartest children that ever was and they owe it all to their mother, every bit."

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## BABY TALK

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### I

The wisest thing Prof. Stuart Litton was ever caught at was the thing he was most ashamed of. He had begun to accumulate knowledge at an age when most boys are learning to fight and to explain at home how they got their clothes torn. He wore out spectacles almost as fast as his brothers wore out copper-toed boots; but he did not begin to acquire wisdom until he was just making forty. Up to that time, if the serpent is the standard, Professor Litton was about as wise as an angleworm.

He submerged himself in books for nearly forty years; and then—in the words of Leonard Teed—then he "came up for air." This man Teed was the complete opposite of Litton. For one thing he was the liveliest young student in the university where Litton was the solemnest old professor. Teed had scientific ambitions and hated Greek and Latin, which Litton felt almost necessary to salvation. Teed regarded Litton and his Latin as the sole obstacles to his success in college; and, though Litton was too much of a gentle heart to hate anybody, if he could have hated anybody it would have been Teed. A girl was concerned in one of their earliest encounters, though Litton's share in it was as unromantic as possible.

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Teed, it seems, had violated one of the rules at Webster University. He had chatted with Miss Fannie Newman—a pretty student in the Woman's College—after nine o'clock; nay, more, he had sat on a campus bench bidding her good night for half an hour, and, with that brilliant mathematical mind of his, had selected the bench at the greatest possible distance from the smallest cluster of lampposts.

On this account he was haled before the disciplinary committee of the faculty. Litton happened to be on that committee. Teed made the best fight he could. He showed himself a Greek—in argument at least—and, like an old sophist, he tried to prove, first, that he was not on the campus with the girl and never had spooned with her; second, that if he had been there and had spooned with her it was too dark for them to be seen; and third, that he was engaged to the girl, anyway, and had a right to spoon with her.

The accusing witness was a janitor whom Teed had played various jokes on and had neglected to appease with tips. Teed submitted him to a fierce cross-examination; forced him to admit that he could not see the loving couple and had identified them solely by their voices. Teed demanded the exact words overheard; and, as often happens to the too-ardent cross-examiner, he got what he asked for and wished he had not. The janitor, blushing at what he remembered, pleaded:

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"You don't vant I should say it exectly vat I heered?"

"Exactly!" Teed answered in his iciest tone.

"Vell," the janitor mumbled, "it vas such a foolish talk as—but—vell, ven I come by I hear voman's voice says, 'Me loafas oo besser as oo loafas me!'"

Teed flushed and the faculty sat forward.

"Den I hear man's voice says, 'Oozie-voozie, mezie-vezie—' Must I got to tell it all?"

"Go on!" said Teed, grimly; and the old German mopped his brow with anguish and snorted with rage: "'Mezie-vezie loafas oozie-voozie bestest!'"

The purple-faced members of the faculty were hanging on to their own safety-valves to keep from exploding—all save Professor Litton, who felt that his hearing must be defective. Teed, fighting in the last ditch, said:

"But such language does not prove the identity of the—er—participants. You said you knew positively."

The janitor, writhing with disgust and indignation, went on:

"Ven I hear such nonsense I stop and listen if it is two people escapet from de loonatic-houze. And den young voman says, 'It doesn't loaf its Fannie-vannie one teeny-veeny mite!' And young man says, 'So sure my name is Lennie Teedie-veedie, little Fannie Newman iss de onliest gerl I ever loafed!'"

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The cross-examiner crumpled up in a chair, while the members of the faculty behaved like children bursting with giggles in church—all save Litton, who had listened with increasing amazement and now leaned forward to demand of the janitor:



"Mr. Kraus, you don't mean to say that two of our students actually disgraced this institution with conversation that would be appropriate only to a nursery?"

Mr. Kraus thundered: "De talk of dose stoovents vould disgrace de nursery! It vas so sickenink I can't forget ut. I try to, but I keep rememberink Oozie-voozie! Mezie-vezie!"

Mr. Kraus was excused in a state of hydrophobic rage and Teed withdrew in all meekness.

Litton had fallen into a stupor of despair at the futility of learning. He remained in a state of coma while the rest of the committee laughed over the familiar idiocies and debated a verdict. Two of the professors, touched by some reminiscence of romance, voted to ignore the incident as a trivial commonplace of youth. Two others, though full of sympathy for Teed—Miss Fannie was very pretty—voted for his suspension as a necessary example, lest the campus be overrun by duets in lovers' Latin. The result was a tie and Litton was roused from his trance to cast the deciding vote.

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Now Professor Litton had read a vast amount about love. The classics are full of its every imaginable version or perversion; but Litton had seen it expressed only in the polished phrases of Anacreon, Bion, Propertius, and the others. He had not guessed that, however these men polished their verses, they doubtless addressed their sweethearts with all the imbecility of sincerity.

Litton's own experience gave him little help. In his late youth he had thought himself in love twice and had expressed his fiery emotions in a Latin epistle, an elegy, and a number of very correct Alcaics. They pleased his teacher, but frightened the spectacles off one bookish young woman, and drove the other to the arms of a prescription clerk, who knew no Latin except what was on his drug bottles.

Litton had thenceforward been wedded to knowledge. He had read nearly everything ancient, but he must have forgotten the sentence of Publilius Syrus: "Even a god could hardly love and be wise." He felt no mercy in his soft heart for the soft-headed Teed. He was a worshiper of language for its own sake and cast a vote accordingly.

"I do not question the propriety of the conduct of these young people," he said. "Mr. Teed claims to be engaged to the estimable young woman."

"Ah!" said Professor Mackail, delightedly.

Teed was the brightest pupil in his laboratory and he had voted for acquittal. His joy vanished as Professor Litton went on:

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"But"—he spoke the word with emphasis—"but waiving all questions of propriety, I do feel that we should administer a stinging rebuke to the use of such appallingly infantile language by one of our students. Surely a man's culture should show itself, above all, in the addresses he pays to the young lady of his choice. What vanity to build and conduct a great institution of learning, such as this aims to be, and then permit one of its pupils to express his regard for a student from the Annex in such language as even Mr. Kraus was reluctant to quote: 'Mezie-wezie loves oozie-woozie bestest!'—if I remember rightly. Really, gentlemen, if this is permitted we might as well change the university to a kindergarten. For his own sake I vote that Mr. Teed be given six months of meditation at home; and I trust that the faculty of the Woman's College will have a similar regard for its ideals and the welfare of the misguided young woman."

Professor Mackail protested furiously, but his advocacy only embittered Litton—for Mackail was the leader of the faction that had tried for years to place Webster University in line with others by removing Latin and Greek from the position of required studies.

Mackail and his crew pretended that French and German, or science, were appropriate substitutes for the classic languages in the case of those whose tastes were not scholastic; but to Litton it was a religion that no man should be allowed to spend four years in college without at least rubbing up against Homer, Æschylos, Vergil, and Horace.

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As Litton put it: "No man has a right to an Alma Mater who doesn't know what the words mean; and nobody has a right to graduate without knowing at least enough Latin to read his own diploma."

This old war had been fought with all the bitterness and professional jealousies of scholarship, which rival those of religion and exceed those of the stage. For yet a while Litton and his followers had vanquished opposition. He little dreamed what he was preparing for himself in punishing Teed.

Teed accepted his banishment with poor grace, but a magnificent determination to come back and graduate. The effect of his punishment was shown when, after six months of rustic meditation, he set out for the university, leaving behind him his Fannie, who had been too timid to return to the scene of her discomfiture. Teed's good-by words ran something like this:

"Bess its ickle heartums! Don't se care! Soonie as Teedle-weedle gets graduated he'll get fine job and marry his Fansy-pansy very first sing." Then he kissed her "Goo'byjums"—and went back with the face of a Regulus returning to be tortured by the enemy.

Teed had a splendid mind for everything material and modern, but he could not and would not master the languages he called dead. His mistranslations of the classics were themselves classics. They sent the other students into uproars; but Litton saw nothing funny in them. When he received Teed's examination papers he marked them with a pitiless exactitude.

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Teed reached the end of his junior year with a heap of conditions in the classics. Litton insisted that he should not be allowed to graduate until he cleaned them up. This meant that Teed must tutor all through his last vacation or carry double work throughout his senior year—when he expected to play some patriotic or Alma-Matritotic football.

Teed had no intention of enduring either of these inconveniences; he trusted to fate to inspire him somehow with some scheme for attaining his diploma without delay. His future job depended on his diploma—and his girl depended on his job.

He did not intend to be kept from either by any ancient authors. He had not the faintest idea how he was going to bridge that chasm—but, as he wrote his Fansy-pansy, "Love will find the way."

While Teed was taking thought for the beginning of his life-work Litton was completing his—or at least he thought he was. With the splendid devotion of the scholar he had selected for his contribution to human welfare the best possible edition of the work least likely to be read by anybody. A firm of publishers had kindly consented to print it—at Litton's expense.

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Litton would donate a copy to his own university; two or three college libraries would purchase copies out of respect to the learned professor; and Litton would give away a few more. The rest would stand in an undisturbed stack of increasing dust, there to remain unread as long perhaps as the myriads of Babylonian classics that Assurbani-pal had copied in brick volumes for his great library at Nineveh.

Professor Litton had chosen for his life-work a recension of the ponderous epic in forty-eight books that old Nonnus wrote in Egypt, the labyrinthine Dionysiaka describing the voyage of Bacchus to India and back.

A pretty theme for an old water-drinker who had never tasted wine! But Litton toiled over the Greek text, added copious notes as to minute variants, appallingly learned prolegomena, an index, and finally an English version in prose. He had begun to translate it into hexameters, but he feared that he would never live to finish it. It was hard enough for a man like Litton to express at all the florid spirit of an author whose theme was "the voluptuous phalanxes" of Bacchus' army—"the heroic race of such unusual warriors; the shaggy satyrs; the breed of centaurs; the tribes of Sileni, whose legs bristle with hair; and the battalions of Bassarids."

He had kept at it all these years, however, and it was ready now for the eyes of a world that would never see it. He had watched it through the compositors' hands, keeping a tireless eye on the infinite nuisance of Greek accents. He had read the galley proofs, the page proofs, and now at last the black-bordered foundry proofs. He scorned to write the bastard "O. K." of approval and wrote, instead, a stately "Imprimatur." He placed the proofs in their envelope and sealed it with lips that trembled like a priest's when giving an illuminated Gospel a ritual kiss.

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The hour was late when Professor Litton finished. He stamped the brown-paper envelope and went down the steps of the boarding-house that had been for years his nearest approach to a home. He left the precious envelope on the hall-tree, whence it would be taken to the post-office for the first mail.

Feeling the need of a breath of air, he stepped out on the porch. It was a spring midnight and the college roofs were wonderful under the quivering moon—or *tremulo sub lumine*, as he remembered it. And he remembered how Quintus Smyrnæus had said that the Amazon queen walked among her outshone handmaidens, "as when, on the wide heavens, among the stars, the divine Selene moves pre-eminent among them all."

He thought of everything in terms of the past; yet, when he heard, mingled with the vague murmur of the night, a distant song of befuddled collegians, among whose voices Teed's soared pre-eminent above the key, he was not pleasantly reminded of the tipsy army of Dionysus. He was revolted and, returning to his solitude, closed an indignant door on the disgrace.

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Poor old Litton! His learning had so frail a connection with the life about him! Steeped in the classics and acquainted with the minutest details of their texts, he never caught their spirit; never seemed to realize that they are classics because their authors were so close to life and imbued them with such vitality that time has not yet rendered them obsolete.

He had hardly suspected the mischief that is in them. A more innocent man could hardly be imagined or one more versed in the lore of evil. Persons who believe that what is called immoral literature has a debasing effect must overlook such men as Litton. He dwelt among those Greek and Roman authors who excelled in exploiting the basest emotions and made poems out of putridity.

He read in the original those terrifying pages that nobody has ever dared to put into English without paraphrase—the polished infamies of Martial; the exquisite atrocities of Theocritus and Catullus. Yet these books left him as unsullied as water leaves a duck's back. They infected him no more than a medical work gives the doctor that studies it the diseases it describes. The appallingly learned Professor Litton was a babe in arms compared with many of his pupils, who read little—or with the janitor, who read nothing at all.



Across Litton's field of view passed a figure that caught his eye. Absently he followed it as it enlarged with approach. He realized that it was Prof. Martha Binley, Ph.D., who taught Greek over there in the Annex.

"How well she is looking!" he mused.

The very thought startled him, as if some one had spoken unexpectedly. He wondered that he had noticed her appearance. After the window-sill blotted her from view he still wondered, dallying comfortably with the reverie.

#### IV

There was a knock at his door and in response to his call the door opened—and she stood there.

"May I come in?" she said.

"Certainly."

Before he knew it some impulse of gallantry hoisted him to his feet. He lifted a bundle of archeological reviews from a chair close to his desk and waited until she sat down. The chair was nearer his than he realized, and as Professor Binley dropped into it she was so close that Professor Litton pushed his spectacles up to his forehead. [Pg 88]

It was the first time she had seen his eyes except through glasses darkly. She noted their color instantly, woman-like. They were not dull, either, as she had imagined. A cloying fragrance saluted his nostrils.

"What are the flowers you are wearing, may I ask?" he said. He hardly knew a harebell from a peony.

"These are hyacinths," she said. "One of the girls gave them to me. I just pinned them on."

"Ah, hyacinths!" he murmured. "Ah yes; I've read so much about them. So these are hyacinths! Such a pretty story the Greeks had. You remember it, no doubt?"

She said she did; but, schoolmaster that he was, he went right on:

"Apollo loved young Hyacinthus—or Huakinthos, as the Greeks called it—and was teaching him to throw the discus, when a jealous breeze blew the discus aside. It struck the boy in the forehead. He fell dead, and from his blood this flower sprang. The petals, they said, were marked with the letters Ai, Ai!—Alas! Alas! And the poet Moschus, you remember, in his 'Lament for Bion,' says: [Pg 89]

"Nun huakinthe lalei ta sa grammata kai pleon aiai!

"Or, as I once Englished it—let me see, I put it into hexameters—it was a long while ago. Ah, I have it!"

And with the orotund notes a poet assumes when reciting his own words, he intoned:

"Now, little hyacinth, babble thy syllables—louder yet—Aiai! Whimper with all of thy petals; a beautiful singer has perished."

Professor Binley stared at him in amazement and cried: "Charming! Beautiful! Your own translation, you say?"

And he, somewhat shaken by her enthusiasm, waved it aside.

"A little exercise of my Freshman year. But to get back to our—hyacinths: Theocritus, you remember, speaks of the 'lettered hyacinth.' May I see whether we can find the words there?"

He bent forward to take and she bent forward to give the flowers. Her hair brushed his forehead with a peculiar influence; and when their fingers touched he noted how soft and warm her hand was. He flushed strangely. She was flushed a little, too, possibly from embarrassment—possibly from the warmth of the day, with its insinuation of spring.

He pulled his spectacles over his eyes in a comfortable discomfiture and peered at the flowers closely. And she peered, too, breathing foolishly fast. When he could not find the living letters he shook his head and felt again the soft touch of her hair. [Pg 90]

"I can't find the words—can you? Your eyes are brighter than mine."

She bent closer and both their hands held the flowers. He looked down into her hair. It struck him that it was a remarkably beautiful idea—a woman's hair—especially hers, streaked as it was with white—silken silver. When she shook her head a snowy thread tickled his nose amusingly.

"I can't find anything like it," she confessed.

Then he said: "I've just remembered. Theocritus calls the hyacinth black—*melan*—and so does Vergil. These cannot be hyacinths at all."

He was bitterly disappointed. It would have been delightful to meet the flower in the flesh that he knew so well in literature. Doctor Martha answered with quiet strength:

"These are hyacinths."

"But the Greeks—"

"Didn't know everything," she said; "or perhaps they referred to another flower. But then we have dark-purple hyacinths."

"Ah!" he said. "Sappho speaks of the hyacinth as purple—*porphuron*."

Thus the modern world was reconciled with the Greek and he felt easier; but there was a gentle forcefulness about her that surprised him. He wondered whether she would not be interested in hearing about his edition of Nonnus. He assumed that she would be, being evidently intelligent. So he told her. He told her and told her, and she listened with almost devout interest. He was still telling her when the students in other classes stampeded to lunch with a many-hoofed clatter. When they straggled back from lunch he was still telling her.

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It was not until he was interrupted by an afternoon class of his own that he realized how long he had talked. He apologized to Professor Binley; but she said she was honored beyond words. She had come to ask him a technical question in prosody, as from one professor to another; but she had forgotten it altogether—at least she put it off to another visit. She hastened away in a flutter, feeling slightly as if she had been to a tryst.

Litton went without his lunch that day, but he was browsing on memories of his visitor. He had not talked so long to a woman since he could remember. This was the only woman who had let him talk uninterruptedly about himself—a very superior woman, everybody said.

When he went to his room that night he was still thinking of hyacinths and of her who had brought them to his eyes.

He knocked from his desk a book. It fell open at a page. As he picked it up he noted that it was a copy of the anonymous old spring rhapsody, the *Pervigilium Veneris*, with its ceaselessly reiterated refrain, "To-morrow he shall love who never loved before." As he fell asleep it was running through his head like a popular tune: *Cras amet qui nunquam amavit; quique amavit cras amet*.

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It struck him as an omen; but it did not terrify him.

## V

Professor Martha called again to ask her question in verse technic. The answer led to further talk and the consultation of books. She was a trifle nearsighted and too proud to wear glasses, so she had to bend close to the page; and her hair tickled his nose again foolishly.

Conference bred conference, and one day she asked him whether she would dare ask him to call. He rewarded her bravery by calling. She lived in a dormitory, with a parlor for the reception of guests. Male students were allowed to call on only two evenings a week. Litton did not call on those evenings; yet the fact that he called at all swept through the town like a silent thunderbolt. The students were mysteriously apprised of the fact that old Professor Litton and Prof. Martha Binley were sitting up and taking notice. To the youngsters it looked like a flirtation in an old folks' home.

Litton's very digestion was affected; his brain was in a whirl. He was the prey of the most childish alarms; gusts of petulant emotion swept through him if Martha were late when he called; he was mad with jealousy if she mentioned another professor.

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She was growing more careful of her appearance. A new youth had come to her. She took fifteen years off her looks by simply fluffing her hair out of its professorial constriction. Professor Mackail noticed it and mentioned to Professor Litton that Professor Binley was looking ever so much better.

"She's not half homely for such an old maid!" he said.

Professor Litton felt murder in his heart. He wanted to slay the reprobate twice—once for daring to observe Martha's beauty and once for his parsimony of praise.

That evening when he called on Martha he was tortured with a sullen mood. She finally coaxed from him the astounding admission that he suspected her of flirting with Mackail. She was too new in love to recognize the ultimate compliment of his distress. She was horrified by his distrust, and so hurt that she broke forth in a storm of tears and denunciation. Their precious evening ended in a priceless quarrel of amazing violence. He stamped down the outer steps as she stamped up the inner.

For three days they did not meet and the university wore almost visible mourning for its pets. Poor Litton had not known that the human heart could suffer such agony. He was fairly burned alive with loneliness and resentment—like another Hercules blistering in the shirt of Nessus. And Martha was suffering likewise as Jason's second wife was consumed in the terrible poisoned robe that Medea sent her.

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One evening a hollow-eyed Litton crept up the dormitory steps and asked the overjoyed maid for Professor Binley. When she appeared he caught her in his arms as if she were a spar and he a drowning sailor. They made up like young lovers and swore oaths that they would never quarrel

again—oaths which, fortunately for the variety of their future existence, they found capable of infinite breaking and mending.

Each denied that the other could possibly love each. He decried himself as a stupid, ugly old foggy; and she cried him up as the wisest and most beautiful and best of men. Since best sounded rather weak, she called him the bestest; and he did not charge the impossible word against her as he had against Teed. He did not remember that Teed had ever used such language. Nobody could ever have used such language, because nobody was ever like her!

And when she said that he could not possibly love a homely, scrawny old maid like her, he delivered a eulogy that would have struck Aphrodite, rising milkily from the sea, as a slight exaggeration. And as for old maid, he cried in a curious blending of puerility and scholasticism:

"Old maid, do you say? And has my little Margy-wargles forgotten what Sappho said of an old maid? We'd have lost it if some old scholiast on the stupid old sophist Hermogenes hadn't happened to quote it to explain the word glukumalon—an apple grafted on a quince. Sappho said this old maid was like—let me see!—'like the sweet apple that blushes on the top of the bough—on the tip of the topmost; and the apple-gatherers forgot it—no, they did not forget it; they just could not get it!' And that's you, Moggles mine! You're an old maid because you've been out of reach of everybody. I can't climb to you; so you're going to drop into my arms—aren't you?"

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She said she supposed she was. And she did.

Triumphantly he said, "Hadn't we better announce our engagement?"

This threw her into a spasm of fear. "Oh, not yet! Not yet! I'm afraid to let the students all know it. A little later—on Commencement Day will be time enough."

He bowed to her decision—not for the last time.

For a time Litton had taken pleasure in employing his learning in the service of Martha's beauty. He called her classic names—*Meæ Deliciæ*, or *Glukutate*, or *Melema*. A poem that he had always thought the last word in silliness became a modest expression of his own emotions—the poem in which Catallus begs Lesbia, "Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred, then a thousand more, then a second hundred; then, when we have made up thousands galore, we shall mix them up so that we shall not know—nor any enemy be able to cast a spell because he knows—how many kisses there are."

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His scholarship began to weary her, however, and it began to seem an affectation to him; so that he was soon mangling the English language in speech and in the frequent notes he found it necessary to send his idol on infinitely unimportant matters that could not wait from after lunch to after dinner.

She coined phrases for him, too, and his heart rejoiced when she achieved the epoch-making revision of Stuart into Stookie-tookie! He had thought that Toodie was wonderful, but it was a mere stepping-stone to Stookie-tookie.

Her babble ran through his head like music, and it softened his heart, so that almost nothing could bring him to earth except the recitations of Teed, who crashed through the classics like a bull in a china-shop or, as Litton's Greeks put it, like an ass among beehives.

During those black days when Litton had quarreled with Martha he had fiercely reminded Teed that only a month remained before his final examinations, and warned him that he would hold him strictly to account. No classics, no diploma!

Teed had sulked and moped while Litton sulked and moped; but when Litton was reconciled to Martha the sun seemed to come out on Teed's clouded world, too. He took a sudden extra interest in his electrical studies and obtained permission to work in the laboratory overtime. He obtained permission even to visit the big city for certain apparatus. And he wrote the despondent, distant Fannie Newman that there would "shortly be something doing in the classics."

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## VI

One afternoon Professor Litton, having dismissed his class—in which he was obliged to rebuke Teed more severely than usual—fell to remembering his last communion with Martha, the things he had said—and heard! He wondered, as a philologist, at the strange prevalence of the "oo" sound in his love-making. It was plainly an onomatopœic word representing the soul's delight. Oo! was what Ah! is to the soul in exaltation and Oh! to the soul in surprise. If the hyacinths babbled *Ai, Ai!* the roses must murmur Oo! Oo!

The more he thought it over, the more nonsense it became, as all words turn to drivel on repetition; but chiefly he was amazed that even love could have wrought this change in him. In his distress he happened to think of Dean Swift. Had not that fierce satirist created a dialect of his own for his everlastingly mysterious love affairs?

Eager for the comfort of fellowship in disgrace he hurried to the library and sought out the works of the Dean of St. Patrick's. And in the "Journal to Stella" he found what he sought—and more. Expressions of the most appalling coarseness alternated with the most insipid tendernesses.

The old dean had a code of abbreviations: M.D. for "My dear," Ppt. for "Poppet," Pdfr. for "Poor

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dear foolish rogue," Oo or zoo or loo stood for "you," Deeleast for "Dearest," and Rettle for "Letter," and Dallars for "Girl," Vely for "Very," and Hele and Lele for "Here and there." Litton copied out for his own comfort and Martha's this passage.

Do you know what? When I am writing in my own language I make up my mouth just as if I was speaking it: "Zoo must cly Lele and Hele, and Hele aden. Must loo mimitate Pdfr., pay? Iss, and so la shall! And so leles fol ee rettle. Dood mollow."

And Dean Swift had written this while he was in London two hundred years before, a great man among great men. With such authority back of him Litton returned to his empty class-room feeling as proud as Gulliver in Lilliput. A little later he was Gulliver in Brobdingnag.

Alone at his desk, with none of his students in the seats before him, he took from his pocket—his left pocket—a photograph of Prof. Martha Binley. It had been taken one day on a picnic far from the spying eyes of pupils. Her hair was all wind-blown, her eyes frowned gleamingly into the sun, and her mouth was curled with laughter.

He sat there alone—the learned professor—and talked to this snapshot in a dialogue he would have recently accepted as a perfect examination paper for matriculation in an insane-asylum.

"Well, Margy-wargy, zoo and Stookie-tookie is dust like old Dean Swiffikins, isn't we?"

There was a rap on the door and the knob turned as he shot the photograph into his pocket and pretended to be reading a volume of Bacchylides—upside down. The intruder was Teed. Litton was too much startled and too throbbing with guilt to express his indignation. He stammered:

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"We-well, Teed?" He almost called him teed-leums, his tongue had so caught the rhythm of love.

Teed came forward with an ominous self-confidence bordering on insolence. There was a glow in his eye that made his former tyrant quail.

"Professor, I'd like a word with you about those conditions. I wish you'd let me off on 'em."

"Let you off, T-Teed?"

"Yes, sir. I can't get ready for the exams. I've boned until my skull's cracked and it lets the blamed stuff run out faster than I can cram it in. The minute I leave college I expect to forget everything I've learned here, anyway; so I'd be ever so much obliged if you'd just pass me along."

"I don't think I quite comprehend," said Litton, who was beginning to regain his pedagogical dignity.

"All you've gotta do," said Teed, "is to put a high enough mark on my papers. You gimme a special examination and I'll make the best stab I can at answering the questions; then you just shut one eye and mark it just over the failure line. That'll save you a lot o' time and fix me hunky-dory."

Litton was glaring at him, hearing the uncouth "gimme" and "gotta," and wondering that a man could spend four years in college and scrape off so little paint. Then he began to realize the meaning of Teed's proposal. His own honor was in traffic. He groaned in suffocation:

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"Do you dare to ask me to put false marks on examination-papers, sir?"

"Aw, Professor, what's the dif? You couldn't grind Latin and Greek into me with a steel-rolling machine. Gimme a chance! There's a little girl waiting for me outside and a big job. I can't get one without the other—and I don't get either unless you folks slip me the sheepskin."

"Impossible, sir! Astounding! Insulting! Impossible!"

"Have a heart, can't you?"

"Leave the room, sir, at once!"

"All right!" Teed sighed, and turned away. At the door he paused to murmur, "All right for you, Stookie-tookie!"

Litton's spectacles almost exploded from his nose.

"What's that?" he shrieked.

Teed turned and came back, with an intolerable smirk, straight to the desk. He leaned on it with odious familiarity and grinned.

"Say, Prof, did you ever hear of the dictagraph?"

"No! And I don't care to now."

"You ought to read some of the modern languages, Prof! Dictagraph comes from two perfectly good Latin words: dictum and graft—well, you'll know 'em. But the Greeks weren't wise to this little device. I got part of it here."

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He took from his pocket the earpiece of the familiar engine of latter-day detective romance. He explained it to the horribly fascinated Litton, whose hair stood on end and whose voice stuck in his throat in the best Vergilian manner. Before he quite understood its black magic Litton

suspected the infernal purpose it had been put to. His wrath had melted to a sickening fear when Teed reached the conclusion of his uninterrupted discourse:

"The other night I was calling on a pair of girls at the dormitory where your—where Professor Binley lives. They pointed out the sofa near the fireplace where you and the professoress sit and hold hands and make googoo eyes."

There was that awful "oo" sound again! Litton was in an icy perspiration; but he was even more afraid for his beloved, precious sweetheart than for himself—and that was being about as much afraid as there is. Teed went on relentlessly, gloating like a satyric mask:

"Well, I had an idea, and the girls fell for it with a yip of joy. The next evening I called I carried a wire from my room across to that dormitory and nobody paid any attention while I brought it through a window and under the carpet to the back of the sofa. And there it waited, laying for you. And over at my digs I had it attached to a phonograph by a little invention of my own.

"Gosh! It was wonderful! It even repeated the creak of those old, rusty springs while you waited for her. And when she came—well, anyway, I got every word you said, engraved in wax, like one of those old poets of yours used to write on." [Pg 102]

Litton was afraid to ask evidence in verification. Teed supplied the unspoken demand:

"For instance, the first thing she says to you is: 'Oh, there you are, my little lover! I thought you'd never come!' And you says, 'Did it miss its stupid old Stookie?' And she says: 'Hideously! Sit down, honey heart.' And splung went the spring—and splung again! Then she says: 'Did it have a mis'ble day in hateful old class-room? Put its boo'ful head on Margy-wargy's shojer.' Then you says—"

"Stop!" Litton cried, raising the only missile he could find, an inkstand. "Who knows of this infamy besides you?"

"Nobody yet—on my word of honor."

"Honor!" sneered Litton, so savagely that Teed's shameless leer vanished in a glare of anger.

"Nobody yet! The girls are dying to hear and some of the fellows knew what I was up to; but I was thinking that I'd tell 'em that the blamed thing didn't work, provided—provided—"

"Provided?" Litton wailed, miserably.

"Provided you could see your way clear to being a little careless with your marks on my exam-papers."

Litton sat with his head whirling and roaring like a coffee-grinder. A multitude of considerations ran through and were crushed into powder—his honor; her honor; the standards of the university; the standards of a lover; the unimportance of Teed; the all-importance of Martha; the secret disloyalty to the faculty; the open disloyalty to his best-beloved. He heard Teed's voice as from far off: [Pg 103]

"Of course, if you can't see your way to sparing my sweetheart's feelings I don't see why I'm expected to spare yours—or to lie to the fellows and girls who are perishing to hear how two professors talk when they're in love."

Another long pause. Then the artful Teed moved to the door and turned the knob. Litton could not speak; but he threw a look that was like a grappling-iron and Teed came back.

"How do I know," Litton moaned, "how do I know that you will keep your word?"

"How do I know that you'll keep yours?" Teed replied, with the insolence of a conqueror.

"Sir!" Litton flared, but weakly, like a sick candle.

"Well," Teed drawled, "I'll bring you the cylinders. I'll have to trust you, as one gentleman to another."

"Gentleman!" Litton snarled in hydrophobic frenzy.

"Well, as one lover to another, then," Teed laughed. "Do I get my diploma?"

Litton's head was so heavy he could not nod it.

"It's my diploma in exchange for your records. Come on, Professor—be a sport! And take it from me, it's no fun having the words you whisper in a girl's ear in the dark shouted out loud in the open court. And mine were repeated in a Dutch dialect! I got yours just as they came from your lips—and hers." [Pg 104]

That ended it. Litton surrendered, passed himself under the yoke; pledged himself to the loathsome compact, and Teed went to fetch the price of his degree of Bachelor of Arts.

Litton hung dejected beyond feeling for a long while. His heart was whimpering *Ai, Ai!* He felt himself crushed under a hundred different crimes. He felt that he could never look up again. Then he heard a soft tap at the door. He could not raise his eyes or his voice. He heard the door open and supposed it was Teed bringing him the wages of his shame; but he heard another voice—an unimaginably beautiful, tragically tender voice—crooning:



"Oo-oo! Stookie-tookie!"

He looked up. How radiant she was! He could only sigh. She came across to him as gracefully and lightly as Iris running down a rainbow. She was murmuring:

"I just had to slip over and tell you something."

"Well, Martha!" he sighed.

She stopped short, as if he had struck her.

"Martha? What's the matter? You aren't mad at me, are you, Stookie?"

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"How could I be angry with you, Marg—er—Martha?"

"Then why don't you call me Margy-wargleums?"

He stared at her. Her whimsical smile, trembling to a piteously pretty hint of terror, overwhelmed him. He hesitated, then shoved back his chair and, rising, caught her to him so tightly that she gasped out, "Oo!" There it was again! He laughed like an overgrown cub as he cried:

"Why don't I call you Margy-wargleums? Well, what a darned fool I'd be not to! Margy-wargleums!"

To such ruin does love—the blind, the lawless, the illiterate child—bring the noblest intelligences and the loftiest principles.

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## THE MOUTH OF THE GIFT HORSE

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### I

The town of Wakefield was—is—suffering from growing pains—from ingrowing pains, according to its rival, Gatesville.

Wakefield has long been guilty of trying to add a cubit to its stature by taking thought. Established, like thousands of other pools left in the prairies by that tidal wave of humanity sweeping westward in the middle of the last century, it passed its tenth thousand with a rush; then something happened.

For decades the decennial census dismally tolled the same knell of fifteen thousand in round numbers. The annual censuses but echoed the reverberations. A few more cases of measles one year, and the population lapsed a little below the mark; an easy winter, and it slipped a little above. No mandragora of bad times or bad health ever quite brought it so low as fourteen thousand. No fever of prosperity ever sent the temperature quite so high as sixteen thousand.

The iteration got on people's nerves till a commercial association was formed under the name of the Wide-a-Wakefield Club, with a motto of "Boom or Bust." Many individuals accomplished the latter, but the town still failed of the former. The chief activity of the club was in the line of decoying manufacturers over into Macedonia by various bribes.

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Its first capture was a cutlery company in another city. Though apparently prosperous, it had fallen foul of the times, and its president adroitly allowed the Wide-a-Wakefield Club to learn that, if a building of sufficient size were offered rent free for a term of years, the cutlery company might be induced to move to Wakefield and conduct its business there, employing at least a hundred laborers, year in, year out.

There was not in all Wakefield a citizen too dull to see the individual and collective advantage of this hundred increase. It meant money in the pocket of every doctor, lawyer, merchant, clothier, boarding-house-keeper, saloon-keeper, soda-water-vender—whom not?

Every establishment in town would profit, from the sanatorium to the "pantatorium"—as the institution for the replenishment of trousers was elegantly styled.

Commercial fervor rose to such heights in Wakefield that in no time at all enough money was subscribed to build a convenient factory and to purchase as many of the shares of cutlery stock as the amiable president cared to print. In due season the manufacture of tableware and penknives began, and the pride of the town was set aglow by the trade-mark stamped on every article issued from the cutlery factory. It was an ingenious emblem—a glorious Cupid in a sash marked "Wakefield," stabbing a miserable Cupid in a sash marked "Sheffield."

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It was Sheffield that survived. In fact, the stupid English city probably never heard of the Wakefield Cutlery Company. Nor did Wakefield hear of it long. For the emery dust soon ceased to glisten in the air and the steel died of a distemper.

It was a very real shock to Wakefield, and many a boy that had been meant for college went into his father's store instead, and many a girl who had planned to go East to be polished stayed at home and polished her mother's plates and pans, because the family funds had been invested in

the steel-engravings of the cutlery stock certificates. They were very handsome engravings.

Hope languished in Wakefield until a company from Kenosha consented to transport its entire industry thither if it could receive a building rent free. It was proffered, and it accepted, the cutlery works. For a season the neighboring streets were acrid with the aroma of the passionate pickles that were bottled there. And then its briny deeps ceased to swim with knobby condiments. A tin-foil company abode awhile, and yet again a tamale-canning corporation, which in its turn sailed on to the Sargasso Sea of missing industries.

Other factory buildings in Wakefield fared likewise. They were but lodging-houses for transient failures. The population swung with the tide, but always at anchor. The lift which the census received from an artificial-flower company, employing seventy-five hands, was canceled by the demise of a more redolent pork-packing concern of equal pay-roll. People missed it when the wind blew from the west.

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But Wakefield hoped on. One day the executive committee of the Wide-a-Wakefield Club, having nothing else to do, met in executive session. There were various propositions to consider. All of them were written on letter-heads of the highest school of commercial art, and all of them promised to endow Wakefield with some epoch-making advantage, provided merely that Wakefield furnish a building rent free, tax free, water free, and subscribe to a certain amount of stock.

The club regarded these glittering baits with that cold and clammy gaze with which an aged trout of many-scarred gills peruses some newfangled spoon.

But if these letters were tabled with suspicion because they offered too much for too little, what hospitality could be expected for a letter which offered still more for still less? The chairman of the committee was Ansel K. Pettibone, whose sign-board announced him as a "practical house-painter and paper-hanger." He read this letter, head-lines and all:

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**MARK A. SHELBY      JOHN R. SHELBY      LUKE B.  
SHELBY**

## **SHELBY PARADISE POWDER COMPANY**

**SPRINGFIELD, MASS., U. S. A.**

**MAKES WASHDAY WELCOME.      SIDESTEP SUBSTITUTES.**

WIDE-A-WAKEFIELD CLUB, Wakefield:

DEAR SIRS,—The undersigned was born in your city, and left same about twenty years ago to seek his fortune. I have finally found it after many ups and downs. Us three brothers have jointly perfected and patented the famous Paradise Powder. It is generally conceded to be the grandest thing of its kind ever put on the market, and, in the words of the motto, "Makes Washday Welcome." Ladies who have used it agree that our statement is not excessive when we say, "Once tried, you will use no other."

It is selling at such a rate in the East that I have a personal profit of two thousand dollars a week. We intend to push it in the West, and we were talking of where would be the best place to locate a branch factory at. My brothers mentioned Chicago, St. Louis, Omaha, Denver, and such places, but I said, "I vote for Wakefield." My brothers said I was cracked. I says maybe I am, but I'm going back to my old home town and spend the rest of my life there and my surplus money, too. I want to beautify Wakefield, and as near as I can remember there is room for improvement. It may not be good business, but it is what I want to do. And also what I want to know is, can I rely on the co-operation of the Wide-a-Wakefield Club in doing its share to build up the old town into a genuine metropolis? Also, what would be the probable cost of a desirable site for the factory?

Hoping to receive a favorable reply from you at your earliest convenience,

Yours truly,

LUKE B. SHELBY.

The chairman's grin had grown wider as he read and read. When he had finished the letter he tossed it along the line. Every member read it and shook with equal laughter.

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"I wonder what kind of green goods he sells?" said Joel Spate, the owner of the Bon-Ton Grocery.

"My father used to say to me," said Forshay, of the One-Price Emporium, "whatever else you do, Jake, always suspicion the fellow that offers you something for nothing. There's a nigger in the woodpile some'eres."

"That's so," said Soyer, the swell tailor, who was strong on second thought.

"He says he's goin' to set up a factory here, but he don't ask for rent free, tax free, light free—nothin' free," said the practical house-painter.

"What's the name again?" said Spate.

"Shelby—Luke B. Shelby," answered Pettibone. "Says he used to live here twenty years ago. Ever hear of him? I never did."

Spate's voice came from an ambush of spectacles and whiskers: "I've lived here all m' life—I'm sixty-three next month. I don't remember any such man or boy."

"Me, neither," echoed Soyer, "and I'm here going on thirty-five year."

The heads shook along the line as if a wind had passed over a row of wheat.

"It's some new dodge for sellin' stock," suspicioned One-Price Forshay, who had a large collection of cutlery certificates. [Pg 112]

"More likely it's just a scheme to get us talking about his Paradise Powder. Seems to me I've had some of their circulars," said Bon-Ton Spate.

Pettibone, the practical chairman, silenced the gossip with a brisk, "What is the pleasure of the meeting as regards answering it?"

"I move we lay it on the table," said Eberhart of the Furniture Palace.

"I move we lay it under the table," said Forshay, who had a keen sense of humor.

"Order, gentlemen! Order," rapped Pettibone, as the room rocked with the laughter in which Forshay led.

When sobriety was restored it was moved, seconded, and passed that the secretary be instructed to send Shelby a copy of the boom number of the Wakefield *Daily Eagle*.

And in due time the homesick Ulysses, waiting a welcome from Ithaca, received this answer to his letter:

LUKE B. SHELBY, Springfield, Mass.

SIR,—Yours of sixteenth inst. rec'd and contents noted. In reply to same, beg to state are sending last special number *Daily Eagle*, giving full information about city and sites.

Yours truly,

JOEL SPATE, *Secy. Exec. Comm.*

Shelby winced. The hand he had held out with pearls of price had been brushed aside. His brothers laughed.

"We said you were cracked. They don't want your old money or your society. Go somewheres where they do." [Pg 113]

But Luke B. Shelby had won his success by refusing to be denied, and he had set his heart on refurbishing his old home town. The instinct of place is stronger than any other instinct in some animals, and Shelby was homesick for Wakefield—not for anybody, any house, or any street in particular there, but just for Wakefield.

Without further ado he packed his things and went.

## II

There was no brass band to meet him. At the hotel the clerk read his name without emotion. When he required the best two rooms in the hotel, and a bath at that, the clerk looked suspicious:

"Any baggage?"

"Three trunks and a grip."

"What line do you carry? Will you use the sample-room?"

"Don't carry any line. Don't want any sample-room."

He walked out to see the town. It had so much the same look that it seemed to have been embalmed. Here were the old stores, the old signs, apparently the same fly-specked wares in the windows.

He read Doctor Barnby's rusty shingle. Wasn't that the same swaybacked horse dozing at the hitching-post? [Pg 114]

Here was the rough hill road where he used to coast as a child. There stood Mrs. Hooker on the lawn with a hose, sprinkling the street, the trees, the grass, the oleander in its tub and the moon-

flower on the porch. He seemed to have left her twenty years ago in that attitude with the same arch of water springing from the nozzle.

He paused before the same gap-toothed street-crossing of yore, and he started across it as across the stepping-stones of a dry stream. A raw-boned horse whirled around the corner, just avoiding his toes. It was followed by a bouncing grocery-wagon on the side of whose seat dangled a shirt-sleeved youth who might have been Shelby himself a score of years ago.

Shelby paused to watch. The horse drew up at the home of Doctor Stillwell, the dentist. Before the wagon was at rest the delivery-boy was off and half-way around the side of the house. Mrs. Stillwell opened the screen door to take in the carrots and soap and washing-powder Shelby used to bring her. Shelby remembered that she used washing-powder then. He wondered if she had heard of the "Paradise."

As he hung poised on a brink of memory the screen door flapped shut, the grocery-boy was hurrying back, the horse was moving away, and the boy leaped to his side-saddle seat on the wagon while it was in motion. The delivery-wagons and their Jehus were the only things that moved fast in Wakefield, now as then.

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Shelby drifted back to the main street and found the Bon-Ton Grocery where it had been when he deserted the wagon. The same old vegetables seemed to be sprawling outside. The same flies were avid at the strawberry-boxes, which, he felt sure, the grocer's wife had arranged as always, with the biggest on top. He knew that some Mrs. Spate had so distributed them, if it were not the same who had hectored him, for old Spate had a habit of marrying again. His wives lasted hardly so long as his hard-driven horses.

Shelby paused to price some of the vegetables, just to draw Spate into conversation. The old man was all spectacles and whiskers, as he had always been. Shelby thought he must have been born with spectacles and whiskers.

Joel Spate, never dreaming who Shelby was, was gracious to him for the first time in history. He evidently looked upon Shelby as a new-comer who might be pre-empted for a regular customer before Mrs. L. Bowers, the rival grocer, got him. It somehow hurt Shelby's homesick heart to be unrecognized, more than it pleased him to enjoy time's topsy-turvy. Here he was, returned rich and powerful, to patronize the taskmaster who had worked him hard and paid him harder in the old years. Yet he dared not proclaim himself and take his revenge.

He ended the interview by buying a few of the grocer's horrible cigars, which he gave away to the hotel porter later.

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All round the town Shelby wandered, trying to be recognized. But age and prosperity had altered him beyond recall, though he himself knew almost every old negro whitewash man, almost every teamster, he met. He was surer of the first names than of the last, for the first names had been most used in his day, and it surprised him to find how clearly he recalled these names and faces, though late acquaintances escaped his memory with ease.

The women, too, he could generally place, though many who had been short-skirted tomboys were now heavy-footed matrons of embonpoint with children at their skirts, children as old as they themselves had been when he knew them. Some of them, indeed, he recognized only by the children that lagged alongside like early duplicates.

As he sauntered one street of homely homes redeemed by the opulence of their foliage, he saw coming his way a woman whose outlines seemed but the enlargement of some photograph in the gallery of remembrance. Before she reached him he identified Phœbe Carew.

Her mother, he remembered, had been widowed early and had eked out a meager income by making chocolate fudge, which the little girl peddled about town on Saturday afternoons. And now the child, though she must be thirty or thereabouts, had kept a certain grace of her youth, a wistful prettiness, a girlish unmarriedness, that marked her as an old maid by accident or choice, not by nature's decree.

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He wondered if she, at least, would pay him the compliment of recognition. She made no sign of it as she approached. As she passed he lifted his hat.

"Isn't this Miss Phœbe Carew?"

Wakefield women were not in danger from strangers' advances; she paused without alarm and answered with an inquiring smile:

"Yes."

"You don't remember me?"

She studied him. "I seem to, and yet—"

"I'm Luke Shelby."

"Luke Shelby! Oh yes! Why, how do you do?" She gave him her beautiful hand, but she evidently lacked the faintest inkling of his identity. Time had erased from recollection the boy who used to take her sliding on his sled, the boy who used to put on her skates for her, the boy who used to take her home on his grocery-wagon sometimes, pretending that he was going her way, just for the benison of her radiant companionship, her shy laughter.

"I used to live here," he said, ashamed to be so forgettable. "My mother was—my stepfather was A. J. Stacom, who kept the hardware-store."

"Oh yes," she said; "they moved away some years ago, didn't they?"

"Yes; after mother died my stepfather went back to Council Bluffs, where we came from in the first place. I used to go to school with you, Phœbe—er—Miss Carew. Then I drove Spate's delivery-wagon for a while before I went East."

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"Oh yes," she said; "I think I remember you very well. I'm very glad to see you again, Mr.—Mr. Stacom."

"Shelby," he said, and he was so heartsick that he merely lifted his hat and added, "I'm glad to see you looking so well."

"You're looking well, too," she said, and smiled the gracious, empty smile one visits on a polite stranger. Then she went her way. In his lonely eyes she moved with a goddess-like grace that made clouds of the uneven pavements where he stumbled as he walked with reverted gaze.

He went back to the hotel lonelier than before, in a greater loneliness than Ulysses felt ending his Odyssey in Ithaca. For, at least, Ulysses was remembered by an old dog that licked his hand.

Once in his room, Shelby sank into a patent rocker of most uncomfortable plush. The inhospitable garishness of a small-town hotel's luxury expelled him from the hateful place, and he resumed the streets, taking, as always, determination from rebuff and vowing within himself:

"I'll make 'em remember me. I'll make the name of Shelby the biggest name in town."

On the main street he found one lone, bobtailed street-car waiting at the end of its line, its horse dejected with the ennui of its career, the driver dozing on the step.

Shelby decided to review the town from this seedy chariot; but the driver, surly with sleep, opened one eye and one corner of his mouth just enough to inform him that the next "run" was not due for fifteen minutes.

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"I'll change that," said Shelby. "I'll give 'em a trolley, and open cars in summer, too."

He dragged his discouraged feet back to the hotel and asked when dinner would be served.

"Supper's been ready sence six," said the clerk, whose agile toothpick proclaimed that he himself had banqueted.

Shelby went into the dining-room. A haughty head waitress, zealously chewing gum, ignored him for a time, then piloted him to a table where he found a party of doleful drummers sparring in repartee with a damsel of fearful and wonderful coiffure.

She detached herself reluctantly and eventually brought Shelby a supper contained in a myriad of tiny barges with which she surrounded his plate in a far-reaching flotilla.

When he complained that his steak was mostly gristle, and that he did not want his pie yet, Hebe answered:

"Don't get flip! Think you're at the Worldoff?"

Poor Shelby's nerves were so rocked that he condescended to complain to the clerk. For answer he got this:

"Mamie's all right. If you don't like our ways, better build a hotel of your own."

"I guess I will," said Shelby.

He went to his room to read. The gas was no more than darkness made visible. He vowed to change that, too.

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He would telephone to the theater. The telephone-girl was forever in answering, and then she was impudent. Besides, the theater was closed. Shelby learned that there was "a movin'-pitcher show going"! He went, and it moved him to the door.

The sidewalks were full of doleful loafers and loaferesses. Men placed their chairs in the street and smoked heinous tobacco. Girls and women dawdled and jostled to and from the ice-cream-soda fountains.

The streets that night were not lighted at all, for the moon was abroad, and the board of aldermen believed in letting God do all He could for the town. In fact, He did nearly all that the town could show of charm. The trees were majestic, the grass was lavishly spread, the sky was divinely blue by day and angelically bestarred at night.

Shelby compared his boyhood impressions with the feelings governing his mind now that it was adult and traveled. He felt that he had grown, but that the town had stuck in the mire. He felt an ambition to lift it and enlighten it. Like the old builder who found Rome brick and left it marble, Shelby determined that the Wakefield which he found of plank he should leave at least of limestone. Everything he saw displeased him and urged him to reform it altogether, and he said:

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"I'll change all this. And they'll love me for it."

And he did. But they—did they?

### III

One day a greater than Shelby came to Wakefield, but not to stay. It was no less than the President of these United States swinging around the circle in an inspection of his realm, with possibly an eye to the nearing moment when he should consent to re-election. As his special train approached each new town the President studied up its statistics so that he might make his speech enjoyable by telling the citizens the things they already knew. He had learned that those are the things people most like to hear.

His encyclopædia informed him that Wakefield had a population of about fifteen thousand. He could not know how venerable an estimate this was, for Wakefield was still fifteen thousand—now and forever, fifteen thousand and insuperable.

The President had a mental picture of just what such a town of fifteen thousand would look like, and he wished himself back in the White House.

He was met at the train by the usual entertainment committee, which in this case coincided with the executive committee of the Wide-a-Wakefield Club. It had seemed just as well to these members to elect themselves as anybody else.

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Mr. Pettibone, the town's most important paper-hanger, was again chairman after some lapses from office. Joel Spate, the Bon-Ton Grocer, was once more secretary, after having been treasurer twice and president once. The One-Price Emporium, however, was now represented by the younger Forshay, son of the founder, who had gone to the inevitable Greenwood at the early age of sixty-nine. Soyer, the swell tailor, had yielded his place to the stateliest man in town, Amasa Harbury, president of the Wakefield Building and Loan Association. And Eberhart, of the Furniture Palace, had been supplanted by Gibson Shoals, the bank cashier.

To the President's surprise the railroad station proved to be, instead of the doleful shed usual in those parts, a graceful edifice of metropolitan architecture. He was to ride in an open carriage, of course, drawn by the two spanking dapples which usually drew the hearse when it was needed. But this was tactfully kept from the President.

There had been some bitterness over the choice of the President's companions in the carriage, since it was manifestly impossible for the entire committee of seven to pile into the space of four, though young Forshay, who had inherited his father's gift of humor, volunteered to ride on the President's lap or hold him on his.

The extra members were finally consoled by being granted the next carriage, an equipage drawn by no less than the noble black geldings usually attached to the chief mourners' carriage.

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As the President was escorted to his place he remarked that a trolley-car was waiting at the station.

"I see that Wakefield boasts an electric line," he beamed.

"Yes," said Pettibone, "that's some of Shelby's foolishness."

A look from Spate silenced him, but the President had not caught the slip.

The procession formed behind the town band, whose symphony suffered somewhat from the effort of the musicians to keep one eye on the music and throw the other eye backward at the great visitor.

"What a magnificent building!" said the President as the parade turned a corner. Nobody said anything, and the President read the name aloud. "The Shelby House. A fine hotel!" he exclaimed, as he lifted his hat to the cheers from the white-capped chambermaids and the black-coated waiters in the windows. They were male waiters.

"And the streets are lighted by electricity! And paved with brick!" the President said. "Splendid! Splendid! There must be very enterprising citizens in Gatesville—I mean Wakefield." He had visited so many towns!

"That's a handsome office-building," was his next remark. "It's quite metropolitan." The committee vouchsafed no reply, but they could see that he was reading the sign:

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THE SHELBY BLOCK:  
SHELBY INDEPENDENT TELEPHONE COMPANY  
SHELBY'S PARADISE POWDER COMPANY  
SHELBY ARTESIAN WELL COMPANY  
SHELBY PASTIME PARK COMPANY  
SHELBY OPERA HOUSE COMPANY  
SHELBY STREET RAILWAY COMPANY

The committee was not used to chatting with Presidents, and even the practical Pettibone, who had voted against him, had an awe of him in the flesh. He decided to vote for him next time; it would be comforting to be able to say, "Oh yes, I know the President well; I used to take long

drives with him—once."

There were heartaches in the carriage as the President, who commented on so many things, failed to comment on the banner of welcome over Pettibone's shop, painted by Pettibone's own practical hand; or the gaily bedighted Bon-Ton Grocery with the wonderful arrangement of tomato-cans into the words, "Welcome to Wakefield." The Building and Loan Association had stretched a streamer across the street, too, and the President never noticed it. His eyes and tongue were caught away by the ornate structure of the opera-house.

"Shelby Opera House. So many things named after Mr. Shelby. Is he the founder of the city or— or—"

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"No, just one of the citizens," said Pettibone.

"I should be delighted to meet him."

Three votes fell from the Presidential tree with a thud.

Had the committee been able to imagine in advance how Shelbyisms would obtrude everywhere upon the roving eye of the visitor, whose one aim was a polite desire to exclaim upon everything exclaimable, they might have laid out the line of march otherwise.

But it was too late to change now, and they grew grimmer and grimmer as the way led to the stately pleasure-dome which Shelby Khan had decreed and which imported architects and landscape-gardeners had established.

Here were close-razored lawns and terraces, a lake with spouting fountains, statues of twisty nymphs, glaring, many-antlered stags and couchant lions, all among cedar-trees and flower-beds whose perfumes saluted the Presidential nostril like a gentle hurrah.

Emerging through the trees were the roofs, the cupola and ivy-bowered windows of the home of Shelby, most homeless at home. For, after all his munificence, Wakefield did not like him. The only tribute the people had paid him was to boost the prices of everything he bought, from land to labor, from wall-paper to cabbages. And now on the town's great day he had not been included in any of the committees of welcome. He had been left to brood alone in his mansion like a prince in ill favor exiled to his palace.

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He did not know that his palace had delighted even the jaded eye of the far-traveled First Citizen. He only knew that his fellow-townsmen sneered at it with dislike.

Shelby was never told by the discreet committeemen in the carriage that the President had exclaimed on seeing his home:

"Why, this is magnificent! This is an estate! I never dreamed that—er—Wakefield was a city of such importance and such wealth. And whose home is this?"

Somebody groaned, "Shelby's."

"Ah yes; Shelby's, of course. So many things here are Shelby's. You must be very proud of Mr. Shelby. Is he there, perhaps?"

"That's him, standing on the upper porch there, waving his hat," Pettibone mumbled.

The President waved his hat at Shelby.

"And the handsome lady is his wife, perhaps?"

"Yes, that's Mrs. Shelby," mumbled Spate. "She was Miss Carew. Used to teach school here."

Phœbe Shelby was clinging to her husband's side. There were tears in her eyes and her hands squeezed mute messages upon his arm, for she knew that his many-wounded heart was now more bitterly hurt than in all his knowledge of Wakefield. He was a prisoner in disgrace gazing through the bars at a festival.

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He never knew that the President suggested stopping a moment to congratulate him, and that it was his own old taskmaster Spate who ventured to say that the President could meet him later. Spate could rise to an emergency; the other committeemen thanked him with their eyes.

As the carriage left the border of the Shelby place the President turned his head to stare, for it was beautiful, ambitiously beautiful. And something in the silent attitude of the owner and his wife struck a deeper note in the noisy, gaudy welcome of the other citizens.

"Tell me about this Mr. Shelby," said the President.

Looks were exchanged among the committee. All disliked the task, but finally Spate broke the silence.

"Well, Mr. President, Shelby is a kind of eccentric man. Some folks say he's cracked. Used to drive a delivery-wagon for me. Ran away and tried his hand at nearly everything. Finally, him and his two brothers invented a kind of washing-powder. It was like a lot of others, but they knew how to push it. Borrowed money to advertise it big. Got it started till they couldn't have stopped it if they'd tried. Shelby decided to come back here and establish a branch factory. That tall chimney is it. No smoke comin' out of it to-day. He gave all the hands a holiday in your honor, Mr.

President."

The President said: "Well, that's mighty nice of him. So he's come back to beautify his old home, eh? That's splendid—a fine spirit. Too many of us, I'm afraid, forget the old places when ambition carries us away into new scenes. Mr. Shelby must be very popular here."

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There was a silence. Mr. Pettibone was too honest, or too something, to let the matter pass.

"Well, I can't say as to that, Mr. President. Shelby's queer. He's very pushing. You can't drive people more 'n so fast. Shelby is awful fussy. Now, that trolley line—he put that in, but we didn't need it."

"Not but what Wakefield is enterprising," Spate added, anxiously.

Pettibone nodded and went on: "People used to think the old bobtailed horse-car—excuse my language—wasn't much, but the trolley-cars are a long way from perfect. Service ain't so very good. People don't ride on 'em much, because they don't run often enough."

The President started to say, "Perhaps they can't run oftener because people don't ride on 'em enough," but something counseled him to silence, and Pettibone continued:

"Same way with the electric light. People that had gas hated to change. He made it cheap, but it's a long way from perfect. He put in an independent telephone. The old one wasn't much good and it was expensive. Now we can have telephones at half the old price. But result is, you've got to have two, or you might just as well not have one. Everybody you want to talk to is always on the other line."

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The President nodded. He understood the ancient war between the simple life and the strenuous. He wished he had left the subject unopened, but Pettibone had warmed to the theme.

"Shelby built an opery-house and brought some first-class troupes here. But this is a religious town, and people don't go much to shows. In the first place, we don't believe in 'em; in the second place, we've been bit by bad shows so often. So his opery-house costs more 'n it takes in.

"Then he laid out the Pastime Park—tried to get up games and things; but the vacant lots always were good enough for baseball. He tried to get people to go out in the country and play golf, too; but it was too much like following the plow. Folks here like to sit on their porches when they're tired.

"He brought an automobile to town—scared most of the horses to death. Our women folks got afraid to drive because the most reliable old nags tried to climb trees whenever Shelby came honking along. He built two or three monuments to famous citizens, but that made the families of other famous citizens jealous.

"He built that big home of his, but it only makes our wives envious. It's so far out that the society ladies can't call much. Besides, they feel uneasy with all that glory.

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"Mrs. Shelby has a man in a dress-suit to open the door. The rest of us—our wives answer the door-bell themselves. Our folks are kind of afraid to invite Mr. and Mrs. Shelby to their parties for fear they'll criticize; so Mrs. Shelby feels as if she was deserted.

"She thinks her husband is mistreated, too; but—well, Shelby's eccentric. He says we're ungrateful. Maybe we are, but we like to do things our own way. Shelby tried to get us to help boost the town, as he calls it. He offered us stock in his ventures, but we've got taken in so often that—well, once bit is twice shy, you know, Mr. President. So Wakefield stands just about where she did before Shelby came here."

"Not but what Wakefield is enterprising," Mr. Spate repeated.

The President's curiosity overcame his policy. He asked one more question:

"But if you citizens didn't help Mr. Shelby, how did he manage all these—improvements, if I may use the word?"

"Did it all by his lonesome, Mr. President. His income was immense. But he cut into it something terrible. His brothers in the East began to row at the way he poured it out. When he began to draw in advance they were goin' to have him declared incompetent. Even his brothers say he's cracked. Recently they've drawn in on him. Won't let him spend his own money."

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A gruesome tone came from among Spate's spectacles and whiskers:

"He won't last long. Health's giving out. His wife told my wife, the other day, he don't sleep nights. That's a bad sign. His pride is set on keepin' everything going, though, and nothing can hold him. He wants the street-cars to run regular, and the telephone to answer quick, even if the town don't support 'em. He's cracked—there's nothing to it."

Amasa Harbury, of the Building and Loan Association, leaned close and spoke in a confidential voice:

"He's got mortgages on 'most everything, Mr. President. He's borrowed on all his securities up to the hilt. Only yesterday I had to refuse him a second mortgage on his house. He stormed around about how much he'd put into it. I told him it didn't count how much you put into a hole, it was how much you could get out. You can imagine how much that palace of his would bring in this



town on a foreclosure sale—about as much as a white elephant in a china-shop."

"Not but what Wakefield is enterprising," insisted Spate.

The lust for gossip had been aroused and Pettibone threw discretion to the winds.

"Shelby was hopping mad because we left him off the committee of welcome, but we thought we'd better stick to our own crowd of represent'ive citizens. Shelby don't really belong to Wakefield, anyway. Still, if you want to meet him, it can be arranged." [Pg 132]

"Oh no," said the President. "Don't trouble."

And he was politic—or politician—enough to avoid the subject thenceforward. But he could not get Shelby out of his mind that night as his car whizzed on its way. To be called crazy and eccentric and to be suspected, feared, resisted by the very people he longed to lead—Presidents are not unaware of that ache of unrequited affection.

The same evening Shelby and Phœbe Shelby looked out on their park. The crowds that had used it as a vantage-ground for the pageant had all vanished, leaving behind a litter of rubbish, firecrackers, cigar stubs, broken shrubs, gouged terraces. Not one of them had asked permission, had murmured an apology or a word of thanks.

For the first time Phœbe Shelby noted that her husband did not take new determination from rebuff. His resolution no longer made a springboard of resistance. He seemed to lean on her a little.

#### IV

The perennially empty cutlery-works gave the Wide-a-Wakefield Club no rest. Year after year the anxiously awaited census renewed the old note of fifteen thousand and denied the eloquent argument of increased population. The committee in its letters continued to refer to Wakefield as "thriving" rather than as "growing." Its ingeniously evasive circulars finally roused a curiosity in Wilmer Barstow, a manufacturer of refrigerators, dissatisfied with the taxes and freight rates of the city of Clayton. [Pg 133]

Barstow was the more willing to leave Clayton because he had suffered there from that reward which is more unkind than the winter wind. He loved a woman and paid court to her, sending her flowers at every possible excuse and besetting her with gifts.

She was not much of a woman—her very lover could see that; but he loved her in his own and her despite. She was unworthy of his jewels as of his infatuation, yet she gave him no courtesy for his gifts. She behaved as if they bored her; yet he knew no other way to win her. The more indifference she showed the more he tried to dazzle her.

At last he found that she was paying court herself to a younger man—a selfish good-for-naught who made fun of her as well as of Barstow, and who borrowed money from her as well as from Barstow.

When Barstow fully realized that the woman had made him not only her own booby, but the town joke as well, he could not endure her or the place longer. He cast about for an escape. But he found his factory no trifling baggage to move.

It was on such fertile soil that one of the Wide-a-Wakefield circulars fell. [Pg 134]

It chimed so well with Barstow's mood that he decided at least to look the town over.

He came unannounced to make his own observations, like the spies sent into Canaan. The trolley-car that met his train was rusty, paintless, forlorn, untenanted. He took a ramshackle hack to the best hotel. Its sign-board bore this legend: "The Palace, formerly Shelby House—entirely new management."

He saw his baggage bestowed and went out to inspect the factory building described to him. The cutlery-works proved smaller than his needs, and it had a weary look. Not far away he found a far larger factory, idle, empty, closed. The sign declared it to be the Wakefield Branch of the Shelby Paradise Powder Company. He knew the prosperity of that firm and wondered why this branch had been abandoned.

In the course of time the trolley-car overtook him, and he boarded it as a sole passenger.

The lonely motorman was loquacious and welcomed Barstow as the Ancient Mariner welcomed the wedding guest. He explained that he made but few trips a day and passengers were fewer than trips. The company kept it going to hold the franchise, for some day Wakefield would reach sixteen thousand and lift the hoodoo.

The car passed an opera-house, with grass aspiring through the chinks of the stone steps leading to the boarded-up doors.

The car passed the Shelby Block; the legend, "For Rent, apply to Amasa Harbury," hid the list of Shelby enterprises. [Pg 135]

The car grumbled through shabby streets to the outskirts of the town, where it sizzled along a singing wire past the drooping fences, the sagging bleachers, and the weedy riot of what had

been a pleasure-ground. A few dim lines in the grass marked the ghost of a baseball diamond, a circular track, and foregone tennis-courts.

Barstow could read on what remained of the tottering fence:

#### HELBY'S PAST      ARK

When the car had reached the end of the line Barstow decided to walk back to escape the garrulity of the motorman, who lived a lonely life, though he was of a sociable disposition.

Barstow's way led him shortly to the edge of a curious demesne, or rather the débris of an estate. A chaos of grass and weeds thrust even through the rust of the high iron fence about the place. Shrubs that had once been shapely grew raggedly up and swept down into the tall and ragged grass. A few evergreen trees lifted flowering cones like funeral candles in sconces. What had been a lake with fountains was a great, cracked basin of concrete tarnished with scabious pools thick with the dead leaves of many an autumn.

Barstow entered a fallen gate and walked along paths where his feet slashed through barbaric tangles clutching at him like fingers. As he prowled, wondering what splendor this could have been which was so misplaced in so dull a town and drooping into so early a neglect, birds took alarm and went crying through the branches. There were lithe escapes through the grass, and from the rim of the lake ugly toads plounced into the pool and set the water-spiders scurrying on their frail catamarans.

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Two bronze stags towered knee-deep in verdure; one had a single antler, the other none. A pair of toothless lions brooded over their lost dignity. Between their disconsolate sentry, mounted flight on flight of marble steps to the house of the manor. It lay like an old frigate storm-shattered and flung aground to rot. The hospitable doors were planked shut, the windows, too; the floors of the verandas were broken and the roof was everywhere sunken and insecure.

At the portal had stood two nymphs, now almost classic with decay. One of them, toppling helplessly, quenched her bronze torch in weeds. Her sister stood erect in grief like a daughter of Niobe wept into stone.

The scene somehow reminded Barstow of one of Poe's landscapes. It was the corpse of a home. Eventually he noticed a tall woman in black, seated on a bench and gazing down the terraces across the dead lake. Barstow was tempted to ask her whose place this had been and what its history was, but her mien and her crêpe daunted him.

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He made his way out of the region, looking back as he went. When he approached the most neighboring house a grocery-wagon came flying down the road. Before it stopped the slanted driver was off the seat and half-way across the yard. In a moment he was back again. Barstow called out:

"Whose place is that?"

"Shelby's."

"Did he move away?"

But the horse was already in motion, and the youth had darted after, leaping to the side of the seat and calling back something which Barstow could not hear.

Shelby, who had given the town everything he could, had even endowed it with a ruins.

When Barstow had reached the hotel again he went in to his supper. A head waitress, chewing gum, took him to a table where a wildly coiffed damsel brought him a bewildering array of most undesirable foods in a flotilla of small dishes.

After supper Barstow, following the suit of the other guests, took a chair on the sidewalk, for a little breeze loafed along the hot street. Barstow's name had been seen upon the hotel register and the executive committee of the Wide-a-Wakefield Club waited upon him in an august body.

Mr. Pettibone introduced himself and the others. They took chairs and hitched them close to Barstow, while they poured out in alternate strains the advantages of Wakefield. Barstow listened politely, but the empty factory and the dismantled home of Shelby haunted him and made a dismal background to their advertisements.

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It was of the factory that he spoke first:

"The building you wrote me about and offered me rent-free looks a little small and out of date for our plant. I saw Shelby's factory empty. Could I rent that at a reasonable figure, do you suppose?"

The committee leaped at the idea with enthusiasm. Spate laughed through his beard:

"Lord, I reckon the company would rent it to you for almost the price of the taxes."

Then he realized that this was saying just a trifle too much. They began to crawfish their way out. But Barstow said, with unconviction:

"There's only one thing that worries me. Why did Shelby close up his Paradise Powder factory and move away?"

Pettibone urged the reason hastily: "His brothers closed it up for him. They wouldn't stand any more of his extravagant nonsense. They shut down the factory and then shut down on him, too."

"So he gave up his house and moved away?" said Barstow.

"He gave up his house because he couldn't keep it up," said Amasa Harbury. "Taxes were pretty steep and nobody would rent it, of course. It don't belong in a town like Wakefield. Neither did Shelby."

"So he moved away?"

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"Moved away, nothin'," sneered Spate. "He went to a boardin'-house and died there. Left his wife a lot of stock in a broken-down street-car line, and a no-good electric-light company, and an independent telephone system that the regulars gobbled up. She's gone back to teachin' school again. We used our influence to get her old job back. We didn't think we ought to blame her for the faults of Shelby."

"And what had Shelby done?"

They told him in their own way—treading on one another's toes in their anxiety; shutting one another up; hunching their chairs together in a tangle as if their slanders were wares they were trying to sell.

But about all that Barstow could make of the matter was that Shelby had been in much such case as his own. He had been hungry for human gratitude, and had not realized that it is won rather by accepting than by bestowing gifts.

Barstow sat and smoked glumly while the committee clattered. He hardly heard what they were at such pains to emphasize. He was musing upon a philosophy of his father's:

"There's an old saying, 'Never look a gift horse in the mouth.' But sayings and doings are far apart. If you can manage to sell a man a horse he'll make the best of the worst bargain; he'll nurse the nag and feed him and drive him easy and brag about his faults. He'll overlook everything from spavin to bots; he'll learn to think that a hamstrung hind leg is the poetry of motion. But a gift horse—Lord love you! If you give a man a horse he'll look him in the mouth and everywhere else. The whole family will take turns with a microscope. They'll kick because he isn't run by electricity, and if he's an Arabian they'll roast him because he holds his tail so high. If you want folks to appreciate anything don't give it to 'em; make 'em work for it and pay for it—double if you can."

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Shelby had mixed poetry with business, had given something for nothing; had paid the penalty.

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## THE OLD FOLKS AT HOME

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### I

The old road came pouring down from the wooded hills to the westward, flowed round the foot of other hills, skirting a meadow and a pond, and then went on easterly about its business. Almost overhanging the road, like a mill jutting upon its journeyman stream, was an aged house. Still older were the two lofty oaks standing mid-meadow and imaged again in the pond. Younger than oaks or house or road, yet as old as Scripture allots, was the man who stalked across the porch and slumped into a chair. He always slumped into a chair, for his muscles still remembered the days when he had sat only when he was worn out. Younger than oaks, house, road, or man, yet older than a woman wants to be, was the woman in the garden.

"What you doin', Maw?" the man called across the rail, though he could see perfectly well.

"Just putterin' 'round in the garden. What you been doin', Paw?"

"Just putterin' 'round the barn. Better come in out the hot sun and rest your old back."

Evidently the idea appealed to her, for the sunbonnet overhanging the meek potato-flowers like a flamingo's beak rose in air, as she stood erect, or as nearly erect as she ever stood nowadays. She tossed a few uprooted weeds over the lilac-hedge, and, clumping up the steps of the porch, slumped into a chair. Chairs had once been her luxury, too. She carried a dish-pan full of green peas, and as her gaze wandered over the beloved scene her wrinkled fingers were busy among the pods, shelling them expertly, as if they knew their way about alone.

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The old man sighed, the deep sigh of ultimate contentment. "Well, Maw, as the fellow says in the circus, here we are again."

"Here we are again, Paw."

They always said the same thing about this time of year, when they wearied of the splendid home they had established as the capital of their estate and came back to the ground from which they

had sprung. James Coburn always said:

"Well, Maw, as the fellow says in the circus, here we are again."

And Sarah Gregg Coburn always answered:

"Here we are again, Paw."

This place was to them what old slippers are to tired feet. Here they put off the manners and the dignities their servants expected of them, and lapsed into shabby clothes and colloquialisms, such as they had been used to when they were first married, long before he became the master of a thousand acres, of cattle upon a hundred hills, of blooded thoroughbreds and patriarchal stallions, of town lots and a bank, and of a record as Congressman for two terms. This pilgrimage had become a sort of annual elopement, the mischief of two white-haired runaways. Now that the graveyard or the city had robbed them of all their children, they loved to turn back and play at an Indian-summer honeymoon.

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This year, for the first time, Maw had consented to the aid of a "hired girl." She refused to bring one of the maids or the cook from the big house, and engaged a woman from the village nearest at hand—and then tried to pretend the woman wasn't there. It hurt her to admit the triumph of age in her bones, but there was compensation in the privilege of hearing some one else faintly clattering over the dish-washing of evenings, while she sat on the porch with Paw and watched the sunset trail its gorgeous banners along the heavens and across the little toy sky of the pond.

It was pleasant in the mornings, too, to lie abed in criminal indolence, hearing from afar the racket of somebody else building the fire. After breakfast she made a brave beginning, only to turn the broom and the bedmaking over to Susan and dawdle about after Paw or celebrate matins in the green aisles of the garden. But mostly the old couple just pretended to do their chores, and sat on the porch and watched the clouds go by and the frogs flop into the pond.

"Mail come yet, Maw?"

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"Susan's gone for it."

He glanced up the road to a sunbonneted figure blurred in the glare, and sniffed amiably. "Humph! Country's getting so citified the morning papers are here almost before breakfast's cleared off. Remember when we used to drive eleven mile to get the *Weekly Tribune*, Maw?"

"I remember. And it took you about a week to read it. Sometimes you got one number behind. Nowadays you finish your paper in about five minutes."

"Nothing much in the papers nowadays except murder trials and divorce cases. I guess Susan must have a mash on that mail-carrier."

"I wish she'd come on home and not gabble so much."

"Expectin' a letter from the boy?"

"Ought to be one this morning."

"You've said that every mornin' for three weeks. I s'pose he's so busy in town he don't realize how much his letters mean to us."

"I hate to have him in the city with its dangers—he's so reckless with his motor, and then there's the temptations and the scramble for money. I wish Stevie had been contented to settle down with us. We've got enough, goodness knows. But I suppose he feels he must be a millionaire or nothing, and what you've made don't seem a drop in the bucket."

The old man winced. He thought how often the boy had found occasion to draw on him for help in financing his "sure things" and paying up the losses on the "sure things" that had gone wrong. Those letters had been sent to the bank in town and had not been mentioned at home, except now and then, long afterward, when the wife pressed the old man too hard about holding back money from the boy. Then he would unfold a few figures. They dazed her, but they never convinced her.

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Who ever convinced a woman? Persuaded? Yes, since Eve! Convinced? Not yet!

It hurts a man's pride to hear his wife impliedly disparage his own achievements in contrast with his son's. Not that he is jealous of his son; not that he does not hope and expect that the boy will climb to peaks he has never dared; not that he would not give his all and bend his own back as a stepping-stone to his son's ascension; but just that comparisons are odious. This disparagement is natural, though, to wives, for they compare what their husbands have done with what their sons are going to do.

It was an old source of peevishness with Paw Coburn, and he was moved to say—answering only by implication what she had unconsciously implied, and seeming to take his theme from the landscape about them:

"When my father died all he left me was this little—bungalow they'd call it nowadays, I suppose, and a few acres 'round it. You remember, Maw, how, when the sun first came sneakin' over that knob off to the left, the shadow of those two oaks used to just touch the stone wall on the western border of father's property, and when the sun was just crawlin' into bed behind those woods off

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yonder the shadow of the oaks just overlapped the rail fence on the eastern border? That's all my father left me—that and the mortgage. That's all I brought you home to, Maw. I'm not disparaging my father. He was a great man. When he left his own home in the East and came out here all this was woods, woods, woods, far as you can see. Even that pond wasn't there then. My father cleared it all—cut down everything except those two oak-trees. He used to call them the Twin Oaks, but they always seemed to me like man and wife. I kind o' like to think that they're you and me. And like you and me they're all that's left standin' of the old trees. They were big trees, too, and those were big days."

The greatness of his thoughts rendered him mute. He was a plain man, but he was hearing the unwritten music of the American epic of the ax and the plow, the more than Trojan war, the more than ten years' war, against forests and savages. His wife brought him back from hyper-Homeric vision to the concrete.

"Thank Heaven, Susan's finished gossipin' and started home."

The mail-carrier in his little umbrellaed cart was vanishing up the hill, and the sunbonnet was floating down the road. The sky was an unmitigated blue, save for a few masses of cloud, like piles of new fleece on a shearing-floor. Green woods, gray road, blue sky, pale clouds, all were steeped in heat and silence so intense it seemed that something must break. And something broke.

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Appallingly, abruptly, came a shattering crash, a streak of blinding fire, an unendurable noise, a searing blast of blaze as if the sun had been dynamite exploded, splintering the very joists of heaven. The whole air rocked like a tidal wave breaking on a reef; the house writhed in all its timbers. Then silence—unbearable silence.

The old woman, made a child again by a paralytic stroke of terror, found herself on her knees, clinging frantically to her husband. The cheek buried in his breast felt the lurch and leap of his pounding heart. Manlike, he found courage in his woman's fright, but his hand quivered upon her hair; she heard his shaken voice saying:

"There, there, Maw, it's all over."

When he dared to open his eyes he was blinded and dazed like the stricken Saul. When he could see again he found the world unchanged. The sky was still there, and still azure; the clouds swam serenely; the road still poured down from the unaltered hills. He tried to laugh; it was a sickly sound he made.

"I guess that was what the fellow calls a bolt from the blue. I've often heard of 'em, but it's the first I ever saw. No harm's done, Maw, except to Susan's feelings. She's pickin' herself up out the dust and hurryin' home like two-forty. I guess the concussion must have knocked her over."

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The old woman, her heart still fluttering madly, rose from her knees with the tremulous aid of the old man and opened her eyes. She could hardly believe that she would not find the earth an apocalyptic ruin of uprooted hills. She breathed deeply of the relief, and her eyes ran along the remembered things as if calling the roll. Suddenly her eyes paused, widened. Her hand went out to clutch her husband's arm.

"Look, Paw! The oaks, the oaks!"

The lightning had leaped upon them like a mad panther, rending their branches from them, ripping off great strips of bark, and leaving long, gaping wounds, dripping with the white blood of trees. The lesser of the two oaks had felt the greater blow, and would have toppled to the ground had it not fallen across its mate; and its mate, though grievously riven, held it up, with branches interlocking like cherishing arms.

To that human couple the tragedy of the trees they had looked upon as the very emblems of stability was pitiful. The old woman's eyes swam with tears. She made no shame of her sobs. The old man tried to comfort her with a commonplace:

"I was readin' only the other day, Maw, that oaks attract the lightning more than any other trees," and then he broke down. "Father always called 'em the Twin Oaks, but I always called 'em you and me."

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The panic-racked Susan came stumbling up the steps, gasping with experiences. But the aged couple either did not hear or did not heed. With old hand embracing old hand they sat staring at the rapine of the lightning, the tigerish atrocity that had butchered and mutilated their beloved trees. Susan dropped into Mrs. Coburn's lap what mail she brought and hurried inside to faint.

The old couple sat in a stupor long and long before Mrs. Coburn found that she was idly fingering letters and papers. She glanced down, and a familiar writing brought her from her trance.

"Oh, Paw, here's a letter from the boy! Here's a letter from Stevie. And here's your paper."

He took the paper, but did not open it, turning instead to ask, "What does the boy say?"

With hands awkwardly eager she ripped the envelope, tore out the letter, and spread it open on her lap, then pulled her spectacles down from her hair, and read with loving inflection:

"MY DARLING MOTHER AND DAD,—It is simply heinous the way I neglect to write you, but somehow the rush of things here keeps me putting it off from day to day. If remembrances were letters you would have them in flocks, for I think of you always and I am homesick for the sight of your blessed faces.

"I should like to come out and see you in your little old nest, but business piles up about me till I can't see my way out at present. I do wish you could run down here and make me a good long visit, but I suppose that is impossible, too. There are two or three big deals pending that look promising, and if any one of them wins out I shall clean up enough to be a gentleman of leisure. The first place I turn will be home. My heart aches for the rest and comfort of your love.

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"Write me often and tell me how you both are, and believe me, with all the affection in the world,

"Your devoted son,

"STEPHEN."

She pushed her dewy spectacles back in her gray hair and pressed the letter to her lips; she was smiling as only old mothers smile over letters from their far-off children. The man's face softened, too, with the ache that battle-scarred fathers feel, thinking of their sons in the thick of the fight. Then he unfolded his paper, set his glasses on his big nose, and pursed his lips to read what was new in the world at large. His wife sat still, just remembering, perusing old files and back numbers of the gazettes of her boy's past, remembering him from her first vague thrill of him to his slow youth, to manhood, and the last good-by kiss.

Nothing was heard from either of them for a long while, save the creak of her chair and the rustle of his paper as he turned to the page recording the results in the incessant Gettysburgs over the prices of corn, pork, poultry, butter, and eggs. They were history to him. He could grow angry over a drop in December wheat, and he could glow at a sign of feverishness in oats. To-day he was profoundly moved to read that October ribs had opened at 10.95 and closed at 11.01, and depressed to see that September lard had dropped from 11.67 to 11.65.

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As he turned the paper his eye was caught by the head-lines of an old and notorious trial at law, and he was confirmed in his wrath. He growled:

"Good Lord, ain't that dog hung yet?"

"What you talkin' about, Paw?"

"I was just noticin' that the third trial of Tom Carey is in full swing again. It's cost the State a hundred thousand dollars already, and the scoundrel ain't punished yet."

"What did he do, Paw?"

The old man blushed like a boy as he stammered: "You're too young to know all he did, Maw. If I told you, you wouldn't understand. But it ended in murder. If he'd been a low-browed dago they'd have had him railroaded to Jericho in no time. But the lawyers are above the law, and they've kept this fellow from his deserts till folks have almost forgot what it was he did. It's disgraceful. It makes our courts the laughing-stock of the world. It gives the anarchists an excuse for saying that there's one law for the poor and another for the rich."

After the thunder of his ire had rolled away there was a gentle murmur from the old woman. "It's a terrible thing to put a man to death."

"So it is, Maw, and if this fellow had only realized it he'd have kept out of trouble."

"He was excited, most likely, and out of his head. What I mean is, it's a terrible thing for a judge and a jury to try a man and take his life away from him."

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"Oh, it's terrible, of course, Maw, but we've got to have laws to hold the world together, ain't we? And if we don't enforce 'em, what's the use of havin' 'em?"

Silence and a far-away look on the wrinkled face resting on the wrinkled hand and then a quiet question:

"Suppose it was our Steve?"

"I won't suppose any such thing. Thank God there's been no stain on any of our family, either side; just plain hard-workin' folks—no crazy ones, no criminals."

"But supposing it was our boy, Paw?"

"Oh, what's the use of arguin' with a woman! I love you for it, Maw, but—well, I'm sorry I spoke."

He returned to his paper, growling now and then as he read of some new quibble devised by the attorneys for the defense. As softly and as surreptitiously as it begins to rain on a cloudy day, she was crying. He turned again with mock indignation.

"Here, here! What you turning up about now?"

"I want to see my boy. I'm worried. He may be sick. He'd never let us know."

The old man tried to cajole her from her forebodings, tried to reason them away, laugh them away. At last he said, with a poor effort at gruffness:

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"Well, for the Lord's sake, why don't you go? He's always askin' us to come and see him. I'm kind o' homesick for a sight of the boy m'self. You haven't been to town for a month of Sundays. Throw a few things in a valise and I'll hitch up. We'll just about make the next train from the village."

She needed no coercion from without. She rose at once. As she opened the squeaky screen-door he was clumping down the steps. He paused to call back:

"Oh, Maw!"

"Yes, Paw!"

"Better tuck in a jar of those preserves you been puttin' up. The boy always liked those better 'n most anything. Don't wrap 'em in my nightshirt, though."

She called out, "All right," and the slap of the screen-door was echoed a moment later by a similar sound in the barn, accompanied by the old man's voice:

"Give over, Fan."

## II

The elevator-boy hesitated. "Oh, yes-sum, I got a pass-key, all right, but I can't hahdly let nobody in Mista Coburn's 'pahtment 'thout his awdas."

"But we're his mother and father."

"Of co'se I take yo' wud for that, ma'am, but, you see, I can't hahdly let nobody—er—um'm—thank you, sir—well, I reckon Mista Coburn might be mo' put out ef I didn't let you-all in than ef I did."

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The elevator soared silently to the eighth floor, and there all three debarked. The boy was so much impressed with the tip the old man had slipped him that he unlocked the door, put the hand-baggage into the room, snapped the switch that threw on all the lights, and said, "Thank you, sir," again as he closed the door.

Paw opened it to give the boy another coin and say: "Don't you let on that we're here. It's a surprise."

The boy, grinning, promised and descended, like an imp through a trap.

The old couple stood stock-still, hesitating to advance. So many feelings, such varied timidities, urged them forward, yet held them back. It was the home of the son they had begotten, conceived, tended, loved, praised, punished, feared, prayed for, counseled, provisioned, and surrendered. Years of separation had made him almost a stranger, and they dreaded the intrusion into the home he had built for himself, remote from their influence. Poor, weak, silly old things, with a boy-and-girlish gawkishness about them, the helpless feeling of uninvited guests!

"You go first, Paw."

And Paw went first. On the sill of the drawing-room he paused and swept a glance around. He would have given an arm to be inspired with some scheme for whisking his wife away or changing what she must see. But she was already crowding on his heels, pushing him forward. There was no retreat. He tried to laugh it off.

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"Well, here we are at last, as the fellow doesn't say in the circus."

There was nothing to do but sit down and wait. The very chairs were of an architecture and upholstery incongruous to them. They knew something of luxury, but not of this school. There was nowhere for them to look that something alien did not meet their eyes. So they looked at the floor.

"It gets awful hot in town, don't it?" said Paw, mopping his beaded forehead.

"Awful," said Maw, dabbing at hers.

Eventually they heard the elevator door gride on its grooves. All the way in on the train they had planned to hide and spring out on the boy. They had giggled like children over the plot. It was rather their prearrangement than their wills that moved them to action. Automatically they hid themselves, without laughter, rather with a sort of guilty terror. They found a deep wardrobe closet and stepped inside, drawing the door almost shut.

They heard a key in the lock, the click of a knob, the sound of a door closed. Then a pause. They had forgotten to turn off the lights. Hurrying footsteps, loud on the bare floor, muffled on the rugs. How well they knew that step! But there was excitement in its rhythm. They could hear the familiar voice muttering unfamiliarly as the footsteps hurried here and there. He came into the room where they were. They could hear him breathe now, for he breathed heavily, as if he had been running. From place to place he moved with a sense of restless stealth. At length, just as they were about to sally forth, he hurried forward and flung open their door.

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Standing among the hanging clothes, the light strong on their faces, they seemed to strike him at

first as ghosts. He stared at them aghast, and recoiled. Then the old ghosts smiled and stepped forward with open arms. But he recoiled again, and his welcome to his far-come, heart-hungry parents was a groan.

They saw that he had a revolver in his hand. His eyes recurred to it, and he turned here and there for a place to lay it, but seemed unable to let it go. His mother flung forward and threw her arms about him, her lips pursed to kiss him, but he turned away with lowered eyes. His father took him by the shoulders and said:

"Why, what's the matter, boy? Ain't you glad to see your Maw—and me?"

For answer he only breathed hard and chokingly. His eyes went to the revolver again, then roved here and there, always as if searching for a place to hide it.

"Give that thing to me, Steve," the old man said. And he took it in his hands, forcing from the cold steel the colder fingers that clung as if frozen about the handle. [Pg 157]

Once he was free of the weapon, the boy toppled into a chair, his mother still clasping him desperately.

The old man knew something about firearms. He found the spring, broke the revolver, and looked into the cylinder. In every chamber was the round eye of a cartridge. Three of them bore the little scar of the firing-pin.

Old Coburn leaned hard against the wall. He looked about for a place to hide the horrible machine, but he, too, could not let go of it. His mouth was full of the ashes of life. He would have been glad to drop dead. But beyond the sick, clammy face of his son he saw the face of his wife, an old face, a mother's face, witless with bewilderment. The old man swallowed hard.

"What's happened, Steve? What's been goin' on?"

The young man only shook his head, ran his dry tongue along his lips, tore a piece of loose skin from the lower one with his teeth, and breathed noisily through nostrils that worked like a dog's. He pushed his mother's hands away as if they irked him. The old man could have struck him to the ground for that roughness, but the prayers in the mother's eyes restrained him.

"Better tell us, Steve. Maybe we might help you."

The young man's head worked as if he were gulping at a hard lump; his lips moved without sound, his gaze leaped from place to place, lighting everywhere but on his father's waiting, watching eyes, and always coming back to the revolver with a loathing fascination. At last he spoke, in a whisper like the rasp of chafed husks: [Pg 158]

"I had to do it. He deserved it."

The mother had not seen the nicks on the cartridges, but she needed no such evidence. She wailed:

"You don't mean that you—no—no—you didn't k-kill-ill-ill—"

The word rattled in her throat, and she went to the floor like a toppling bolster. It was the old man that lifted her face from the rug, ran to fetch water, and knelt to restore her. The son just wavered in his chair and kept saying:

"I had to do it. He was making her life a—"

"Her life?" the old man groaned, looking up where he knelt. "Then there's a woman in it?"

"Yes, it was for her. She's had a hard time. She's been horribly misunderstood. She may have been indiscreet—still she's a noble woman at heart. Her husband was a vile dog. He deserved it."

But the old man's head had dropped as if his neck were cracked. He saw what it all meant and would mean. He would have sprawled to the floor, but he caught sight of the pitiful face of his old love still white with the half-death of her swoon. He clenched his will with ferocity, resolving that he must not break, could not, would not break. He laid a hand on his son's knee and said, appealingly, in a low tone, as if he were the suppliant for mercy: [Pg 159]

"Better not mention anything about—about her—the woman you know, Steve—before your mother, not just now. Your mother's kind of poorly the last few days. Understand, Steve?"

The answer was a nod like the silly nodding of a toy mandarin.

It was a questionable mercy, restoring the mother just then from the bliss of oblivion, but she came gradually back through a fog of daze to the full glare of fact. Her thoughts did not run forward upon the scandal, the horror of the public, the outcry of all the press; she had but one thought, her son's welfare.

"Did anybody see you, Steve?"

"No. I went to his room. I don't think anybody s-saw me—yes, maybe the man across the hall did. Yes, I guess he saw me. He was at his door when I came out. He looked as if he sus-suspected-ed me. I suppose he heard the shots. And probably he s-saw the revol-ver. I couldn't seem to let it drop—to le-let it drop."



The mother turned frantic. "They'll come here for you, Stevie. They'll find it out. You must get away—somewhere—for just now, till we can think up something to do. Father will find some way of making everything all right, won't you, Paw? He always does, you know. Don't be scared, my boy. We must keep very calm." Her hands were wavering over him in a palsy. "Where can he go, Paw? Where's the best place for him to go? I'll tell you, Steve. Is your—your car anywhere near?"

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"It's outside at the door. I came back in it."

She got to her feet, and her urgency was ferocious. "Then you get right in this minute and go up to the old place—the little old house opposite the pond. Go as fast as you can. You know the place—where we lived before you were born. There's two big oak-trees st-standing there, and a pond just across the road. You go there and tell Susan—what shall he tell Susan, father? What shall he tell Susan? We'll stay here, and—and we'll bribe the elevator-boy to say you haven't come home at all, and if the po-po-lice come here we'll say we're expecting you, but we haven't seen you for ever so long. Won't we, Paw? That's what we'll say, won't we, Paw?"

The old man stood up to the lightning like an old oak. Trees do not run. They stand fast and take what the sky sends them. Old Coburn shook his white hair as a tree its leaves in a blast of wind before he spoke.

"Steve, my boy, I don't know what call you had to do this, but it's no use trying to run away and hide. They'll get you wherever you go. The telegraph and the cable and the detectives—no, it's not a bit of use. It only makes things look worse. Put on your hat and come with me. We'll go to the police before they come for you. I'll go with you, and I'll see you through."

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But flight, not fight, was the woman's one hope. She was wild with resistance to the idea of surrender. Her panic confirmed the young man in his one impulse—to get away. He dashed out into the hall, and when the father would have pursued, the mother thrust him aside, hurried past, and braced herself against the door. He put off her clinging, clutching hands as gently as he might, but she resisted like a tigress at bay, and before he could drag her aside they heard the iron-barred door of the elevator glide open and clang shut. And there they stood in the strange place, the old man staggered with the realization of the future, the old woman imbecile with fear.

What harm is it the honest oaks do, that Heaven hates them so and its lightnings search them out with such peculiar frenzy?

### III

Having no arenas where captive gladiators and martyrs satisfy the public longing for the sight of bleeding flesh and twitching nerve, the people of our day flock to the court-rooms for their keenest excitements.

The case of "The People vs. Stephen Coburn" had been an intensely popular entertainment. This day the room was unusually stuffed with men and women. At the door the officers leaned like buttresses against the thrust of a solid wall of humanity. Outside, the halls, the stairs, and the sidewalk were jammed with the mob crushing toward the door for a sight of the white-haired mother pilloried in the witness-box and fighting with all her poor wits against the shrewdest, calmest, fiercest cross-examiner in the State.

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In the jury-box the twelve silent prisoners of patience sat in awe of their responsibilities, a dozen extraordinarily ordinary, conspicuously average persons condemned to the agony of deciding whether they should consign a fellow-man to death or release a murderer among their fellow-men.

Next the judge sat Sarah Coburn, her withered hands clenched bonily in the lap where, not so many years ago, she had cuddled the babe that was now the culprit hunted down and abhorred. The mere pressure of his first finger had sent a soul into eternity and brought the temple of his own home crashing about his head.

Next the prisoner sat his father, veteran now with the experience that runs back to the time when the first father and mother found the first first-born of the world with hands reddened in the blood of the earliest sacrifice on the altar of Cain.

People railed in the street and in the press against the law's delay with Stephen Coburn's execution and against the ability of a rich father to postpone indefinitely the vengeance of justice. Old Coburn had forced the taxpayers to spend vast sums of money. He had spent vaster sums himself. The public and the prosecution, his own enormously expensive lawyers, his son and his very wife, supposed that he still had vast sums to spend. It was solely his own secret that he had no more. He had built his fortune as his father had built the stone wall along his fields, digging each boulder from the ground with his hands, lugging it across the irregular turf and heaving it to its place. Every dollar of his had its history of effort, of sweat and ache. And now the whole wall was gone, carried away in wholesale sweeps as by a landslide.

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In his business he had been so shrewd and so close that people had said, "Old Coburn will fight for five days for five minute's interest on five cents." When his son's liberty was at stake he signed blank checks, he told his lawyers to get the best counsel in the nation. He did not ask, "How much?" He asked, "How good?" Every technical ruse that could be employed to thwart the prosecution he employed. He bribed everybody bribable whose silence or speech had value. Dangerous witnesses were shipped to places whence they could not be summonsed. Blackmailers

and blackguards fattened on his generosity and his fear.

The son, Stephen Coburn, had gone to the city, warm-hearted, young, venturesome, not vicious, had learned life in a heap, sowed his wild oats all at once, fallen among evil companions, and drifted by easy stages into an affair of inexcusable ugliness, whence he seemed unable to escape till a misplaced chivalry whispered him what to do. He had found himself like Lancelot with "his honor rooted in dishonor" and "faith unfaithful kept him falsely true." But Stephen Coburn was no Lancelot, any more than his siren was a Guinevere or her slain husband a King Arthur. He was simply a well-meaning, hot-headed, madly enamoured young fool. The proof of this last was that he took a revolver to his Gordian knot. Revolvers, as he found too late, do not solve problems. They make a far-reaching noise, and their messengers cannot be recalled.

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His parents had not known the city phase of their son. They had known the adorable babe he had been, the good boy weeping over a broken-winged robin tumbled from a nest, running downstairs in his bare feet for one more good-night kiss, crying his heart out when he must be sent away to school, remembering their birthdays and abounding in gentle graces. This was the Stephen Coburn they had known. They believed it to be the real, the permanent, Stephen Coburn; the other was but the victim of a transient demon. They could not believe that their boy would harm the world again. They could not endure the thought that his repentance and his atonement should be frustrated by a dishonorable end.

The public knew only the wicked Stephen Coburn. His crime had been his entrance into fame. All the bad things he had done, all the bad people he had known, all the bad places he had gone, were searched out and published by the detectives and the reporters. To blacken Stephen Coburn's repute so horribly that the jurors would feel it their inescapable duty to scavenge him from the offended earth, that was the effort of the prosecution. To prevent that blackening was one of the most vital and one of the most costly features of the defense. To deny the murder and tear down the web of circumstantial evidence as fast as the State could weave it was another.

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The Coburn case had become a notorious example of that peculiarly American institution, the serial trial. The first instalment had ended in a verdict of guilty. It had been old Coburn's task to hold up his wife and his son in the collapse of their mad despair, while he managed and financed the long, slow struggle with the upper courts till he wrung from them an order for a new trial. This had ended, after weeks of torment in the court-room and forty-eight hours of almost unbearable suspense, in a disagreement of the jury. The third trial found the prosecution more determined than ever, and acquainted with all the methods of the defense. The only flaw was the loss of an important witness, "the man across the hall," whom impatient time had carried off to the place where subpoenaeas are not respected. His deposition and his testimony at the previous trials were as lacking in vitality as himself.

And now once more old Coburn must carry everything upon his back, aching like a world-weary Atlas who dares not shift his burden. But now he was three years weaker, and he had no more money to squander. His house, his acres, the cattle upon his hills, his blooded thoroughbreds, his patriarchal stallions, his town lots, his bank-building, his bonds and stocks, all were sold, pawned as collateral, or blanketed with mortgages.

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As he had comforted his wife when they had witnessed the bolt from the blue, so now he sat facing her in her third ordeal. Only now she was not on the home porch, but in the arena. He could not hold her hands. Now she dared not close her eyes and cry; it was not the work of one thunderbolt she had to see. Now, under the darting questions of the court-examiner, she was like a frightened girl lost in the woods and groping through a tempest, with lightning thrusts pursuing her on every side, stitching the woods with fire like the needle in a sewing-machine stabbing and stabbing at the dodging shuttle.

The old woman had gone down into the pit for her son. She had been led through the bogs and the sewers of vice. Almost unspeakable, almost unthinkable wickedness had been taught to her till she had become deeply versed in the lore that saddens the eyes of the scarlet women of Babylon. But still her love purified her, and almost sanctified the strategy she practised, the lies she told, the truths she concealed, the plots she devised with the uncanny canniness of an old peasant. People not only felt that it was her duty to fight for her young like a mad she-wolf, but they would have despised her for any failure of sacrifice.

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She sat for hours baffling the inquisitor, foreseeing his wiles by intuition, evading his masked pitfalls by instinct. She was terribly afraid of him, yet more afraid of herself, afraid that she would break down and become a brainless, weeping thing. It was the sincerity of her fight against this weakness that made her so dangerous to the prosecuting attorney. He wanted to compel her to admit that her son had confessed his deed to her. She sought to avoid this admission. She had not guessed that he was more in dread of her tears than of her guile. He was gentler with her than her own attorneys had been. At all costs he felt that he must not succeed too well with her.

The whole trial had become by now as academic as a game of chess, to all but the lonely, homesick parents. The prosecuting attorney knew that the mother was not telling the truth; the judge and the jury knew that she was not telling the truth. But unless this could be geometrically demonstrated the jury would disregard its own senses. Yet the prosecutor knew that if he succeeded in trapping the mother too abruptly into any admission dangerous to her son she would probably break down and cry her dreary old heart out, and then those twelve superhuman jurors would weep with her and care for nothing on earth except her consolation.

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The crisis came as crises love to come, without warning. The question had been simple enough, and the tone as gentle as possible: "You have just stated, Mrs. Coburn, that your son spoke to you in his apartment the day he is alleged to have committed this act, but I find that at the first and second trials you testified that you did not see him in his apartment at all. Which, please, is the correct statement?"

In a flash she realized what she had done. It is so hard to build and defend a fortress of lies, and she was very old and not very wise, tired out, confused by the stare of the mob and the knowledge that every word she uttered endangered the life she had borne. Now she felt that she had undone everything. She blamed herself for ruining the work of years. She saw her son led to death because of her blunder. Her answer to the question and the patient courtesy of the attorney was to throw her hands into the air, toss her white head to and fro, and give up the battle. The tears came like a gush of blood from a deep wound; they poured through the lean fingers she pressed against her gaunt cheeks, and she shook with the dry, weak weeping of senility and utter desolation. Then her old arms yearned for him as when a babe.

"I want my boy! I want my boy!"

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The judge grew very busy among his papers, the prosecuting attorney swallowed hard. The jurymen thought no more of evidence and of the stability of the laws. They all had mothers, or memory-mothers, and they only resolved that whatever crime Stephen Coburn might have committed, it would be a more dastardly crime for them to drive their twelve daggers into the aching breast that had suckled him. On the instant the trial had resolved itself into "The People vs. One Poor Old Mother." The jury's tears voted for them, and their real verdict was surging up in one thought:

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"This white haired saint wants her boy: he may be a black sheep, but she wants him, and she shall have him, by—" whatever was each jurymen's favorite oath.

When the judge had finished his charge the jury stumbled on one another's heels to get to their sanctum. There they reached a verdict so quickly that, as the saying is, the foreman was coming back into the court-room before the twelfth man was out of it. Amazed at their own unanimity, they were properly ashamed, each of the other eleven, for their mawkish weakness, and their treachery to the stern requirements of higher citizenship. But they went home not entirely unconsolated by the old woman's cry of beatitude at that phrase, "Not Guilty."

She went among them sobbing with ecstasy, and her tears splashed their hands like holy water. It was all outrageously illegal, and sentimental, and harmful to the sanctity of the law. And yet, is it entirely desirable that men should ever grow unmindful of the tears of old mothers?

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#### IV

The road came pouring down from the wooded hills, and the house faced the pond as before. But there was a new guest in the house. Up-stairs, in a room with a sloping wall and a low ceiling and a dormer window, sat a young man whose face had been prominent so long in the press and in the court-room that now he preferred to keep away from human eyes. So he sat in the little room and read eternally. He had acquired the habit of books in the whitewashed cell where he had spent the three of his years that should have been the happiest, busiest, best of all. He read anything he could find now—old books, old magazines, old newspapers. Finally he read even the old family Bible his mother had toted into his room for his comfort. It was a bulky tome with print of giant size and pictures of crude imagery, with here and there blank pages for recording births, deaths, marriages. Here he found the names of all his brothers and sisters, and all of them were entered among the deaths. The manners of the deaths were recorded in the shaky handwriting of fresh grief: Alice Anne, scarlet fever; James Arthur, Jr., convulsions; Andrew Morton, whooping-cough; Cicely Jane, typhoid; Amos Turner, drowned while saving his brother Stephen's life; Edward John, killed in train wreck.

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Sick at heart, he turned away from the record, but the book fell open of itself at a full-page insert of the Decalogue, illuminated by some artless printer with gaudy splotches of gold, red and blue and green initials, and silly curlicues of arabesque, as if the man had been ignorant of what they meant, those ten pillars of the world.

Stephen smiled wanly at the bad taste of the decoration, till one line of fire leaped from the text at him, "Thou Shalt Not Kill." But he needed no further lessoning in that wisdom. He retreated from the accusing page and went to lean against the dormer window and look out upon the world from the jail of his past. No jury could release him from that. Everywhere he looked, everywhere he thought, he saw evidence of the penalty he had brought upon his father and mother, more than upon himself and his future. He knew that his father's life-work had been ruined, and that his honorable career would be summed up in the remembrance that he was the old man who bankrupted himself to save his son from the gallows. He knew that this very house, which remained as the last refuge, was mortgaged again as when his father and mother had come into it before he was born. The ironic circle was complete.

Down-stairs he could hear the slow and heavy footsteps of his father, and the creak of the chair as he dropped heavily into it. Then he heard the screen-door flap and heard his mother's rocking-

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chair begin its seesaw strain. He knew that their tired old hands would be clasped and that their tired old eyes would be staring off at the lightning-shattered oaks. He heard them say, just about as always:

"What you been doin', Paw?"

"Just putterin' 'round the barn. What you been doin', Maw?"

"Just putterin' 'round the kitchen gettin' supper started. I went up-stairs and knocked at Stevie's door. He didn't answer. Guess he's asleep."

"Guess so."

"It seems awful good, Paw, to be back in this old place, don't it?—you and me just settin' here and our boy safe and sound asleep up-stairs."

"That's so. As the fellow says in the circus, here we are again, Maw."

"Here we are again, Paw."

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## AND THIS IS MARRIAGE

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His soul floated upward from the lowermost depths of oblivion, slowly, as a water-plant, broken beneath, drifts to the surface. And then he was awake and unutterably afraid.

His soul opened, as it were, its eyes in terror and his fleshly eyelids went ajar. There was nothing to frighten him except his own thoughts, but they seemed to have waited all ready loaded with despair for the instant of his waking.

The room was black about him. The world was black. He had left the window open, but he could not see outdoors. Only his memory told him where the window was. Never a star pinked the heavens to distinguish it. He could not tell casement from sky, nor window from wall, nor wall from ceiling or floor. He was as one hung in primeval chaos before light had been decreed.

He could not see his own pillow. He knew of it only because he felt it where it was hot under his hot cheek. He could not see the hand he raised to push the hair from his wet brow. He knew that he had a hand and a brow only from their contact, from the sense of himself in them, from the throb of his pulse at the surface of himself.

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He felt almost completely disembodied, poised in space, in infinite gloom, alone with complete loneliness. As the old phrase puts it, he was all by himself.

The only sound in his universe, besides the heavy surf of his own blood beating in his ears, was the faint, slow breathing of his wife, asleep in the same bed, yet separated from him by a sword of hostility that kept their souls as far apart as planets are.

He laughed in bitter silence to think how false she was to the devoted love she had promised him, how harsh her last words had been and how strange from the lips that used to murmur every devotion, every love-word, every trust.

He wanted to whirl on her, shake her out of the cowardly refuge of sleep, and resume the wrangle that had ended in exhaustion.

He wanted to gag her so that she would hear him out for once and not break into every phrase. He wanted to tell her for her own good in one clear, cold, logical, unbroken harangue how atrocious she was, how futile, fiendish, heartless. But he knew that she would not listen to him. Even if he gagged her mouth her mind would still dodge and buffet him. How ancient was the experience that warned a man against argument with a woman! And that wise old saw, "Let sleeping dogs lie," referred even better to wives. He would not let her know that he was awake—awake, perhaps, for hours of misery.

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This had happened often of late. It had been a hard week, day after day of bitter toil wearing him down in body and fraying his every nerve.

His business was in a bad way, and he alone could save it, and he could save it only by ingenuity and inspiration. But the inspiration, he was sure, would not come to him till he could rest throughout.

Sleep was his hope, his passion, food, drink, medicine. He was heavily pledged at the bank. He could borrow no more. The president had threatened him if he did not pay what was overdue. Bigger businesses than his were being left to crash. A financial earthquake was rocking every tower in the world.

Though he needed cash vitally to further his business, there was a sharper and sharper demand upon him from creditors desperately harried by their own desperate creditors. He must find with his brain some new source of cash. He must fight the world. But how could he fight without rest? Even pugilists rested between rounds.

He had not slept a whole night for a week. To-night he had gone to bed sternly resolved on a

while of annihilation. Anything for the brief sweet death with the morning of resurrection.

And then she had quarreled with him. And now he was awake, and he felt that he would not sleep.

He wondered what the hour was. He was tempted to rise and make a light and look at his watch, but he felt that the effort and the blow of the glare on his eyes might confirm his insomnia. He lay and wondered, consumed with curiosity as to the hour—as if that knowledge could be of value.

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By and by, out of the stillness and the widespread black came the slumbrous tone of a far-off town clock. Three times it rumbled in the air as if distance moaned faintly thrice.

Three o'clock! He had had but two hours' sleep, and would have no more! And he needed ten! Tomorrow morning—this morning!—he must join battle for his very existence.

He lay supine, trying not to clench a muscle, seeking to force his surrender to inanition; but he could not get sleep though he implored his soul for it, prayed God for it.

At length he ceased to try to compel slumber. He lay musing. It is a strange thing to lie musing in the dark. His soul seemed to tug and waver outside his body as he had seen an elephant chained by one leg in a circus tent lean far away from its shackles, and sway and put its trunk forth gropingly. His soul seemed to be under his forehead, pushing at it as against a door. He felt that if he had a larger, freer forehead he would have more soul and more room for his mind to work.

Then the great fear came over him again. In these wakeful moods he suffered ecstasies of fright.

He was appalled with life. He felt helpless, bodyless, doomed.

On his office wall hung a calendar with a colored picture showing fishermen in a little boat in a fog looking up to see a great Atlantic liner just about to run them down. So the universe loomed over him now, rushed down to crush him. The other people of the world were asleep in their places; his creditors, his rivals were resting, gaining strength to overwhelm him on the morrow, and he must face them unrefreshed.

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He dreamed forward through crisis after crisis, through bankruptcy, disgrace, and mortal illness. He thought of his family, the children asleep in their beds under the roof that he must uphold like an Atlas. Poor little demanding, demanding things! What would become of them when their father broke down and was turned out of his factory and out of his home? How they would hamper him, cling to him, cry out to him not to let them starve, not to let them go cold or barefoot, not to turn them adrift.

Yet they did not understand him. They loved their mother infinitely more. She watched over them, played with them, cuddled and kissed them, while he had to leave the house before they were up, and came home at night too fagged to play their games or endure their noise. And if they were to be punished, she used him as a threat, and saved them up for him to torment and denounce.

They loved her and were afraid of him. Yet what had she done for them? She had conceived them, borne them, nourished them for a year at most. Thereafter their food, their shelter, their clothes, their education, their whole prosperity must come from their father. Yet the very necessities of the struggle for their welfare kept him from giving them the time that would win their favor. They complained because he did not buy them more. They were discontented with what they had, and covetous of what the neighbors' children had, even where it was less than their own.

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He busied himself awhile at figuring out how much, all told, his children's upbringing had cost him. The total was astounding. If he had half of that sum now he would not be fretting about his pay-roll or his notes. He would triumph over every obstacle. Next he made estimate of what the children would cost him in the future. As they grew their expenses grew with them. He could not hope for the old comfort of sons, when they made a man strong, for nowadays grown sons must be started in business at huge cost with doubtful results and no intention of repaying the investment. And daughters have to be dressed up like holiday packages, expensive gifts that must be sent prepaid and may be returned, collect.

He could see nothing but vanity back of him and a welter of cost ahead. He could see no hope of ever catching up, of ever resting. His only rest would come when he died.

If he did not sleep soon he would assuredly die or go mad. Perhaps he was going mad already. He had fought too long, too hard. He would begin to babble and giggle soon and be led away to twiddle his fingers and talk with phantoms. He saw himself as he had seen other witless, slaving spectacles that had once been human, and a nausea of fear crushed big sweat out of his wincing skin.

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Better to die than to play the living burlesque of himself. Better to die than to face the shame of failure, the shame of reproach and ridicule; the epitaph of his business a few lines in the small type of "Business Troubles." Better to kill himself than risk the danger of going mad and killing perhaps his own children and his wife. He knew a man once, a faithful, devoted, gentle struggler with the world, whom a sudden insanity had led to the butchery of his wife and three little boys. They found him tittering among his mangled dead, and calling them pet names, telling the shattered red things that he had wrought God's will upon them.

What if this should come to him! Better to end all the danger of that by removing himself from

the reach of mania or shame. It would be the final proof of his love for his flock. And they would not think bitterly of him. All things are forgiven the dead. They would miss him and remember the best of him.

They would appreciate what they had cost him, too, when they no longer had him to draw on. He felt very sorry for himself. Grown man as he was, he was driven back into infancy by his terrors, and like a pouting, supperless boy, he wanted to die to spite the rest of the family and win their apologies even if he should not hear them.

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He wondered if, after all, his wife would not be happier to be rid of him. No, she would regret him for one thing at least, that he left her without means.

Well, she deserved to be penniless. Why should she expect a man to kill himself for her sake and leave her a wealthy widow to buy some other man? Let her practise then some of the economies he had vainly begged of her before. If she had been worthy of his posthumous protection she would not have treated him so outrageously at a time of such stress as this.

She knew he was dog-tired, yet she allowed him to be angered, and she knew just what themes were sure to provoke his wrath. So she had harped on these till she had rendered him to a frenzy.

They had stood about or paced the floor or dropped in chairs and fought as they flung off their clothes piecemeal. She had combed and brushed her hair viciously as she raged, weeping the unbeautiful tears of wrath. But he had not had that comfort of tears; his tears ran down the inside of his soul and burned. She goaded him out of his ordinary self-control—knew just how to do it and reveled in it.

No doubt he had said things to her that a gentleman does not say to a lady, that hardly any man would say to any woman. He was startled to remember what he had said to her. He abhorred the thought of such things coming from his lips—and to the mother of his children. But the blame for these atrocities was also hers. She had driven him frantic; she would have driven a less-dignified man to violence, to blows, perhaps. And she had had the effrontery to blame him for driving her frantic when it was she that drove him.

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Finally they had stormed themselves out, squandered their vocabularies of abuse, and taken resort to silence in a pretended dignity. That is, she had done this. He had relapsed into silence because he realized how impervious to truth or justice she was. Facts she would not deal in. Logic she abhorred. Reasoning infuriated her.

And then in grim, mutual contempt they had crept into bed and lain as far apart as they could. He would have gone into another room, but she would have thought he was afraid to hear more of her. Or she would have come knocking at the door and lured him back only to renew the war at some appeal of his to that sense of justice he was forever hoping to find in her soul.

He was aligned now along the very edge of the mattress. It was childish of her to behave so spitefully, but what could he do except repay her in kind? She would not have understood any other behavior. She had turned her back on him, too, and stretched herself as thin as she could as close to the edge as she could lie without falling out.

What a vixen she was! And at this time of all when she should have been gentle, soothing. Even if she had thought him wrong and misinterpreted his natural vehemence as virulence, she should have been patient. What was a wife for but to be a helpmeet? She knew how easily his temper was assuaged, she knew the very words. Why had she avoided them?

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And she was to blame for so many of his problems. Her bills and her children's bills were increasing. She took so much of his time. She needed so much entertaining, so much waiting on, so much listening to. Neither she nor the children produced. They simply spent. In a crisis they never gave help, but exacted it.

In business, as in a shipwreck, strong and useful men must step back and sacrifice themselves that the women and children might be saved—for other men to take care of. And what frauds these women were! All allurements and gentleness till they had entrapped their victims, then fiends of exaction, without sympathy for the big work of men, without interest in the world's problems, alert to ridiculous suspicions, reckless with accusations, incapable of equity, and impatient of everything important.

Marriage was a trap, masking its steel jaws and its chain under flowers. What changelings brides were! A man never led away from the altar the woman he led thither. Before marriage, so interested in a man's serious talk and the business of his life! After marriage, unwilling to listen to any news of import, sworn enemies of achievement, putting an ingrowing sentiment above all other nobilities of the race.

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And his wife was of all women the most womanish. She had lost what early graces she had. In the earlier days they had never quarreled. That is, of course, they had quarreled, but differently. They had left each other several times, but how rapturously they had returned. And then she had craved his forgiveness and granted hers without asking. She had always forgiven him for what he had not done, said, or thought, or for the things he had done and said most justly. But there had been a charm about her, a sweet foolishness that was irresistible.

In the dark now he smiled to think how dear and fascinating she had been then. Oh, she had loved him then, had loved the very faults she had imagined in him. Perhaps after he was dead she

would remember him with her earlier tenderness. She would blame herself for making him the irascible, hot-tempered brute he had been—perhaps—at times.

And now he had slain and buried himself, and his woe could burrow no farther down. His soul was at the bottom of the pit. There was no other way to go but upward, and that, of course, was impossible.

As he wallowed in the lugubrious comfort of his own post-mortem revenge he wished that he had left unsaid some of the things he had said. Quelled by the vision of his wife weeping over him and repenting her cruelties, they began to seem less cruel. She was absolved by remorse.

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He heard her sobbing over his coffin and heard her recall her ferocious words with shame. His white, set face seemed to try to console her. He heard what he was trying to tell her in all the gentle understanding of the tomb:

"I said worse things, honey. I don't know how I could have used such words to you, my sweetheart. A longshoreman wouldn't have called a fishwife what I called you, you blessed child. But it was my love that tormented me. If a man had quarreled with me, we'd have had a knock-down and drag-out and nothing more thought of it. If any woman but you had denounced me as you did I'd have shrugged my shoulders and not cared a—at all.

"It was because I loved you, honey, that your least frown hurt me so. But I didn't really mean what I said. It wasn't true. You're the best, the faithfulest, the prettiest, dearest woman in all the world, and you were a precious wife to me—so much more beautiful, more tender, more devoted than the wives of the other men I knew. I will pray God to bring you to me in the place I'm going to. I could not live without you anywhere."

This was what he was trying to tell her, and could not utter a word of it. He seemed to be lying in his coffin, staring up at her through sealed eyelids. He could not purse his cold lips to kiss her warm mouth. He could not lift an icy hand to bless her brow. They would come soon to lay the last board over his face and screw down the lid. She would scream and fight, but they would drag her away. And he could not answer her wild cries. He could not go to her rescue. He would be lifted in the box from the trestles and carried out on the shoulders of other men, and slid into the waiting hearse; and the horses would trot away with him, leaving her to penury, with her children and his at the mercy of the merciless world, while he was lowered into a ditch and hidden under shovelfuls of dirt, to lie there motionless, useless, hideously idle forever.

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This vision of himself dead was so vivid that his heart jumped in his breast and raced like a propeller out of water. The very pain and the terror were joyful, for they meant that he still lived.

Whatever other disasters overhung him, he was at least not dead. Better a beggar slinking along the dingiest street than the wealthiest Rothschild under the stateliest tomb. Better the sneers and pity of the world in whispers about his path than all the empty praise of the most resounding obituary.

The main thing was to be alive. Before that great good fortune all misfortunes were minor, unimportant details. And, after all, he was not so pitiable. His name was still respected. His factory was still running. Whatever his liabilities, he still had some assets, not least of them health and experience and courage.

But where had his courage been hiding that it left him whimpering alone? Was he a little girl afraid of the dark, or was he a man?

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There were still men who would lend him money or time. What if he was in trouble? Were not the merchant princes of the earth sweating blood? There had been a rich men's panic before the poor were reached. Now everybody was involved.

After all, what if he failed? Who had not failed? What if he fell bankrupt?—that was only a tumble down-stairs. Could he not pick himself up and climb again? Some of the biggest industries in the world had passed through temporary strain. The sun himself went into eclipse.

If his factory had to close, it could be opened again some day. Or even if he could not recover, how many better men than he had failed? To be crushed by the luck of things was no crime. There was a glory of defeat as well as of victory.

The one great gleaming truth was that he was still alive, still in the ring. He was not dead yet. He was not going to die. He was going to get up and win.

There was no shame in the misfortunes he had had. There was no disgrace in the fears he had bowed to. All the nations and all the men in them were in a night of fear. But already there was a change of feeling. The darker the hour, the nearer the dawn. The worse things were, the sooner they must mend.

People had been too prosperous; the world had played the spendthrift and gambled too high. But economy would restore the balance for the toilers. What had been lost would soon be regained.

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Fate could not down America yet. And he was an American. What was it "Jim" Hill had said to the scare-mongers: "The man who sells the United States short is a damned fool." And the man who sells himself short is a damned fool.

Thus he struggled through the bad weather of his soul. The clouds that had gathered and roared and shuttled with lightnings had emptied their wrath, and the earth still rolled. The mystery of terror was subtly altered to a mystery of surety.

Lying in the dark, motionless, he had wrought out the miracle of meditation. Within the senate chamber of his mind he had debated and pondered and voted confidence in himself and in life.

His eyes, still open, still battling for light, had found none yet. The universe was still black. He could not distinguish sky from window, nor casement from ceiling. Yet the gloom was no longer terrible. The universe was still a great ship rushing on, but he was no longer a midget in a little cockleshell about to be crushed. He was a passenger on the ship. The night was benevolent, majestic, sonorous with music. The sea was glorious and the voyage forward.

And now that his heart was full of good news, he had a wild desire to rush home with it to her who was his home. How often he had left her in the morning after a wrangle, and hurried back to her at night bearing glad tidings, the quarrel forgotten beyond the need of any treaty. And she would be there among their children, beaming welcome from her big eyes.

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And she was always so glad when he was glad. She took so much blame on herself; though how was she to blame for herself? Yet she took no credit to herself for being all the sweet things she was. She was the flowers and the harvest, and the cool, amorous evening after the hard day was done. And he was the peevish, whining, swearing imbecile that chose a woman for wife because she was a rose and then clenched her thorns and complained because she was not a turnip.

He felt a longing to tell her how false his croakings had been in that old dead time so long ago as last night. But she was asleep. And she needed sleep. She had been greatly troubled by his troubles. She had been anxious for him and the children. She had so many things to worry over that never troubled him. She had wept and been angry because she could not make him understand. Her very wrath was a way of crying: "I love you! You hurt me!"

He must let her sleep. Her beauty and her graces needed sleep. It was his blessed privilege to guard her slumbers, his pride to house her well and to see that she slept in fabrics suited to the delicate fabric of her exquisite body.

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But if only she might chance to be awake that he might tell her how sorry he was that he had been weak and wicked enough to torment her with his baseless fears and his unreasonable ire. At least he must touch her with tenderness. Even though she slept, he must give her the benediction of one light caress.

He put his hand out cautiously toward her. He laid his fingers gently on her cheek. How beautiful it was even in the dark! But it was wet! with tears! Suddenly her little invisible fingers closed upon his hand like grape tendrils.

But this did not prove her awake. So habited they were to each other that even in their sleep their bodies gave or answered such endearments.

He waited till his loneliness for her was unendurable, then he breathed, softly:

"Are you asleep, honey?"

For answer she whirled into his bosom and clenched him in her arms and wept—in whispers lest the children hear. He petted her tenderly and kissed her hair and her eyelids and murmured:

"Did I wake you, honey?"

"No, no!" she sobbed. "I've been awake for hours."

"But you didn't move!"

"I was afraid to waken you. You need your rest so much. I've been thinking how hard you work, how good you are. I'm so ashamed of myself for—"

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"But it was all my fault, honey."

"Oh no, no, my dear, my dear!"

He let her have the last word; for an enormous contentedness filled his heart. He drew the covers about her shoulder and held her close and breathed deep of the companionship of the soul he had chosen. He breathed so deeply that his head drooped over hers, his cheek upon her hair. The night seemed to bend above them and mother them and say to them, "Hush! hush! and sleep!"

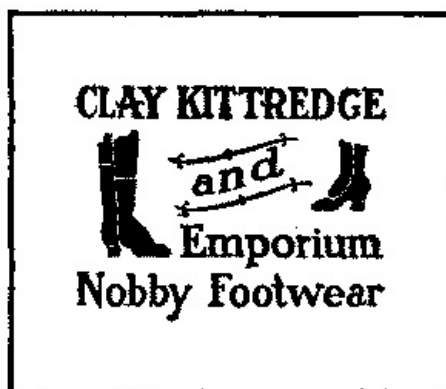
There are many raptures in the world, and countless beautiful moments, and not the least of them is this solemn marriage in sleep of the man and woman whose days are filled with cares, and under whose roof at night children and servants slumber aloof secure.

While these two troubled spirits found repose and renewal, locked each in the other's arms, the blackness was gradually withdrawn from the air. In the sky there came a pallor that grew to a twilight and became a radiance and a splendor. And night was day. It would soon be time for the father to rise and go forth to his work, and for the mother to rise to the offices of the home.



## I

In the tame little town of Hillsdale he seemed the tamest thing of all, Will Rudd—especially appropriate to a kneeling trade, a shoe clerk by election. He bent the pregnant hinges to anybody soever that entered the shop, with its ingenious rebus on the sign-board:



He not only untied the stilted Oxfords or buttoned in the arching insteps of those who sat in the "Ladies' and Misses' Dept.," which was the other side of the double-backed bench whose obverse was the "Gents' Dept.," but also he took upon the glistening surface of his trousers the muddy soles of merchants, the clay-bronzed brogans of hired men, the cowhide toboggans of teamsters, and the brass-toed, red-kneed boots of little boys ecstatic in their first feel of big leather.

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Rudd was a shoe clerk to be trusted. He never revealed to a soul that Miss Clara Lommel wore shoes two sizes too small, and when she bit her lip and blenched with agony as he pried her heel into the protesting dongola, he seemed not to notice that she was no Cinderella.

And one day, when it was too late, and Miss Lucy Posnett, whose people lived in the big brick mansard, realized that she had a hole in her stocking, what did Rudd do? Why, he never let on.

Stanch Methodist that he was, William Rudd stifled *in petto* the fact that the United Presbyterian parson's wife was vain and bought little, soft black kids with the Cuban heel and a patent-leather tip to the opera toe! The United Presbyterian parson himself had salved his own vanity by saying that shoes show so plainly on the pulpit, and it was better to buy them a trifle too small than a trifle too large, but—umm!—er, hadn't you better put in a little more of that powder, Mr. Rudd? I have on—whew!—unusually thick socks to-day.

Clay Kittredge, Rudd's employer, valued him, secretly, as a man who brought in customers and sold them goods. But he never mentioned this to his clerk lest Rudd be tempted to the sin of vanity, and incidentally to demanding an increase in that salary which had remained the same since he had been promoted from delivery-boy.

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Kittredge found that Rudd kept his secrets as he kept everybody's else. Professing church member as he was, Rudd earnestly palmed off shopworn stock for fresh invoices, declared that the obsolete Piccadillies which Kittredge had snapped up from a bankrupt sale were worn on all the best feet on Fifth Avenoo, and blandly substituted "just as good" for advertised wares that Kittredge did not carry.

Besides, when no customer was in the shop he spent the time at the back window, doctoring tags—as the King of France negotiated the hill—by marking up prices, then marking them down.

But when he took his hat from the peg and set it on his head, he put on his private conscience. Whatever else he did, he never lied or cheated to his own advantage.

And so everybody in town liked William Rudd, and nobody admired him. He was treated with the affectionate contempt of an old family servant. But he had his ambitions and great ones, ambitions that reached past himself into the future of another generation. He felt the thrill that stirs the acorn, fallen into the ground and hidden there, but destined to father an oak. His was the ambition beyond ambition that glorifies the seed in the loam and ennobles the roots of trees thrusting themselves downward and gripping obscurity in order that trunks and branches, flowers and fruits, pods and cones, may flourish aloft.

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Eventually old Clay Kittredge died, and the son chopped the "Jr." curlicue from the end of his name and began a new régime. The old Kittredge had sought only his own aggrandizement, and his son was his son. The new Clay Kittredge had gone to public school with Rudd and they continued to be "Clay" and "Will" to each other; no one would ever have called Rudd by so demonstrative a name as "Bill."

When Clay second stepped into his father's boots—and shoes—he began to enlarge the business, hoping to efface his father's achievements by his own. The shop gradually expanded to a department store for covering all portions of the anatomy and supplying inner wants as well.

Rudd was so overjoyed at not being uprooted and flung aside to die that he never observed the

shrewd irony of Kittredge's phrase, "You may remain, Will, with no reduction of salary."

To have lost his humble position would have frustrated his dream, for he was doing his best to build for himself and for Her a home where they could fulfil their destinies. He cherished no hope, hardly even a desire, to be a great or rich man himself. He was one of the nest-weavers, the cave-burrowers, the home-makers, who prepare the way for the greater than themselves who shall spring from themselves.

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He was of those who become the unknown fathers of great men. And so, on a salary that would have meant penury to a man of self-seeking tastes, he managed to save always the major part of his earning. At the bank he was a modest but regular visitor to the receiving-teller, and almost a total stranger to the paying-teller.

His wildest dissipation being a second pipeful of tobacco before he went to bed—or "retired," as he would more gently have said it—he eventually heaped up enough money and courage to ask Martha Kellogg to marry him. Martha, who was the plainest woman in plain Hillsdale, accepted William, and they were made one by the parson. The wedding was accounted "plain" even in Hillsdale.

The gloomy bridegroom and the unbridly bride spent together all the time that Rudd could spare from the store. He bought for her a little frame house with a porch about as big as an upper berth, a patch of grass with a path through it to the back door, some hollyhocks of startling color, and a highly unimportant woodshed. It spelled HOME to them, and they were as happy as people usually are. He did all he could to please her. At her desire he even gave up his pipe without missing it—much.

Mrs. Martha Rudd was an ambitious woman, or at least restless and discontented. Having escaped her supreme horror, that of being an old maid, she began to grow ambitious for her husband. She nagged him for a while about his plodding ways, the things that satisfied him, the salary he endured. But it did no good. Will Rudd was never meant to put boots and spurs on his own feet and splash around in gore. He was for carpet slippers, round-toed shoes, and on wet days, rubbers; on slushy days he even descended to what he called "ar'tics."

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Not understanding the true majesty of her husband's long-distance dreams, and baffled by his unresponse to her ambitions for him, Martha grew ambitious for the child that was coming. She grew frantically, fantastically ambitious. Here was something William Rudd could respond to. He could be ambitious as Cæsar—but not for himself. He was a groundling, but his son should climb.

Husband and wife spent evenings and evenings debating the future of the child. They never agreed on the name—or the alternative names. For it is advisable to have two ready for any emergency. But the future was rosy. They were unanimous on that—President of the United States, mebbe; or at least the President's wife.

Mrs. Rudd, who occasionally read the continued stories in the evening paper, had happened on a hero named "Eric." She favored that name—or Gwendolynne (with a "y"), as the case might be. In any event, the child's future was so glowing that it warmed Mrs. Rudd to asking one evening, forgetful of her earlier edict:

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"Why don't you smoke your pipe any more, Will?"

"I'd kind o' got out of the habit, Marthy," he said, and added, hastily, "but I guess I'll git back in."

Thereafter they sat of evenings by the lamp, he smoking, she sewing things—holding them up now and then for him to see. They looked almost too small to be convincing, until he brought home from the store a pair of shoes—"the smallest size made, Marthy, too small for some of the dolls you see over at Bostwick's."

It was the golden period of his life. Rudd never sold shoes so well. People could hardly resist his high spirits. Anticipation is a great thing—it is all that some people get.

To be a successful shoe clerk one must acquire the patience of Job without his gift of complaint, and Rudd was thoroughly schooled. So he waited with a hope-lit serenity the preamble to the arrival of his—her—their child.

And then fate, which had previously been content with denying him comforts and keeping him from luxuries, dealt him a blow in the face, smote him on his patient mouth. The doctor told him that the little body of his son had been born still. After that it was rather a stupor of despair than courage that carried him through the vain struggle for life of the worn-out housewife who became only almost a mother. It seemed merely the logical completion of the world's cruelty when the doctor laid a heavy hand on his shoulder and walked out of the door, without leaving any prescription to fill. Rudd stood like a wooden Indian, too dazed to understand or to feel. He opened the door to the undertaker and waited outside the room, just twiddling his fingers and wondering. His world had come to an end and he did not know what to do.

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At the church, the offices of the parson, and the soprano's voice from behind the flowers, singing "Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me"—Marthy's favorite hymn—brought the tears trickling, but he could not believe that what had happened had happened. He got through the melancholy honor of riding in the first hack in the shabby pageant, though the town looked strange from that window. He shivered stupidly at the first sight of the trench in the turf which was to be the new lodging of his family. He kept as quiet as any of the group among the mounds while the bareheaded

preacher finished his part.

He was too numb with incredulity to find any expression until he heard that awfullest sound that ever grates the human ear—the first shovelful of clods rattling on a coffin. Then he understood—then he woke. When he saw the muddy spade spill dirt hideously above her lips, her cheeks, her brow, and the little bundle of futile flesh she cuddled with a rigid arm to a breast of ice—then a cry like the shriek of a falling tree split his throat and he dropped into the grave, sprawling across the casket, beating on its denying door, and sobbing:

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"You mustn't go alone, Marthy. I won't let you two go all by yourselves. It's so fur and so dark. I can't live without you and the—the baby. Wait! Wait!"

They dragged him out, and the shovels concluded their venerable task. He was sobbing too loudly to hear them, and the parson was holding him in his arms and patting his back and saying "'Shh!' 'Shh!'" as if he were a child afraid of the dark.

The sparse company that had gathered to pay the last devoir to the unimportant woman in the box in the ditch felt, most of all, amazement at such an unexpected outburst from so expectable a man as William Rudd. There was much talk about it as the horses galloped home, much talk in every carriage except his and the one that had been hers.

Up to this, the neighbors had taken the whole affair with that splendid philosophy neighbors apply to other people's woes. Mrs. Budd Granger had said to Mrs. Ad. Peck when they met in Bostwick's dry-goods store, at the linen counter:

"Too bad about Martha Rudd, isn't it? Plain little body, but nice. Meant well. Went to church regular. Yes, it's too bad. I don't think they ought to put off the strawb'ry fest'val, though, just for that, do you? Never would be any fun if we stopped for every funeral, would there? Besides, the strawb'ry fest'val's for charity, isn't it?"

The strawberry festival was not put off and the town paper said that "a pleasant time was had by all." Most of the talk was about Will Rudd. The quiet shoe clerk had provided the town with an alarm, an astonishment. He was most astounded of all. As he rode back to the frame house in the swaying carriage he absolutely could not believe that such hopes, such plans, could be shattered with such wanton, wasteful cruelty. That he should have loved, married, and begotten, and that the new-made mother and the new-born child should be struck dead, nullified, returned to clay—such things were too foolish, too spendthrift, to believe.

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It is strange that people do not get used to death. It has come to nearly every being anybody has ever heard of; and whom it has not yet reached, it will. Every one of the two billions of us on earth to-day expects it to come to him, and (if he have them) to his son, his daughter, his man-servant, his maid-servant, his ox, his ass, the stranger within his gates, the weeds by the road. Kittens and kingdoms, potato-bugs, plants, and planets—all are on the visiting-list.

Death is the one expectation that never fails to arrive. But it comes always as a new thing, an unheard-of thing, a miracle. It is the commonest word in the lexicon, yet it always reads as a *hapax legomenon*. It is like spring, though so unlike. For who ever believed that May would emerge from March this year? And who ever remembers that violets were suddenly abroad on the hills last April, too?

William Rudd ought to have known better. In a town where funerals were social events dangerously near to diversion, he had been unusually frequent at them. For he belonged to the local chapter of the Knights of Pythias, and when a fellow-member in good standing was forced to resign, William Rudd donned his black suit, his odd-looking cocked hat with the plume, and the anachronous sword, which he carried as one would expect a shoe clerk to carry a sword. The man in the hearse ahead went to no further funerals, stopped paying his dues, made no more noise at the bowling-alley, and ceased to dent his pew cushion. Somebody got his job at once and, after a decent time, somebody else probably got his wife. The man became a remembrance, if that.

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Rudd had long realized that people eventually become dead; but he had never realized death. He had been an oblivious child when his mother and father had taken the long trip whose tickets read but one way, and had left him to the grudging care of an uncle with a large enough family.

And now his own family was obliterated. He was again a single man, that familiar thing called a widower. He could not accept it as a fact. He denied his eyes. He was as incredulous as a man who sees a magician play some old vanishing trick. He had seen it, but he could not understand it enough to believe it. When the hack left him at his house he found it emptier than he could have imagined a house could be. Marthy was not on the porch, or in the settin'-room, the dinin'-room, the kitchen, or anywhere up-stairs. The bed was empty, the stove cold. The lamp had not been filled. The cruse of his life was dry, the silver cord loosened, the pitcher broken at the fountain, the wheel broken at the cistern.

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As he stumbled about filling the lamp, and covering his hands with kerosene, he wondered what he should do in those long hours between the closing of the shoe-shop of evenings and its opening of mornings. Men behave differently in this recurring situation. Some take to drink, or return to it. Rudd did not like liquor; at least he did not think he would have liked it if he had ever tasted it. Some take to gambling. Rudd did not know big casino from little, though he had once almost acquired a passion for checkers—the give-away game. Some submerge themselves in

money-getting. Rudd would not have given up the serene certainty of his little salary for a speculator's chance to clean up a million, or lose his margin.

If only the child had lived, he should have had an industry, an ambition, a use.

Widowers have occasionally hunted consolation with the same sex that sent them grief. Rudd had never known any woman in town as well as he had known Martha, and it had taken him years to find courage to propose to her. The thought of approaching any other woman with intimate intention gave him an ague sweat.

And how was he to think of taking another wife? Even if he had not been so confounded with grief for his helpmeet as to believe her the only woman on earth for him, how could he have accosted another woman when he had only debts for a dowry?

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Death is an expensive thing in every phase. The event that robbed Rudd of his wife, his child, his hope, had taken also his companion, his cook, his chambermaid, his washerwoman, the mender of his things; and in their place had left an appalling monument of bills. The only people he had permitted himself to owe money to were the gruesome committee that brought him his grief; the doctor, the druggist, the casket-maker, the sexton, and the dealer in the unreal estate who sold the tiny lots in the sad little town.

His soul was too bruised to grope its way about, but instinct told him that bills must be paid. Instinct automatically set him to work clearing up his accounts. For their sakes he devoted himself to a stricter economy than ever. He engaged meals at Mrs. Judd's boarding-house. He resolved even to rent his home. But, mercifully, there was no one in town to take the place. In economy's name, too, he put away his pipe—for one horrible evening. The next day he remembered how Marthy had sung out, "Why don't you smoke your pipe any more, Will?" and he had answered: "I'd kind o' got out of the habit, Marthy, but I guess I'll git back in." And Lordy, how she laughed! The laughter of the dead—it made a lonely echo in the house.

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Gradually he found, as so many dismal castaways have found, that there is a mystic companionship in that weed which has come out of the vegetable world, as the dog from among the animals, to make fellowship with man. Rudd and his pipe were Robinson Crusoe and his man Friday on the desert island of loneliness. They stared out to sea; and imagined.

Remembering how Martha and he used to dream about the child, in the tobacco twilight, and how they planned his future, Rudd's soul learned to follow the pipe smoke out from the porch, over the fence and to disappear beyond the horizons of the town and the sharp definition of the graveyard fence. He became addicted to dreams, habituated to dealing in futurities that could never come to pass.

Being his only luxury on earth, by and by they became his necessities, realities more concrete than the shoes he sold or the board walk he plodded to and from his store.

One Sunday Rudd was present at church when Mr. and Mrs. Budd Granger brought their fourth baby forward to be christened. The infant bawled and choked and kicked its safety-pins loose. Rudd was sure that Eric never would have misbehaved like that. Yet Eric had been denied the sacred rite.

This reminded Rudd how many learned theologians had proved by rigid logic that unbaptized babies are damned forever. He spent days of horror at the frightful possibility, and nights of infernal travel across gridirons where babies flung their blistered hands in vain appeal to far-off mothers. He could not get it from his mind until, one evening, his pipe persuaded him to erect a font in the temple of his imagination.

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He mused through all the ritual, and the little frame house seemed to thrill as the vague preacher enounced the sonorous phrase:

"I baptize thee Eric—in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

Marthy was there, too, of course, but it was the father that held the baby. And the child did not wince when the pastor's fingers moistened the tiny brow. He just clasped a geranium-petal hand round Rudd's thumb and stared at the sacrament with eyes of more than mortal understanding.

The very next day Mrs. Ad. Peck walked into the store, proud as a peahen. She wanted shoes for her baby. The soles of the old pair were intact, but the stubby toes were protruding.

"He crawls all over the house, Mr. Rudd! And he cut his first tooth to-day, too. Just look at it. Ain't it a beauty?"

In her insensate conceit she pried the child's mouth apart as if he were a pony, to disclose the minute peak of ivory. It was nothing to make such a fuss over, Rudd thought, though he praised it as if it were a snow-capped Fuji-yama.

That night Eric cut two teeth. And Marthy nearly laughed her head off.

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Rudd did not talk aloud to the family he had revened from the grave. He had no occult persuasions. He just sat in his rocker and smoked hard and imagined hard. He imagined the lives of his family not only as they might have been, but as they ought to have been. He was like a spectator at a play, mingling belief and make-belief inextricably, knowing it all untrue, yet weeping, laughing, thrilling as if it were the very image of fact.

All mothers and some fathers have a sad little calendar in their hearts' cupboards where they keep track of the things that might have been. "October fifth," they muse. "Why, it's Ned's birthday! He'd have been twenty-one to-day if he'd lived. He'd have voted this year. December twenty-third? Alice would have been coming home from boarding-school to-day if—July fourth? Humph! How Harry loved the fireworks! But he'd be a Senator now and invited to his home town to make a speech in the park to-day if—" If! If!

Everybody must keep some such if-almanac, some such diary of prayers denied. That was all Rudd did; only he wrote it up every evening. He would take from the lavender where he kept them the little things Martha had sewed for the child and the little shoes he had bought. The warm body had never wriggled and laughed in the tiny trousseau, the little shoes had never housed pink toes, but they helped him to pretend until they became to him things outgrown by a living, growing child. He cherished them as all parents cherish the first shoes and the first linens and woollens of their young.

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Marthy and Eric Rudd lived just behind the diaphanous curtain of the pipe smoke, or in the nooks of the twilight shadow, or in the heart of the settin'-room stove.

The frame house had no fireplace, and in its lieu he was wont to open the door of the wood-stove, lean forward, elbows on knees, and gaze into the creamy core of the glow where his people moved unharmed and radiant, like the three youths conversing in the fiery furnace.

In the brief period allotted them before bedtime they must needs live fast. The boy grew at an extraordinary rate and in an extraordinary manner, for sometimes Rudd performed for him that feat which God Himself seems not to achieve in His world; he turned back time and brought on yesterday again, or reverted the year before last, as a reaper may pause and return to glean some sheaf overlooked before.

For instance, Eric was already a strapping lad of seven spinning through school at a rate that would have given brain fever to a less-gifted youngster, when, one day, Farmer Stebbins came to the Emporium with a four-year-old chub of a son who ran in ahead of his father, kicked his shoes in opposite directions and yelled, to the great dismay of an old maid in the "Ladies' and Misses' Dept.":

"Hay, mister, gimme pair boots 'ith brass toes!"

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The father, after a formulaic pretense of reproving the lad, explained:

"We'll have to excuse him, Rudd; it's his first pair of boots."

Rudd's heart was sore within him, and he was oppressed with guilt. He had never bought Eric his first pair of brass-toed boots! And he a shoe clerk!

So that night Eric had to be reduced several years, brought out of school, and taken to St. Louis. Rudd knew what an epoch-making event this was, and he wanted Eric to select from a larger stock than the meager and out-of-date supply of Kittredge's Emporium—though this admission was only for Rudd's own family. The thumb-screw could not have wrung it from him for the public.

There was a similar mix-up about Eric's first long trousers which Rudd likewise overlooked. He accomplished the Irish miracle of the tight boots. Eric had worn his breeches a long while before he put them on for the first time.

To the outer knowledge of the stranger or the neighbor, William Rudd's employer had all the good luck that was coming to him, and all of Rudd's besides. They were antitheses at every point.

Where Rudd was without ambition, importance, family, or funds, Kittredge was the richest man in town, the man of most impressive family, and easily the leading citizen. People began to talk him up for Congressman, maybe for Senator. He had held all the other conspicuous offices in his church, his bank, his county. You could hardly say that he had ever run for any office; he had just walked up and taken it.

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Yet Rudd did not envy him his record or his family. Clay Kittredge had children, real children. The cemetery lodged none of them. Yet one of the girls or boys was always ill or in trouble with somebody; Mrs. Kittredge was forever cautioning her children not to play with Mrs. So-and-so's children and Mrs. So-and-so would return the compliment. The town was fairly torn up with these nursery Guelph and Ghibelline wars.

Rudd compared the wickednesses of other people's children with the perfections of Eric. Sometimes his evil genius whispered a bitter thought that if Eric had lived to enter the world this side of the tobacco smoke, he, too, might have been a complete scoundrel in knee-breeches, instead of the clean-hearted, clear-skinned, studious, truthful little gentleman of light and laughter and love that he was. But Rudd banished the thought.

Eric was never ill, or only ill enough at times to give the parents a little of the rapture of anxiety and of sitting by his bedside holding his hand and brushing his hair back from a hot forehead. Eric never was impolite, or cruel to an animal, or impudent to a teacher, or backward in a class.

And Rudd's wife differed from Kittredge's wife and wives in general—and indeed from the old Martha herself—in staying young and growing more and more beautiful. The old Martha had been too shy and too cognizant of the truth ever to face a camera; and Rudd often regretted that

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he owned not even a bridal photograph such as the other respectable married folks of Hillsdale had on the wall, or in a crayon enlargement on an uneasy easel. He had no likeness of Martha except that in his heart. But thereby his fancy was unshackled and he was enabled to imagine her sweeter, fairer, every day.

It was the boy alone that grew; the mother, having become perfect, remained stationary in charm like the blessed Greeks in the asphodel-fields of Hades.

About the time Eric Rudd outgrew the public schools of Hillsdale and graduated from the high school with a wonderful oration of his own writing called "Night Brings Out the Stars," Kittredge announced that his eldest son would go to Harvard in the fall. Rudd determined that Eric should go to Yale. He even sent for catalogues. Rudd was appalled to see how much a person had to know before he could even get into college. And then, this nearly omniscient intellect was called a Freshman!

The prices of rooms, of meals, of books, of extra fees, the estimated allowances for clothing and spending-money dazed the poor shoe clerk and nearly sent Eric into business. But, fortunately, the brier pipe came to the rescue with an unexpected legacy from an unsuspected uncle.

The four years of college life were imagined with a good deal of elision and an amount of guesswork that would have amused a janitor. But Rudd and Martha were chiefly interested in the boy's vacations at home, and their own trips to New Haven, and the letters of approval from the professors. [Pg 211]

Eric had an athletic career seldom equaled since the days of Hercules. For Eric was a champion tennis-player, hockey-player, baseballist, boxer, swimmer, runner, jumper, shot-putter. And he was the best quoit-thrower in the New Haven town square. Rudd had rather dim notions of some of the games, so that Eric was established both as center rush of the football team and the cockswain in the crew.

He was also a member of all the best fraternities. He was a "Bones" man in his Freshman year, and in his Sophomore year added the other Senior societies. And, of course, he stood at the head of all his classes—though he never condescended to take a single red apple to a professor.

The boy's college life lasted Rudd a thousand and one evenings. It was in beautiful contrast with the career of Kittredge's children, some of whom were forever flunking their examinations, slipping back a year, requiring expensive tutors, acquiring bad habits, and getting into debt. Almost the only joy Kittredge had of them was in telegraphing them money in response to their telegrams for money—they never wrote. Their vacations either sent them scurrying on house parties or other excursions. Or if they came home they were discontented with house and parents. They corrected Kittredge's grammar, though his State accounted him an orator. They corrected Mrs. Kittredge's etiquette, though Hillsdale looked up to her as a social arbitrix. [Pg 212]

Kittredge poured a deal of his disappointment into Rudd's ear, because his hard heart was broken and breaking anew every day, and he had to tell somebody. He knew that his old clerk would keep it where he kept all the secrets of his business, but he never knew that Rudd still had a child of his own, forging ahead without failure. Rudd could give comfort, for he had it to spare, and he was empty of envy.

It was a ghastly morning when Kittredge showed Rudd a telegram saying that his eldest son, Thomas, had thrown himself in front of a train because of the discovery that his accounts were wrong. Kittredge had found him a place in a New York bank, but the gambling fever had seized the young fellow. And now he was dead, in his sins, in his shame. Dives cried out to Lazarus:

"It's hell to be a father, Will. It's an awful thing to bring children into the world and try to carry 'em through it. It's not a man's job. It's God's."

At times like these, and when Rudd heard from the tattlers, or read in the printed gossip of the evening paper concerning the multifarious wickednesses of the children of men about the earth, he felt almost glad that his boy had never lived upon so plague-infected a world. But in the soothe of twilight the old pipe persuaded him to a pleasanter view of his boy, alive and always doing the right thing, avoiding the evil. [Pg 213]

His motto was, "Eric would have done different." He was sure of that. It was his constant conclusion.

After graduating from an imaginary Yale Eric went to an imaginary law-school in New York City—no less. Then he was admitted to that imaginary bar where a lawyer never defends an unrighteous cause, never loses a case, yet grows rich. And, of course, like every other American boy that dreams or is dreamed of, in good time he had to become President.

Eric lived so exemplary a life, was so busy in virtue, so unblemished of fault, that he could not be overlooked by the managers of the quadrennial national performance, searching with Demosthenes' lantern for a man against whom nothing could be said. They called Eric from private life to be headliner in their vaudeville.

Rudd had watched Kittredge clambering to his success, or rather wallowing to it through a swamp of mud. All the wrong things Kittredge had ever done, and their name was legion, were hurled in his path. His family scandals were dug up by the double handful and splashed in his face. Against his opponent the same methods were used. It was like a race through a marsh; and

when Kittredge reached his goal in the Senate he was so muck-bemired, his heart had been so lacerated, the nakedness of his past so exposed, that his laurel seemed more like a wreath of poison ivy. And once mounted on his high post, he was an even better target than when he was on the wing.

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Against Eric's blameless life the arrows of slander were like darts shot toward the sun. They fell back upon the archers' heads. That was a lively night in the tobacco lagoon when the election returns came in and State after State swung to Eric's column. Rudd made it as nearly unanimous as he could without making it stupid. The solid South he left unbroken; he just brought it over to Eric en bloc. For Eric, it seems, had devised what everybody else has looked for in vain, a solution of the negro problem to satisfy both North and South—and the negroes. Unfortunately the details have been lost.

Marthy was there, of course; she rode in the same hack with their boy. Some of the politicians and the ex-President wanted to get in, but Eric said:

"My mother and father ride with me or I won't be President."

That settled 'em. Eric even wanted to ride backward, too, but Will, as his father, insisted; and of course Eric obeyed, though he was President. And the weather was more like June than March, no blizzards delaying trains and distributing pneumonia.

Once the administration was begun, the newspapers differed strangely in their treatment of Eric from their attitude toward other Chief Magistrates, from Washington down. Realizing that Eric was an honorable man trying to do the right thing by the people, no editor or cartoonist dreamed of accusing him of an unworthy motive or an unwise act. As for the tariff labyrinth, a matter of some trouble to certain Presidents pulled in all directions at once by warring constituencies, Eric settled that in a jiffy. And the best of it was that everybody was satisfied, importers and exporters; East, West, and Middle; farmers, manufacturers, lumbermen, oilmen, painters—everybody.

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And when his first term was ended the Democrats and Republicans, realizing that they had at last found a perfectly wise and honorable ruler, nominated him by acclamation at both conventions. The result was delightful; both parties elected their candidate.

Marthy and Will sat with Eric in the carriage at the second inaugural, too. There was an argument again about who should ride backward. Rudd said:

"Eric, your Excellency, these here crowds came to see you, and you ought to face 'em. As your dad I order you to set there 'side of your mother."

But Eric said, "Dad, your Majesty, the people have seen me often enough, and as the President of these here United States I order you to set there 'side of your wife."

And of course Rudd had to do it. Folks looked very much surprised to see him and there was quite a piece in the papers about it.

To every man his day's work and his night's dream. Will Rudd has poor nourishment of the former, but he is richly fed of the latter. His failures and his poverty and the monotony of his existence are public knowledge; his dream is his own triumph and the greater for being his secret.

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The Fates seemed to go out of their way to be cruel to Will Rudd, but he beat them at their own game. Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos kept Jupiter himself in awe of their shears, and the old Norns, Urdur, Verdandi, and Skuld, ruined Wotan's power and his glory. But they could not touch the shoe clerk. They shattered his little scheme of things to bits, but he rebuilt it nearer to his heart's desire. He spread a sky about his private planet and ruled his little universe like a tribal god. He, alone of all men, had won the oldest, vainest prayer that was ever said or sung: "O God, keep the woman I love young and beautiful, and grant our child happiness and success without sin or sorrow."

If, sometimes, the imagination of the matter-of-fact man wavers, and the ugliness of his loneliness overwhelms him, thrusts through his dream like a hideous mountainside when an avalanche strips the barren crags of their fleece; and if he then breaks down and calls aloud for his child and his wife to be given back to him from Out There—these panics are also his secret. Only the homely sitting-room of the lonely frame house knows them. He opens the door of the wood-stove or follows his pipe smoke and rallies his courage, resumes his dream. The next morning sees him emerge from his door and go briskly to the shop as always, whether his path is through rain or sleet, or past the recurrent lilacs that have scattered many a purple snow across his sidewalk since the bankruptcy of his ambitions.

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He would have been proud to be the unknown father of a great man. He was not permitted to be the father even of a humble man. Yet being denied the reality, he has taken sustenance in what might have been, and has turned "the saddest words of tongue or pen" into something almost sweet. If his child has missed the glories of what might have been, he has escaped the shames that might have been, and the bruises and heartaches and remorses that must have been, that always have been. That is the increasing consolation a bitter world offers to those who love and have lost. That was Rudd's solace. And he made the most of it; added to it a dream. He was a wise man.

After he paid his sorrowful debts his next slow savings went to the building of a monument for his family. It is one of the handsomest shafts in the cemetery. If Rudd could brag of anything he would brag of that. The inscription took a long time to write. You could tell that by its simplicity. And you might notice the blank space left for his own name when all three shall be together again.

Rudd is now saving a third fund against the encroaching time when he shall be too feeble to get up from his knees after he has dropped upon them to unlace somebody's sandal. Lonely old orphans like Rudd must provide their own pensions. There is a will, however, which bequeaths whatever is left of his funds to an orphan home. Being a sonless father, he thinks of the sons who have no fathers to do for them what he was so fain to do for his. It is not a large fund for these days when rich men toss millions as tips to posterity, but it is pretty good for a shoe clerk. And it will mean everything to some Eric that gets himself really born.

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If you drop in at the Emporium and ask for a pair of shoes or boots, or slippers or rubbers, or trees or pumps, and wait for old Rudd to get round to you, you will be served with deference, yet with a pride of occupation that is almost priestly. And you will probably buy something, whether you want it or not.

The old man is slightly shuffly in his gaiters. His own elastics are less resilient than once they were. If you ask for anything on the top shelf he is a trifle slow getting the ladder and rather ratchety in clambering up and down, and his eyes are growing so tired that he may offer you a 6D when you ask for a 3A.

But, above all things, don't hurt his pride by offering to help him to his feet if he shows some difficulty in rising when he has performed his genuflexion before you. Just pretend not to notice, as he would pretend not to notice any infirmity or vanity of yours. It is his vanity to be still the best shoe clerk in town—as he is. There is a gracious satisfiedness about the old man that radiates contentment and makes you comfortable for the time in most uncomfortable shoes. And as old Rudd says:

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"You'll find that the best shoe is the one that pinches at first and hurts a little; in time it will grow very comfortable and still be becoming."

That is what Rudd says, and he ought to know.

In these days he is so supremely comfortable in his old shoes that his own fellow-clerks hardly know what to make of him. If they only understood what is going on in his private world they would realize that Eric is about to be married—in the White House. The boy was so busy for the country and loved his mother so that he had no time to go sparkin'.

But Marthy got after him and said: "Eric, they're goin' to make you President for the third term. Oh, what's that old tradition got to do with it? Can't they change it? Well, you mark my words, like as not you'll settle down and live in the White House the rest of your life. You'd ought to have a wife, Eric, and be raisin' some childern to comfort your declining years. What would Will and me have done without you? I'm gettin' old, Eric, and I'd kind o' like to see how it feels to be a grandmother, before they take me out to the—"

But that was a word Rudd could never frame even in his thoughts.

Eric, being a mighty good boy, listened to his mother, as always. And Marthy looked everywhere for an ideal woman, and when she found one, Eric fell in love with her right away. It is not every child that is so dutiful as that.

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The marriage is to take place shortly and Rudd is very busy with the details. He will go on to Washington, of course—of evenings. In fact, the wedding is to be in the evening, so that he won't have to miss any time at the shop. There are so many people coming in every day and asking for shoes, that he wouldn't dare be away.

Martha is insisting on Will's buying a dress soot for the festivities, but he is in doubt about that. Martha, though, shall have the finest dress in the land, for she is more beautiful even than Eric's bride, and she doesn't look a day older than she did when she was a bride herself. A body would never guess how many years ago that was.

The White House is going to be all lit up, and a lot of big folks will be there—a couple of kings, like as not. There will be fried chicken for dinner and ice-cream—mixed, maybe, chocolate and vanilla, and p'raps a streak of strawb'ry. And there will be enough so's everybody can have two plates. Marthy will prob'ly bake the cake herself, if she can get that old White House stove to working right.

Rudd has a great surprise in store for her. He's going to tell a good one on Marthy. At just the proper moment he's going to lean over—Lord, he hopes he can keep his face straight—and say, kind of offhand:

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"Do you remember, Marthy, the time when you was makin' little baby-clothes for the President of the United States here, and you says to me—you see, Eric, she'd made me quit smokin', herself, but she plumb forgot all about that—and she says to me, s'she, 'Why don't you smoke your pipe any more, Will?' she says. And I says, 'I'd kind o' got out of the habit, Marthy,' s'I, 'but I guess I'll git back in,' s'I. I said it right off like that, 'I guess I'll git back in!' s'I. Remember, Marthy?"



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## THE HAPPIEST MAN IN IOWAY

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Jes' down the road a piece, 'ith dust so deep  
It teched the bay mare's fetlocks, an' the sun  
So b'ilin' hot, the peewees dassn't peep,  
Seemed like midsummer 'fore the spring's begun!  
An' me plumb beat an' good-for-nothin'-like  
An' awful lonesome fer a sight o' you ...  
I come to that big locus' by the pike,  
An' she was all in bloom, an' trembly, too,  
With breezes like drug-store perfumery.  
I stood up in my sturrups, with my head  
So deep in flowers they almost smothered me.  
I kind o' liked to think that I was dead ...  
An' if I hed 'a' died like that to-day,  
I'd 'a' b'en the happiest man in Ioway.

For what's the use't o' goin' on like this?  
Your pa not 'lowin' me around the place ...  
Well, fust I knowed, I'd give' them blooms a kiss;  
They tasted like Good-Night on your white face.  
I reached my arms out wide, an' hugged 'em—say,  
I dreamt' your little heart was hammerin' me!  
I broke this branch off for a love-bo'quet;  
'F I'd b'en a giant, I'd 'a' plucked the tree!  
The blooms is kind o' dusty from the road,  
But you won't mind. So, as the feller said,  
"When this you see remember me"—I knowed  
Another poem; but I've lost my head  
From seein' you! 'Bout all that I kin say  
Is—"I'm the happiest man in Ioway."

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Well, comin' 'long the road I seen your ma  
Drive by to town—she didn't speak to me!  
An' in the farthest field I seen your pa  
At his spring-plowin', like I'd ought to be.  
But, knowin' you'd be here all by yourself,  
I hed to come; for now's our livin' chance!  
Take off yer apern, leave things on the shelf—  
Our preacher needs what th' feller calls "romance".  
'Ain't got no red-wheeled buggy; but the mare  
Will carry double, like we've trained her to.  
Jes' put a locus'-blossom in your hair  
An' let's ride straight to heaven—me an' you!  
I'll build y' a little house, an' folks'll say:  
"There lives the happiest pair in Ioway."

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## PRAYERS

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God leaned forward in His throne and bent His all-seeing gaze upon one of the least of the countless suns. A few tiny planets spun slowly about it like dead leaves around a deserted camp-fire.

Almost the smallest of these planets had named itself the Earth. The glow of the central cinder brightened one side and they called that Day. And where the shadow was was Night.

The creeping glimmer of Day woke, as it passed, a jangle in shops and factories, a racket and hurry of traffic, war and business, which the coming of the gloom hushed in its turn. As God's eyes pierced the shadow they found, between the dotted lines of street-lamps and under the roofs where the windows glimmered—revelry or solemnity. In denser shadows there was a murmur of the voices of lovers and of families at peace or at war.

The All-hearing heard no chaos in this discord, but knew each instrument and understood each melody, concord, and clash. Loudest of all were the silences or the faint whimperings of those who knelt by their beds and bent their brows toward their own bosoms, communing with the various selves that they interpreted as the one God. He knew who prayed for what, and He answered each in His own wisdom, knowing that He would seem to have answered none and knowing why.

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Among the multitudinous prayers one group arrived at His throne from separate places, but linked together by their contradictions. He heard the limping effort to be formal as before a king

or a court of justice. He heard the anxious fear break through the petition; He heard the selfish eagerness trembling in the pious phrases of altruism. He understood.

## I. A MAN'S VOICE

Our Father which art in heaven let me come back to Thy kingdom. Bless my wife Edith and our little Marjorie and give them to me again. I am not worthy of them; I have sinned against them and against Thee. I have been drunken, adulterous, heartless, but from this night I will be good again. I will try with all my soul, and with Thy help I will succeed. Teach me to be strong. Forgive me my trespasses and help Edith to forgive them. Make my wife beautiful in my sight and make all those other beautiful faces ugly in my eyes so that I shall see only Edith as I used to.

Grant me freedom from the wicked woman who will not let me go; don't let Rose carry out her threats; don't let her wreck my home; make her understand that I am doing my duty; make her love some one else; make her forget me. How can I be true to my sin and true to Thee! Help me out of these depths, O Lord, that I may walk in the narrow path and escape destruction.

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To-morrow I am going back to my wife and my child with words of love and humility on my lips.

Give me back my home again, O God. Amen.

## II. A WOMAN'S VOICE

Let me come to Thee again, dear Father, and do not reject my prayer. Forgive me for what I shall do to-night. Take care of my little Marjorie and save her from the temptations that have overwhelmed me. Thou alone knowest how hard I have tried to live without love, how long I have waited for John to come back to me. Thou only hast seen me struggling against the long loneliness. Thou alone canst forgive, for Thou hast seen me refuse to be tempted with love. Thou hast heard my cries in the long, long nights. Thou knowest that I have been true to my husband who was not true to me. Thou hast seen me put away the happiness that Frank has offered me and asked of me. And now if I can endure no longer, if I give myself to him, more for his sake than mine, let me bear the punishment, not Frank; let me bear even the punishment John has earned. I am what Thou hast made me, Lord. If it be Thy pleasure that I shall burn in the fires forever, then let Thy will be done; for I can live no longer without Frank. Thou mayest refuse to hear my prayers, but I cannot refuse to hear his. Forgive me if I leave my beloved child alone. She is safer with Thee than with me. Perhaps her father will be good to her now. Perhaps he will turn back to her if I am away. And help me through the coming years to be true to Frank. He needs me, he loves me, he is braving the wrath of the world and of heaven for my sake.

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Help us, Lord, to find in our new life the peace and the virtue that was not in the old and bless and guard my motherless little Marjorie, O God, and save her from the fate that overwhelmed her mother for her father's fault. I am leaving her asleep here in Thy charge, O God. When she wakes in the morning let Thy angels comfort her and dry her tears. Let me not hear her crying for me, or I shall kill myself. I cannot bear everything. I have endured more than my strength can endure. Help me, O Lord, and forgive me for my sin—if sin it is. Amen.

## III. A MAN'S VOICE

God, if You are in heaven, hear me and help me. I have not prayed for many years. My voice is strange to You. My prayer may offend You, but it rushes from my heart.

I am about to do what the world calls hideous crime—to steal another man's wife and carry her to another country where we may have peace. I loved Edith before her husband loved her. I love her better than John ever loved her. I can't stand it. I can't stand it any longer to see her deserted in her beauty, and despised and weeping in loneliness, wasting her love on a dog who squandered his heart on a vile woman. I can't go on watching her die in a living hell. I have sold all my goods and gotten all I could save into my safe so that we may sever all ties with this heartless love. If what we are about to do offends Thee, then let me suffer for her. She has suffered enough, enough, enough!

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And keep her husband from following us, lest I kill him. Keep her from mourning too much for her child—his child. Give her a little happiness, O God. Take bitter toll from my heart afterward, but give us a little happiness now. Grant us escape to-night and safety and a little happiness for her. And then I shall believe in Thee again and live honorably in Thy sight. Amen.

## IV. A WOMAN'S VOICE

Dear God in heaven, what shall I do? He has abandoned me, John has turned against me at last. Has denounced me as wicked, and hateful, has accused me of wrecking his life and breaking his wife's heart—as if she had a heart, as if I had not saved him from despair, as if I had not sacrificed my name, my hopes, on earth and in heaven to make him happy.

O God, why hast Thou persecuted me so fiercely always? What made You hate me so? Why didn't You give me a decent home as a child? Why did You throw me into the snares of those vile men? Why did You make me beautiful and weak and trusting? Why didn't You make me ugly and suspicious and hateful so that I could be good?

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And now, now that I am no longer a girl, now that the wrinkles are coming, and the fat and the dullness, why didst Thou throw me into the way of this man who promised to love me forever, who promised me and praised me and called me his real wife, only to tire of me and tear my hands away and go back to her?

But don't let him have her, don't let him be happy with her, while I grovel here in shame! I can't bear the thought of that, I can't imagine him in her arms telling her how good she is and how bad I was. I'd rather kill them both. Isn't that best, O Lord—to kill them both—to kill her, anyway? Then I can kill myself and he will be sorry. Don't let him have both of us, O God. Am I going mad, or do I hear Thy voice telling me to act? Yes, it is Thy voice. Thou hast answered. I will do as Thou dost command. Perhaps he is going there to-night. I will go to the house and wait in the shadow and when he comes to the door and she comes to meet him I will shoot her and myself, and then he shall be punished as he should be.

I thank Thee, God, for showing me the way. Guide my arm and my heart and don't let me be afraid to die or to make her die. Forgive my sins and take me into Thy peace, O God, for I am tired of life and the wickedness of the world. Amen. Amen.

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## V. A CHILD'S VOICE

Our Father which art in he'v'm, hallowed be Dy name. Dy king'm come. Dy will be done in earf as it is in he'v'm. Give us dis day our daily bread and forgive an'—an' forgive Marjorie for bein' a bad chile an' getting so s'eeepy, and b'ess papa an' b'ing him home to mamma an'—an' trespasses as—tres-passes 'gainst us. King'm, power, and glory forever. Amen.

## VI. AN OLD WOMAN'S VOICE

—and give my poor Edith strength and let her find happiness again in the return of her husband. Let her forget his wrongs and forgive them and live happily in her old age as I have done with my husband. I thank Thee for helping me through those cruel years. Thou alone couldst have helped me and now all would be happiness if only Edith had happiness, but for the mercies Thou hast vouchsafed make me grateful.

## VII. AN OLD WOMAN'S VOICE

—and help my poor Rose to be a good girl to her old mother and keep her out of trouble and make her send me some more money, for I'm so sick and tired and the rent's comin' due and I need a warm coat for the winter, and I've had a hard life and many's the curse You've put upon me, but I'm doing my best and I'm all wore out.

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## VIII. A MAN'S VOICE

Fergimme, O Gawd, if it makes Thou mad fer to be prayed to by a sneakin' boiglar, but help me t'roo dis one job and I'll go straight from now on, so help me. Don't let dis guy find me crackin' his safe, so's I won't have to kill 'im. Help me make a clean getaway and I'll toin over a noo leaf, I will. I'll send money to me mudder, and I'll go to choich reg'lar and I'll never do nuttin' crooked again. On'y dis one time, O Gawd.

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God closed His eyes and smiled the sorrowful smile of the All-knowing, the All-pitying, the Unknown, the Unpitied, and He said to Him who sat at His side:

"They call these Prayers! They will wonder why I have not finished the tasks they set Me nor accepted the bribes they offered. And to-morrow they will rebuke Me as a faithless, indolent servant who has disobeyed!"

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## PAIN

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### I

"How much more bitter, dearly beloved, are the anguishes of the soul than any mere bodily distress! When the heart under conviction of sin for the violation of one of God's laws writhes and cries aloud in repentance and remorse, then, ah, then, is true suffering. What are the fleeting torments of this tenement of clay, mere bone and flesh, to the soul's despair? Nothing! Noth—"

The clergyman's emphatic fist did not thump the Scriptures the second time. He checked it in air; for a woman stood up straight and stared at him straight. Her thin mouth seemed to twist with a sneer. He thought he read on her lips words not quite uttered. He read:

"You fool! You fool!"

Then Miss Straley sidled from the family pew to the aisle and marched up it and out of the church.

Doctor Crosson was shocked doubly. The woman's action was an outrage upon the holy composure of the Sabbath, and it would remind everybody that he was an old lover of Irene Straley's.

The neatly arranged congregational skulls were disordered now, some still tilted forward in sleep, some tilted back to see what the pastor would do, some craned round to observe the departer, some turned inward in whispering couples. [Pg 233]

Such a thing had never happened before in all the parsoning of Doctor Crosson—the D.D. had been conferred on him by the small theological institute where he had imbibed enough dogmas in two years to last him a lifetime.

Some of his dogmas were so out of fashion that he felt them a trifle shabby even for village wear. He had laid aside the old red hell-fire dogma for a new one of hell-as-a-state-of-mind. He was expounding that doctrine this morning again. He had never heard any complaint of it. But his mind was so far from his memory that he hardly knew what he had just uttered. He wondered what he could have said to offend Miss Straley.

But he must not stand there gaping and wondering before his gaping and wondering congregation. He must push on to his *lastly's*. His mind retraced his words, and he repeated:

"What are the fleeting torments of this tenement of clay, mere bone and flesh, to the soul's despair? Nothing! As I said before—nothing!"

And then he understood why Irene Straley had walked out. The realization deranged him so that only the police-force every one has among his faculties coerced him into going on with his sermon.

It was a good sermon. It was his own, too; for at last he had paid the final instalment on the clergyman's library which contained a thousand sermons as aids to overworked, underinspired evangelists. He had built this discourse from well-seasoned timbers. He had used it in two pulpits where he had visited, and now he was giving it to his own flock. He knew it well enough to trust his oratorical machinery with its delivery, while the rest of his mind meditated other things. [Pg 234]

Often, while preaching, a portion of his brain would be watching the effect on his congregation, another watching the clock, another thinking of dinner, another musing over the scandals he knew in the lives of the parishioners.

But now all his by-thoughts were scattered at the abrupt deed of Irene Straley. She was the traffic of his other brains now, while his lips went on enunciating the phrases of his discourse and his fists thudded the Bible for emphasis. He was remembering his boyhood and his infatuation for Irene Straley. That was before he was sure of his call to the ministry. If he had married her, he might not have heard the call.

Doctor Crosson hoped that he was not regretting that sacrament! Sweat came out on his brow as he understood the blasphemy of noting (even here on the rostrum with his mouth pouring forth sacred eloquence) that Irene Straley as she marched out of the church was still slender and flexile, virginal. Doctor Crosson mopped his brow at the atrocity of his thoughts this morning. The springtime air was to blame. The windows were open for the first time. The breeze that lolled through the church had no right there. It was irreverent and frivolous. It was amused at the people. It rippled with laughter at the preacher's heavy effort to start a jealousy between the pangs of the flesh and the pangs of the soul. [Pg 235]

It brought into church a savor of green rushes growing in the warm, wet thickets where Doctor Crosson—once Eddie Crosson—had loved to go hunting squirrels and rabbits, and wild duck in season. Those were years of depravity, but they were entrancing in memory. He felt a Satanic whisper: "Order these old fogies out into the fields and let them worship there. It is May, you fool!"

"You fool!" That was what Irene Straley had seemed to whisper. Only, the breeze made a soft, sweet coo of the word that had been so bitter on her lips.

Across the square of a window near the pulpit a venerable locust-tree brandished a bough dripping with blossoms. Countless little censers of white spice swung frankincense and myrrh for pagan nostrils.

There was a beckoning in the locust bough, and in the air an incantation that made a folly of sermons and souls and old maids' resentments and gossips' queries. The preacher fought on, another Saint Anthony in a cloud of witches.

He could hear himself intoning the long sermon with the familiar pulpiteering rhythms and the final upsnap of the last syllable of each sentence. He could see that the congregation was already drowsily forgetful of Irene Straley's absence. But, to save his soul, he could not keep his mind from following her out into the leafy streets and on into the past where she had been the prize he and young Drury Boldin had contended for—a past in which he had never dreamed that his future was a pulpit in his home town. [Pg 236]

He was the manlier of the two, for Drury was a delicate boy, too sensitive for the approval of his

Spartan fellows. They made fun of his gentleness. He hated to wreath a fishing-worm on a hook! He loathed to wrench a hook from a fish's gullet! The nearest he had ever come to fighting was in defense of a thousand-legged worm that one of the boys had stuck a pin through, to watch it writhe and bite itself behind the pin.

Irene Straley was a sentimental girl. That was right in a girl, but silly in a boy.

Once when Eddie Crosson stubbed his toe and it swelled up to great importance, Irene Straley wept when she saw it, while Drury Boldin turned pale and sat down hard. Once when Drury cut his thumb with a penknife he fainted at the sight of his own blood!

Eddie Crosson was a real boy. He smoked cubeb cigarettes with an almost unprecedented precocity. He nearly learned to chew tobacco. He could snap a sparrow off a telegraph-wire with a nigger-shooter almost infallibly. He had the first air-gun in town and a shot-gun at fifteen. He thought that he was manlier than Drury because he was wiser and stronger. It never occurred to him that Drury might suffer more because he was more finely built, that his nerves were harp-strings while Crosson's were fence-wire.

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So Crosson called Drury a milksop because he would not go hunting. He called himself one of the sons of Nimrod.

For a time he gained prestige with Irene Straley, especially as he gave her bright feathers now and then, an oriole's gilded mourning, or a tanager's scarlet vesture.

One day Drury Boldin was at her porch when Ed came in from across the river with a brace of duck.

"You can have these for your dinner to-morrow, Reny," he said, as he laid the limp, silky bodies on the porch floor.

Their bills and feet were grotesque, but there was something about their throats, stretched out in waning iridescence, that asked for regret.

"Oh, much obliged!" Irene cried. "That's awful nice of you, Eddie. Duck cook awful good."

And then her enthusiasm ebbed, for she caught the look of Drury Boldin as he bent down and stroked the glossy mantle of the birds, not with zest for their flavor, nor envy of the skill that had fetched them from the sky, but with sorrow for their ended careers, for the miracle gone out of their wings, and the strange fact that they had once quawked and chirruped in the high air and on hidden waters—and would never fly or swim again. "I wonder if they had souls," he mumbled.

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Eddie Crosson winked at Irene. There was no use getting mad at Drury. Eddie only laughed:

"Course not, you darn galoot!"

"How do you know?" Drury asked.

"Anybody knows that much," was Crosson's sufficient answer, and Drury changed to another topic. He asked:

"Did it hurt 'em much to die?"

"Course not," Eddie answered, promptly. "Not the way I got 'em. They just stopped sailin' and dropped. I lost one, though. He was goin' like sixty when I drew bead on him. Light wasn't any too good and I just nipped one wing. You ought to seen him turning somersets, Reny. He lit in a swampy spot, though, and I couldn't find him. I hunted for an hour or more, but I couldn't find him and it was growin' dark, so I come home."

Drury spoke up quickly: "You didn't kill him?"

"I don't guess so. He was workin' mighty hard when he flopped."

"Oh, that's terrible!" Drury groaned. "He must be layin' out there now somewheres—sufferin'. Oh, that's terrible!"

"Aw, what's it your business?" was Crosson's gruff comment. But there was uneasiness in his tone, for Drury had set Irene to wringing her hands nervously, and Crosson felt a trifle uncomfortable himself. Twilight always made him susceptible to emotions that daylight blinded him to, as to the stars. He remembered that boyhood emotion now in his pulpit, and his shoulder-blades twitched; an icy finger seemed to have written something on them. He was casting up his eyes and his hands in a familiar gesture and quoting a familiar text:

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"Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler and from the noisome pestilence. He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust."

From the roof of the church he seemed to see that wounded wild duck falling, turning in air, striking at the air frantically with his good wing and feebly with the one that bled. Down he fell, struggling somewhere among the pews.

A fantastic notion drifted into the preacher's mind—that Satan had shot up a bullet from hell and it had lodged among the feathers of Jehovah the protector, and He was falling and lost among that congregation in which so often the preacher had failed to find God.

Doctor Crosson shook his head violently to fling away such madnesses, and he propounded his next "furthermore" with added energy. But he could not shake off the torment in the recollection of Drury Boldin's nagging interest in that wild duck.

## II

Drury insisted on knowing where the wild duck fell, and Crosson told him that it was "near where the crick emptied into the sluice, where the cat-tails grew extra high." [Pg 240]

He went on home to his supper, but the thought of the suffering bird had seized his mind; it flopped and twisted at the roots of his thoughts.

A few days later Drury met him and asked him again where the duck had fallen.

"I can't find it where you said," he said.

"You ain't been lookin' for it, have you?"

"Yes, for days."

"What'd you do if you found it?" Crosson asked.

"Kill it," Drury answered. It was a most unexpected phrase from him.

"That sounds funny, comin' from you," Crosson snickered. Then he spoke gruffly to conceal his own misgivings. "Aw, it's dead long ago."

"I'd feel better if I was sure," said Drury.

Crosson called him a natural-born idiot, but the next day Crosson himself was across the river, dragged by a queer mood. He took his bearings from the spot where he had fired his shot-gun and then made toward the place where the duck fell.

He stumbled about in slime and snarl for an hour in vain. Suddenly he was startled by the sound of something floundering through the reeds. He was afraid that it might be a wild animal, a traditional bear or a big dog. But it was Drury Boldin. And Irene Straley was with him.

They were covered with mud. Crosson was jealous and suspicious and indignant. They told him that they were looking for the hurt bird. He was furious. He advised them to go along about their own business. It was his bird. [Pg 241]

"Who gave it to you?" Drury answered, with a battling look in his soft eyes.

"The Lord and my shot-gun."

"What right you got to go shootin' wild birds, anyway?" Drury demanded.

Crosson was even then devoted to the Bible for its majestic music, if for nothing else. He quoted the phrase about the dominion over the fowls of the air given to man for his use.

Drury would not venture to contradict the Scriptures, and so he turned away silenced. But he continued his search. And Irene followed him.

In sullen humor Crosson also searched, till he heard Drury cry out; then he ran to see what he had found.

Irene and Drury were shrinking back from something that even the son of Nimrod regarded with disquiet. The duck, one wing caked and festered, and busy with ants and adrone with flies, was still alive after all those many days.

Its flat bill was opening and shutting in hideous awkwardness, its hunger-emaciated frame rising and falling with a kind of lurching breath, and the film over its eyes drawing together and rolling back miserably.

At the sight of the three visitors to its death-chamber it made a hopeless effort to lift itself again to the air of its security. It could not even lift its head. [Pg 242]

Drury fell to one knee before it, and a swarm of flies zoned angrily away. He put out his hand, but he was afraid to touch, and he only added panic to the bird's wretchedness.

He rose and backed away. The three stood off and stared. Crosson felt the guilt of Cain, but when Irene moaned, "What you goin' to do?" he shook his head. He could not finish his task.

It was Drury Boldin, weak-kneed and putty-faced, who went hunting now. He had to look far before he found a heavy rock. He lugged it back and said, "Go on away, Reny."

She hurried to a distance, and even Crosson turned his head aside.

On the way home they were all three tired and sick, and Drury had to stop every now and then to sit down and get strength into his knees.

But there was a sense of grim relief that helped them all, and the bird, once safely dead, was rapidly forgotten. After that Crosson seemed to lose his place in Irene's heart, and Drury won all that Crosson lost, and more. Before long it was understood that Drury and Irene had agreed to

get married as soon as he could earn enough to keep them. All four parents opposed the match; Irene's because Drury was "no 'count," and Drury's for much the same reason.

Old Boldin allowed that Irene would be added to his family, for meals and lodgin', if she married his son; and old Straley guessed that it would be the other way round, and the Boldin boy would come over to his house to live.

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Also, Drury could get no work in Carthage. Eventually he went to Chicago to try his luck there. Crosson seized the chance to try to get back to Irene. One Sunday he took his shot-gun out in the wilderness and brought down a duck whose throat had so rich a glimmer that he believed it would delight Irene. He took it to her.

She was out in her garden, and she looked at his gift with eyes so hurt by the pity of the bird's drooping neck that they were blind to its beauty.

While Crosson stood in sheepish dismay, recognizing that Drury was present still in his absence, the minister appeared at his elbow. It was not the wrecked career of the fowl that shocked the pastor, but the broken Sabbath.

"It seems to me, Eddie," he said, "that it is high time you were beginning to take life seriously. Come to church to-night and make up for your ungodliness."

Crosson consented. It was a good way of making his escape from Irene's haunted eyes.

The service that night had little influence on his heart, but a month later a revivalist came into Carthage with a great fanfare of attack on the hosts of Lucifer. This man was an emotionalist of irresistible fire. He reasoned less than he sang. His voice was as thrilling as a trombone, and his words did not matter. It was his tone that made the heart resound like a smitten bell.

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The revivalist struck unsuspected chords of emotion in Eddie Crosson and made him weep! But he wept tears of a different sort from the waters of grief. His unusual tears were a tribute to eloquence. Sonorous words and noble thoughts thrilled Eddie Crosson then as ever after.

He had loved to speak pieces at school. Whether it were Spartacus exhorting his brawny slaves to revolt, or Daniel Webster upholding the Union now and forever, one and inseparable, he had felt an exaltation, an exaltation that enlarged him to the clouds. He loved the phrase more than the meaning. What was well worded was well reasoned.

His passion for elocution had inclined him at first to be a lawyer, but when he visited the county courthouse the attorneys he listened to had such dull themes to expound that he felt no call to the law. What glory was there in pleading for the honor of an old darky chicken-thief when everybody knew at once that he was guilty of stealing the chickens in question, or would have been if he had known of their accessibility? What rapture was there in insisting that a case in an Alabama court eight years before furnished an exact precedent in the matter of a mechanic's lien in Carthage?

So Crosson chilled toward the legal profession. His father urged him to come into the Crosson hardware emporium, but Eddie hated the silent trades. The revivalist decided him, and he began to make his heart ready for the clerical life. His father opposed him heathenishly and would not pay for his seminary course.

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For several months Crosson waited about, becalmed in the doldrums. There was little to interest him in town except a helpless espionage on Irene's loyalty to Drury Boldin. Her troth defied both time and space. She went every day to the post-office to mail a heavy letter and to receive the heavy letter she was sure to find there.

She became a sort of tender joke at the post-office, and on the street as well, for she always read her daily letter on the way home. She would be so absorbed in the petty chronicles of Drury's life that she would stroll into people and bump into trees, or fetch up short against a fence. She sprained her ankle once walking off the walk. And once she marched plump into the parson's horrified bosom.

Crosson often stood in ambush so that she would run into him. She was very soft and delicate, and she usually had flowers pinned at her breast.

Crosson would grin as she stumbled against him; then the lovelorn girl would stare up at him through the haze of the distance her letter had carried her to, and stammer excuses and fall back and blush, and glide round him on her way. Crosson would laugh aloud, bravely, but afterward he would turn and stare at her solemnly enough when she resumed her letter and strolled on in the rosy cloud of her communion with her far-off "fellow."

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One day Crosson had to run after her, because when she thought she was turning into her own yard her absent mind led her to unlatch the gate to a pasture where a muley cow with a scandalous temper was waiting for her with swaying head.

Irene laughed at her escape, with an unusual mirth for her. She explained it by seizing Crosson's sleeve and exclaiming:

"Oh, Eddie, such good news from Drury you never heard! He's got a position with a jewelry-store, the biggest in Chicago. And they put him in the designing department at ten dollars a week, and they say he's got a future. Isn't it simply glorious?"

She held Crosson while she read the young man's hallelujahs. They sounded to Crosson like a funeral address.

Irene's mother was even prouder of Drury's success than the daughter was. She bragged now of the wedding she had dreaded before. Finally Irene proclaimed the glorious truth that Drury's salary had been boosted again and they would wait no longer for wealth. He was awful busy, and so he'd just run down for a couple of days and marry her and run back with her to Chicago and jewelry. This arrangement ended Irene's mother's dreams of a fine wedding and relieved the townspeople of the expense of wedding-presents.

The sudden announcement of the wedding shocked Crosson. He endured a jealousy whose intensity surprised him in retrospect. He endured a good deal of humor, too, from village cut-ups, who teased him because his best girl was marrying the other fellow. [Pg 247]

Crosson felt a need of solitude and a fierce desire to kill something. He got his abandoned gun and went hunting to wear out his wrath. He wore himself out, at least. He shot savagely at all sorts of life. He followed one flitting, sarcastic blue-jay with a voice like a village cut-up, all the way home without getting near enough to shoot.

He came down the long hill with the sunset, bragging to himself that he was reconciled to Irene's marriage with anybody she'd a mind to.

He could see her from a distance, sitting on the porch alone. She was all dressed up and rocking impatiently. Evidently the train was late again, as always. From where he was, Crosson could see the track winding around the hills like a little metal brook. The smoke of the engine was not yet pluming along the horizon. The train could not arrive for some minutes yet.

To prove his freedom from rancor and his emancipation from love, but really because he could not resist the chance to have a last word with Irene, he went across lots to her father's back yard and came round to the porch. He forgot to draw the shells from his gun.

In the sunset, with his weapon a-shoulder, he must have looked a bit wild, for Irene jumped when he spoke to her. He sought an excuse for his visit and put at her feet the game he had bagged—a squirrel, a rabbit, and a few birds—the last he ever shot. [Pg 248]

The moment the dead things were there he regretted the impulse. He was reminded of his previous quarry and its ill success. Irene was reminded, too, for she thanked him timidly and asked if he had left any wounded birds in the field. He laughed "No" with a poor grace.

She said: "I'd better get these out of sight before Drury comes. He doesn't like to see such things."

She lifted them distastefully and went into the house. She came out almost at once, for she heard a train. But it was not the passenger swooping south; it was the freight trudging north. There was only a single track then, and no block system of signals.

Irene no sooner recognized the lumbering, jostling drove of cattle-cars and flats going by than she gasped:

"That freight ought not to be on that track—now!"

She was frozen with dread. Crosson understood, too. Then from the distance came the whistle of the express, the long hurrah of its approach to the station. The freight engineer answered it with short, sharp blasts of his whistle. He kept jabbing the air with its noise.

There was the grind of the brakes on the wheels. The cars tried to stop, like a mob, but the rear cars bunted the front cars forward irresistibly. The cattle aboard lowed and bellowed. The brakemen, quaint silhouettes against the red sky, ran along the tops of the box-cars, twisting the brake-wheels. [Pg 249]

Irene stumbled down the steps and dashed across the pastures toward the jutting hill that she had so often seen the express sweep round. Crosson followed.

They came to a fence. She could not climb, she was trembling so. Crosson had to help her over. She ran on, and as he sprawled after, he nearly discharged the gun.

He brought it along by habit as he followed Irene, who ran and ran, waving her arms as if she would stop the express with her naked hands.

But long before they reached the tracks the express roared round the headland and plunged into the freight. The two locomotives met and rose up and wrestled like two black bears, and fell over. The cars were scattered and jumbled like a baby's train. They were all of wood—heated by soft-coal stoves and lighted by coal-oil lamps.

The wreck was the usual horror, the usual chaos of wanton destruction and mysterious escape. The engineers stuck to their engines and were involved in their ruin somewhere. The passenger-train was crowded, and destruction showed no favoritism: old men, women, children, sheep, horses, cows, were maimed, or killed, or left scot-free.

Some of those who were uninjured ran away. Some stood weeping. Some of the wounded began at once to rescue others. Crosson stood gaping at the spectacle, but Irene went into the wreckage, pawing and peering like a terrier. [Pg 250]



She could not find what she was looking for. She would bend and stare into a face glaring under the timbers and maundering for help, then pass on. She would turn over a twisted frame and let it roll back. She was not a sister of charity; she was Drury Boldin's helpmeet.

She kept calling his name, "Drury—Drury—Drury!" Crosson watched her as she poised to listen for the answer that did not come. He gaped at her in stupid fascination till a brakeman shook him and ordered him to lend a hand. He rested his gun against a pile of ties and bowed his shoulder to the hoisting of a beam overhanging a woman and a suckling babe.

The helpers dislodged other beams and finished the lives they had meant to save.

There were no physicians on the train. But a doctor or two from the town came out and the others were sent for. A telegram was sent to summon a relief-train, but it could not arrive for hours.

The doctors began at the beginning, but they could do little. Their own lives were in constant danger from tumbling wreckage, for the rescuers were playing a game of tragic jackstraws. The least mistake brought down disaster.

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As he worked, Crosson could hear Irene calling, calling, "Drury, Drury, Drury!"

He left his task to follow her, his jealousy turned into a wild sorrow for her.

At last he heard in her cry of "Drury!" a note that meant she had found him. But such a welcome as it was for a bride to give! And such a trysting-place!

The car Drury was in had turned a somersault and cracked open across another. Its inverted wheels on their trucks had made a bower of steel about the bridegroom. The flames from the stove and from the oil-lamps were blooming like hell-flowers everywhere. And the wind that fanned the blazes was blowing clouds of scalding steam from the crumpled boilers of the two engines.

Crosson ran to Irene's side. She was trying to clamber through a trellis of iron and splintered wood. She was stretching her hand out to Drury, where he lay unconscious, deep in the clutter. Crosson dragged her away from a flame that swung toward her. She struck his hand aside and thrust her body into the danger again.

Crosson, finding no water, began to shovel loose earth on the blaze with a sharp plank from the side of a car. Finding that she could not reach her lover, Irene turned and begged Crosson to run for help and for the doctors.

He ran, but the doctors refused to leave the work they had in hand, and the other men growled:

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"Everybody's got to take their turn."

Crosson ran back to Irene with the news. Drury had just emerged from the merciful swoon of shock to the frenzies of his splintered bones, lacerated flesh and blistered skin, and the threat of his infernal environment.

The last exquisite fiendishness was the sight of his sweetheart as witness to his agony, her face lighted up by the flames that were ravaging toward him, her hands hungering toward him, just beyond the stretch of his one free arm.

Crosson heard the lovers murmur to each other across that little abyss. He flung himself against the barriers like a madman. But his hands were futile against the tangle of joists and hot steel.

Irene saw him working alone and asked him where the others were, and the doctors.

"They wouldn't come!" Crosson groaned, ashamed of their ugly sense of justice.

The girl's face took on a look of grim ferocity. She said to Crosson:

"Your gun—where is it?"

He pointed to where he had left it. It had fallen to the ground.

She ran and seized it up, and holding it awkwardly but with menace, advanced on a doctor who toiled with sleeves rolled high, and face and beard and arms blotched with red grime.

She thrust the muzzle into his chest and spoke hoarsely:

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"Doctor Lane, you come with me."

"I'm busy here," he growled, pushing the gun aside, hardly knowing what it was.

She jammed it against his heart again and cried, "Come with me or I'll kill you!"

He followed her, wondering rather than fearing, and she swept a group of men with the weapon, and commanded, "You men come, too." She marched them to the spot where Drury was concealed, and pointed to him and snarled, "Get him out!"

The men tested their strength here and there without promise of success. One group started a heap of wheels to slewing downward and Crosson shouted to them to stop. An inch more, and they would have buried Drury from sight or hope.

One man wormed through somehow and caught Drury by the hand, but the first tug brought from him such a wail of anguish that the man fell back. He could not budge the body clamped with steel. He could only wrench it. So he came away.

"There's nothing for me to do, Reny," the doctor faltered, and, choked with pity for her and her lover and the helplessness of mankind, he turned away, and she let him go. The gun fell to the ground.

The other men left the place. One of them said that the wrecking-crew would be along with a derrick in a few hours.

"A few hours!" Irene whimpered.

She leaned against the lattice that kept her from the bridegroom and tried to tell him to be brave. But he had heard his sentence, and with his last hope went what little courage he had ever had. [Pg 254]

He began to plead and protest and weep. He gave voice to all the voices of pain, the myriad voices from every tormented particle of him.

Irene knelt down and twisted through the crevice to where she could hold his hand. But he snatched it away, babbling: "Don't touch me! Don't touch me!"

Crosson stayed near, dreading lest Irene's skirts should catch fire. Twice he beat them out with his hands. She had not noticed that they were aflame. She was murmuring love-words of odious vanity to one who almost forgot her existence, centered in the glowing sphere of his own hell.

Drury rolled and panted and gibbered, cursed even, with lips more used to gentle words and prayers. He prayed, too, but with sacrilege:

"O Lord, spare me this. O God, have a little mercy. Send rain, send help, lift this mountain from me just till I can breathe. O God, if You have any mercy in Your heart—but no, no—no, no, You let Your own Son hang on the cross, didn't You? He asked You why You had deserted Him, and You didn't answer, did You?"

Crosson looked up to see a thunderbolt split the dark sky, but the stars were agleam now, twinkling about the moon's serenity.

Irene put her fingers across Drury's lips to hush his blasphemy. She tore her face with her nails, and tried for his sake to stifle the sobs that smote through her. [Pg 255]

By and by Drury's voice grew hoarse, and he whispered. She bent close and heard. She called to Crosson:

"Run get the doctor to give him something—some morphine or something—quick. Every second is agony for my poor boy."

Crosson ran to the doctor. He stood among writhing bodies and shook his head dismally. He was saying as Crosson came up:

"I'm sorry, I'm awful sorry, folks, but the last grain of morphine is gone. The drug-stores haven't got any more. We've telegraphed to the next town. You'll just have to stand it."

Crosson went back slowly with that heavy burden of news. He whispered it to Irene, but Drury heard him, and a shriek of despair went from him like a flash of fire. New blazes sprang up with an impish merriment. Crosson, fearing for Irene's safety, fought at them with earth and with water that boys fetched from distances, and at last extinguished the immediate fire.

The bystanders worked elsewhere, but Crosson lingered to protect Irene. In the dark he could hear Drury whispering something to her.

He pleaded, wheedled, kissed her hand, mumbled it like a dog, reasoned with her insanely, while she trembled all over, a shivering leaf on a blown twig.

Crosson could hear occasional phrases: "If you love me, you will—if you love me, Reny. What do you want me to suffer for, honey? You don't want me just to suffer—just to suffer, do you—you don't, do you? Reny honey, Reny? You say you love me, and you won't do the thing that will help me. You don't love me. That's it, you don't really love me!" [Pg 256]

She turned to Crosson at last and moaned: "He wants me to kill him! What can I do? Oh, what is there to do?"

Crosson could not bear to look in her eyes. He could not bear the sound of Drury's voice. He could not even debate that problem. He was cravenly glad when somebody's hand seized him and a rough voice called him away to other toil. He slunk off.

There were miseries enough wherever he went, but they were the miseries of strangers. He could not forget Irene and the riddle of duty that was hers. He avoided the spot where she was closeted with grief, and worked remote in the glimmer from bonfires lighted in the fields alongside.

The fire in the wreck was out now, save that here and there little blazes appeared, only to be quenched at once. But smoldering timbers crackled like rifle-shots, and there were thunderous slidings of wreckage.

Irene's mother and father had stood off at a distance for a long time, but at length they missed Irene and came over to question Crosson. He knew that Irene would not wish them present at such obsequies, and he told them she had gone home.

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After a time, curiosity nagged him into approaching her hiding-place. He listened, and there was no sound. He peered in and dimly descried Drury. He was not moving; he might have been asleep. Irene might have been asleep, too, for she lay huddled up in what space there was.

Crosson knelt down and crawled in. She was unconscious. He touched Drury with a dreading hand, which drew quickly back as from a contact with ice.

A kind of panic seized Crosson. He backed out quickly and dragged Irene away with him in awkward desperation.

As her body came forth, his gun came too. He thought it had lain outside. He caught it and broke it at the breech, ejecting the two shells; one of them was empty. He threw it into the wreck and pocketed the other shell and tossed the gun under a stack of wreckage.

He was trying to revive Irene when her father and mother came back anxiously to say that she was not at home. Her mother dropped down at her side.

Crosson left Irene with her own people. He did not want to see her or hear her when she came back to this miserable world. He did not want her even to know what he knew.

### III

Crosson had tried afterward to forget. It had been hard at first, but in time he had forgotten. He had gone to a theological school and learned to chide people for their complaints and to administer well-phrased anodynes. During his vacations he had avoided Irene. When he had been graduated he had been first pulpit in a far-off city.

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Years afterward he had been invited to supply an empty pulpit in his home town. He had not succeeded with life. He lacked the flame or the luck or the tact—something. He had come back to the place he started from. He had renewed old acquaintances, laughed over the ancient jokes, and said he was sorry for those who had had misfortune. When he met Irene Straley he hardly recalled his love, except to smile at it as a boyish whim. He had forgotten the pangs of that as one forgets almost all his yester aches. He had forgotten the pains he had seen others suffer, even more easily than he forgot his own.

To-day his sermon on the triviality of bodily discomfort had flung Irene Straley back into the caldron of that old torment. She had made that silent protest against the iniquitous cruelty of his preachment. She had dragged him backward into the living presence of his past.

She had not forgotten. She had been faithful to Drury Boldin while he was working in a distant city. She was faithful to him still in that Farthest Country. She had the genius of remembrance.

These were Doctor Crosson's ulterior thoughts while he harangued his flock visibly and audibly. His thoughts had not needed the time their telling requires. They gave him back his scenes in pictures, not in words; in heartaches and heartbreaks and terrors and longings, not in limping syllables that mock the vision with their ineptitude.

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He felt anew what he had felt and seen, and he could not give any verve to the peroration of his sermon. He could not even change it. It had been effective when he had preached it previously. But now he parroted with unconscious irony the phrases he had once so admired. He came to the last word.

"And so, to repeat: How much more bitter, dearly beloved, are the anguishes of the soul than any mere bodily distress! What are the fleeting torments of this tenement of clay, mere bone and flesh, to the soul's despair? Nothing, nothing."

His congregation felt a lack of warmth in his tone. His hand fell limply on the Bible and the sermon was done. The only stir was one of relief at its conclusion.

He gave out the final hymn, and he sat through it while the people dragged it to the end. He gave forth the benediction "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost," and he made short work of the dawdlers who waited to exchange stupidities with him. He took refuge from his congregation in his study, locked the door, and gave himself up to meditation.

Somehow pain had suddenly come to mean more to him than it had yet meant. He had known it, groaned under it, lived it down, and let it go. He had felt sorry for other people and got rid of their woes as best as he could with the trite expressions in use, and had forgotten whether they were hushed by health or by death.

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And so he had let the old-fashioned hell go by with other dogmas out of style. He had fashioned a new Hades to frighten people with, that they might not find sin too attractive and imperilous.

Now he was suddenly convinced that if there must be hell, it must be such as Dante set to rhyme and the old hard-shell preachers preached: a region where flames sear and demons pluck at the frantic nerves, playing upon them fiendish tunes.

Yet he could not reconcile that hell with the God that made the lilac-bush whose purple clusters

shook perfume and little flowers against his window-sill, while the old locust in rivalry bent down and flaunted against the lilacs its pendants of ivory grace and heavenly fragrance.

Against that torment of beauty came glimpses of Drury and Irene in the lurid cavern under the wreck. Beyond those delicate blossoms he imagined the battle-fields of Europe and the ruined vessels where hurt souls writhed in multitudes.

He could not be satisfied with any theory of the world. He could not find that pain was punishment here, or see how it could follow the soul after the soul had left behind it the fleshly instrument of torture. The why of it escaped his reason utterly; for Drury had been good, and he had come upon an honorable errand when he fell into the pit.

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Doctor Crosson stood at his window and begged the placid sky for information. He looked through the lilacs and the locusts and all the green wilderness where beauty beat and throbbed like a heart in bliss. It was the Sabbath, and he was not sure. But he was sure of a melting tenderness in his heart for Irene Straley, and he felt that her power to feel sorry for her lover—sorry enough to defy all the laws in his behalf—was a wonderful power. He longed for her sympathy.

By and by he began to feel a pain, the pain of Drury Boldin. He was glad. He groaned. "I hurt! I hope that I may hurt terribly."

Suddenly it seemed that he actually was Drury Boldin in the throes of every fierce and spasmodic thrill. Again he most vividly was Irene Straley watching her lover till she could not endure his torture or her own, and with one desperate challenge sent him back to the mystery whence he came.

Doctor Crosson, when he came back to himself, could not solve that mystery or any mystery. He knew one reality, that it hurts to be alive; that everybody is always hurting, and that human heart must help human heart as best it can. Pain is the one inescapable fact; the rest is theory.... He prayed with a deeper fervor than he had ever known:

"God give me pain, that I may understand, that I may understand!"

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## THE BEAUTY AND THE FOOL

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There was once a beautiful woman, and she lived in a small town, though people said that she belonged rather in a great city, where her gifts would bring her glory, riches, and a brilliant marriage. In repose, she was superb; in motion, quite perfectly beautiful of form and carriage, with all the suave rhythms of a beautiful being.

Her beauty was her sole opulence; the boast of her friends; the confession of her enemies; the magnet of many lovers; the village's one statue. She had an ordinary heart, quite commonplace brains, but beauty that lined the pathway where she walked with eyes of admiration and delight.

In her town, among her suitors, was one that was a Fool—not a remarkable fool; a simple, commonplace fool of the sort that abounds even in villages. He was foolish enough to love the Beauty so completely that when he made sure that she would not love him he could not endure to remain in the village, but went far away in the West to get the torment of her beauty out of his sight. The other suitors, who were wiser than he, when they found that she was not for them, gave her up with mild regret as one gives up a fabulous dream, saying: "There was no hope for us, anyway. If the Fool had stayed at home he would have been saved from the sight of her, for she is going East, where there are great fortunes for the very beautiful."

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And this she made ready to do, since the praise she had received had bred ambition in her—a reasonable and right ambition, for why should a light be hidden under a bushel when it might be set up on high to illumine a wide garden? Besides, she had not learned to love any of the unimportant men who loved her important beauty, yet promised it nothing more than a bushel to hide itself in.

So she made ready to take her beauty to the larger market-place. But the night before she was to leave the village her father's house took fire mysteriously. The servant, rushing to her door to waken her, died, suffocated there before she could cry out. The Beauty woke to find her bed in flames. She rose with hair and gown ablaze, and, agonizing to a window, leaped blindly out upon the pavement. There the neighbors quenched the fire and saved her life—but nothing more.

Thereafter she was a cripple, and her vaunted beauty was dead; it had gone into the flames, and she had only the ashes of it on her seared face. Now she had only pity where she had had envy and adulation. Now there was a turning away of eyes when she hurried abroad on necessary errands. Now her enemies were tenderly disposed toward her, and everybody forbore to mention what she had been. Everybody spared her feelings and talked of other things and looked at the floor or at the sky when she must be spoken to.

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One day the Fool, having heard only that the Beauty was to leave the village, and having heard nothing of the fire, and not having prospered where he was, returned to his old home. The first person he saw he asked of the Beauty, and that one told him of the holocaust of her graces, and

warned him, remembering that the Fool had always spoken his thoughts without tact or discretion—warned the Fool to disguise when he saw her the shock he must feel and make no sign that he found her other than he left her. And the Fool promised.

When he saw her he made a pretense indeed of greeting her as before, but he was like a man trying to look upon a fog as upon a sunrise; for the old beauty of her face did not strike his eyes full of its own radiance. She saw the struggle of his smile and the wincing of his soul. But she did not wince, for she was by now bitterly accustomed to this reticence and self-control.

He walked along the street with her, and looked always aside or ahead and talked of other things. He walked with her to her own gate, and to her porch, trying to find some light thing to say to leave her. But the cruelty of the world was like a rusty nail in his heart, and when he put out his hand and she set in his hand what her once so exquisite fingers were now, his heart broke in his breast; and when he lifted his eyes to what her once so triumphant face was now, they refused to withhold their tears, and his lips could not hold back his thoughts, and he groaned aloud:

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"Oh, you were so beautiful! No one was ever so beautiful as you were then. But now—I can't stand it! I can't stand it! I wish that I might have died for you. You were so beautiful! I can see you now as you were when I told you good-by."

Then he was afraid for what he had said, and ashamed, and he dreaded to look at her again. He would have dashed away, but she seized him by the sleeve, and whispered:

"How good it is to hear your words! You are the only one that has told me that I ever was beautiful since I became what I am. Tell me, tell me how I looked when you bade me good-by!"

And he told her. Looking aside or at the sky, he told her of her face like a rose in the moonlight, of her hair like some mist spun and woven in shadows and glammers of its own, of her long creamy arms and her hands that a god had fashioned lovingly. He told her of her eyes and their deeps, and their lashes and the brows above them. He told her of the strange rhythm of her musical form when she walked or danced or leaned upon the arm of her chair.

He dared not look at her lest he lose his remembrance of them; but he heard her laughing, softly at first, then with pride and wild triumph. And she crushed his hand in hers and kissed it, murmuring: "God bless you! God bless you!"

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For even in poverty it is sweet to know that once we were rich.

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## THE GHOSTLY COUNSELORS

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### I

In a little hall bedroom in a big city lay a little woman in a big trouble. She had taken the room under an assumed name, and a visitor had come to her there—to little her in the big city, from the bigger unknown.

She had taken the room as "Mrs. Emerton." The landlady, Mrs. Rotch, had had her doubts. But then she was liberal-minded—folks had to be in that street. Still, she made it an invariable rule that "no visitors was never allowed in rooms," a parlor being kept for the purpose up to ten o'clock, when the landlady went to bed in it, "her having to have her sleep as well as anybody."

But, in spite of the rules, a visitor had come to "Mrs. Emerton's" room—a very, very young man. His only name as yet was "the Baby." She dared not give the young man his father's name, for then people would know, and she had come to the city to keep people from knowing. She had come to the wicked city from the sweet, wholesome country, where, according to fiction, there is no evil, but where, according to fact, people are still people and moonlight is still madness. In the country, love could be concealed but not its consequence.

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Her coadjutor in the ceremony of summoning this little spirit from the vasty deep had not followed her to the city where the miracle was achieved. He was poor, and his parents would have been brokenhearted; his employer in the village would have taken away his seven-dollar-a-week job.

So the boy sent the girl to town alone, with what money he had saved up and what little he could borrow; and he stayed in the village to earn more.

The girl's name was Lightfoot—Hilda Lightfoot—a curiously prophetic name for her progress in the primrose path, though she had gone heavy-footed enough afterward. And now she could hardly walk at all.

Hilda Lightfoot had come to the city in no mood to enjoy its frivolities, and with no means. She had climbed the four flights to her room a few days ago for the last time. In all the weeks and weeks she had never had a caller, except, the other day, a doctor and a nurse, who had taken away most of her money and left her this little clamorous youth, whose victim she was as he was hers.

To-night she was desperately lonely. Even the baby's eternal demands and uproars were hushed

in sleep. She felt strong enough now to go out into the wonderful air of the city; the breeze was as soft and moonseeped as the blithe night wind that blew across the meadows at home.

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The crowds went by the window and teased her like a circus parade marching past a school.

But she could not go to circuses—she had no money. All she had was a nameless, restless baby.

She grew frantically lonely. She went almost out of her head from her solitude, the jail-like loneliness, with no one to talk to except her little fellow-prisoner who could not talk.

Her homesick heart ran back to the home life she was exiled from. She was thinking of the village. It was prayer-meeting night, and the moon would wait outside the church like Mary's white-fleeced lamb till the service was over, and then it would follow the couples home, gamboling after them when they walked, and, when they paused, waiting patiently about.

The moon was a lone white lamb on a shadowy hill all spotted with daisies. Everything in the world was beautiful except her fate, her prison, her poverty, and her loneliness.

If only she could go down from this dungeon into the streets! If only she had some clothes to wear and knew somebody who would take her somewhere where there was light and music! It was not much to ask. Hundreds of thousands of girls were having fun in the theaters and the restaurants and the streets. Hundreds of thousands of fellows were taking their best girls places.

If only Webster Edie would come and take her out for a walk! She had been his best girl, and he had been her fellow. Why must he send her here, alone? It was his duty to be with her, now of all times. A woman had a right to a little petting, now of all times. She had written him so yesterday, begging him to come to her at any cost. But her letter must have crossed his letter, and in that he said that he could not get away and could not send her any money for at least another week, and then not much.

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She was doomed to loneliness—indefinitely. If only some one would come in and talk to her! The landlady never came except about the bill. The little slattern who brought her meals had gone to bed. She knew nobody—only voices, the voices of other boarders who went up and down the stairs and sometimes paused outside her door to talk and laugh or exchange gossip. She had caught a few names from occasional greeting or exclamation: "Good morning, Miss Marland!" "Why, Mrs. Elsbree!" "How was the show last night, Miss Bessett?" "Oh, Mrs. Teed, would you mind mailing these letters as you go out?" "Not at all, Mrs. Braywood."

They were as formless to her as ghosts, but she could not help imagining bodies and faces and clothes to fit the voices. She could not help forming likes and dislikes. She would have been glad to have any of them come to see her, to ask how she was or admire the baby, or to borrow a pin or lend a book.

If somebody did not come to see her she would go mad. If only she dared, she would leave the baby and steal down the stairs and out of the front door and slip along the streets. They called her; they beckoned to her and promised her happiness. She was like a little yacht held fast in a cove by a little anchor. The breeze was full of summons and nudgings; the water in the bay was dancing, every ripple a giggle. Only her anchor held her, such a little anchor, such a gripping anchor!

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If only some one would come in! If only the baby could talk, or even listen with understanding! She was afraid to be alone any longer, lest she do something insane and fearful. She sat at the window, with one arm stretched out across the sill and her chin across it, and stared off into the city's well of white lights. Then she bent her head, hid her hot face in the hollow of her elbow, and clenched her eyelids to shut away the torment. She was loneliest staring at the city, but she was unendurably lonely with her eyes shut. She would go crazy if somebody did not come.

There was a knock at the door. It startled her.

She sat up and listened. The knock was repeated softly. She turned her head and stared at the door. Then she murmured, "Come in."

The door whispered open, and a woman in soft black skirts whispered in. The room was lighted only by the radiance from the sky, and the mysterious woman was mysteriously vague against the dimly illuminated hall.

She closed the door after her and stood, a shadow in a shadow. Even her face was a mere glimmer, like a patch of moonlight on the door, and her voice was stealthy as a breeze. It was something like the voice she heard called "Mrs. Elsbree."

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Hilda started to rise, but a faint, white hand pressed her back and the voice said:

"Don't rise, my dear. I know how weak you are, what you have gone through, alone, here in this dreary place. I know what pain you have endured, and the shame you have felt, the shame that faces you outside in the world. It is a cruel world. To women—oh, but it is cruel! It has no mercy for a woman who loves too well.

"If you had a lot of money you might fight it with its own weapon. Money is the one weapon it respects. But you haven't any money, have you, my dear? If you had, you wouldn't be here in the dark alone, would you?

"I'm afraid there is nothing ahead of you, either, but darkness, my dear. The man you loved has

deserted you, hasn't he? He is a poor, weak thing, anyway. Even if he married you, you would probably part. He'd always hate you. Nobody else will want you for a wife, you poor child; you know that, don't you? And nobody will help you, because of the baby. You couldn't find work and keep the baby with you, could you? And you couldn't leave it. It is a weight about your neck; it will drown you in deep waters.

"Even if it lived, it would have only misery ahead of it, for your story would follow it through life. The older it grew, the more it would suffer. It would despise you and itself. How much happier you would be not to be alive at all, both of you, you poor, unwelcome things!

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"There are many problems ahead of you, my dear; and you'll never solve them, except in one way. If you were dead and asleep in your grave with your poor little one at your breast, all your troubles would be over then, wouldn't they? People would feel sorry for you; they wouldn't sneer at you then. And you wouldn't mind loneliness or hunger or pointing fingers or anything.

"Take my advice, dearie, and end it now. There are so many ways; so many things to buy at drug-stores. And that's the river you can just see over there. It is very peaceful in its depths. Its cool, dark waters will wash away your sorrows. Or if that is too far for you to go, there's the window. You could climb out on the ledge with your baby in your arms and just step off into—peace. Take my advice, poor, lonely, little thing. It's the one way; I know. The world will forgive you, and Heaven will be merciful. Didn't Christ take the Magdalen into His own company and His mother's? He will take you up into heaven, if you go now. Good-by. Don't be afraid. Good-by. Don't be afraid."

She was gone so softly that Hilda did not see her go. She had been staring off into that ocean of space, and when she turned her head the woman was gone. But her influence was left in the very air. Her words went on whispering about the room. Under their influence the girl rose, tottered to the bed, gathered the sleeping baby to her young bosom, kissed his brow without waking him, and stumbled to the window.

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She pushed it as high as it would go and knelt on the ledge, peering down into the street. It was a fearful distance to the walk.

She hoped she would not strike the stone steps or the area rail. And yet what difference would it make? It would only assure her peace the quicker. She must wait for those people below to walk past. But they were not gone before others were there. She could not hurl herself upon them.

As she waited, it grew terrible to take the plunge. She had always been afraid of high places. She grew dizzy now, and must cling hard to keep from falling before she said her prayers and was ready. And, now the pavement was clear. She kissed her baby again. She drew in a deep breath, her last sip of the breath of life. How good it was, this clear, cool air flowing across this great, beautiful, heartless city that she should never see again! And now—

There was a knock at the door. It checked her. She lost impulse and impetus and crept back and sank into a chair. She was pretending to be rocking the baby to sleep when she murmured, "Come in."

Perhaps it would be Mrs. Elsbree, returned to reproach her for her cowardice and her delay. But when she dared to look up it was another woman. At least it was another voice—perhaps Miss Marland's.

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"I've been meaning to call on you, Mrs. Emerton, but I haven't had a free moment. Of course I've known all along why you were here. We all have. There's been a good deal of backbiting. But that's the boarding-house of it. This evening, at dinner, there was some mention of you at the table, and some of the women were ridiculing you and some were condemning you. Oh, don't wince, my dear; everybody is always being ridiculed or condemned or both for something. If you were one of the saints they would burn you at the stake or put you to the torture.

"Anyway, I spoke up and told them that the only one who had a right to cast a stone at you was one without sin, and I despaired of finding such a person in this boarding-house—or outside, either, for that matter. I spoke up and told them that you were no worse than the others. They all had their scandals, and I know most of them. There's some scandal about everybody. We're all sinners—if you want to call it sin to follow your most sacred instincts.

"Why should you be afraid of a little gossip or a few jokes or a little abuse from a few hypocrites? They're all sinners—worse than you, too, most of them, if the truth were known.

"Why blame yourself and call yourself a criminal? You loved the boy—loved him too much, that's all. If you had been really wicked you would have refused to love him or to give yourself up to his plea. If you had been really bad you'd have known too much to have this child. You'd have got rid of it at all costs.

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"You are really a very good little woman with a passion for being a mother. It's the world outside that's bad. Don't be ashamed before it. Hold your head up. The world owes you a living, and it will pay it if you demand it. It will pay for you and your child, too. Just demand your rights. You'll soon find a place. You're too young and beautiful to be neglected. You're young and beautiful and passionate. You can make some man awfully happy. He'll be glad to have your baby and you—disgrace and all. He may be very rich, too. Go find him. The baby may grow up to be a wonderful man. You could make enough to give the boy every advantage and a fine start in the world.

"The world is yours, if you'll only take it. Remember the Bible, 'Ask and it shall be given unto you.' Think it over, my dear. Don't do anything foolish or rash. You're too young and too beautiful. And now I must run along. Good-by and good luck."

While Hilda was breathing deep of this wine of hope and courage the woman was gone.

Hilda glanced out of the window again. She shuddered. A moment more and she would have been lying below there, broken, mangled, unsightly—perhaps not dead, only crippled for life and arrested as a suicide that failed; perhaps as a murderess, since the fall would surely have killed her child—her precious child. She held him close, her great man-baby, her son; he laughed, beat the air with his hands, chuckled, and smote her cheek with palms like white roses. She would take him from this gloomy place. She would go out and demand money, fine clothes, attention.

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She put on her hat, a very shabby little hat. She began to wrap the baby in a heavy shawl. They would have finer things soon.

She grew dizzy with excitement and the exertion, and sank back in the chair a moment, to regain her strength. The chair creaked. No, it was a knock at the door. It proved what the last woman had said. "Ask, and it shall be given unto you."

She had wished for some one to call on her. The whole boarding-house was coming. She was giving a party.

This time it was another voice out of the darkness. It must have been Miss Bessett's. She spoke in a cold, hard, hasty tone. "Going out, my dear? Alone, I hope? No, the baby's wrapped up! You're not going to be so foolish as to lug that baby along? He brands you at once. Nobody will want you round with a squalling baby. Oh, of course he's a pretty child; but he's too noisy. He'll ruin every chance you have.

"You're really very pretty, my dear. The landlady said so. If she noticed it, you must be a beauty, indeed. This is a great town for pretty girls. There's a steady market for them.

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"The light is poor here, but beauty like yours glows even in darkness, and that's what they want, the men. The world will pay anything for beauty, if beauty has the brains to ask a high price and not give too much for it.

"Think of the slaves who have become queens, the mistresses who have become empresses. There are rich women all over town who came by their money dishonestly. You should see some of them in the Park with their automobiles. You'd be ashamed even to let them run over you. Yet, if you were dressed up, you'd look better than any of the automobile brigade.

"You might be a great singer. I've heard you crooning to the baby. You find a rich man and make him pay for your lessons, and then you make eyes at the manager and, before you know it, you'll be engaged for the opera and earning a thousand dollars a night—more than that, maybe.

"Think how much that means. It would make you mighty glad you didn't marry that young gawp at home. He's a cheap skate to get you into this trouble and not help you out.

"But I'll set you in the way of making a mint of money. There's only one thing: you must give up the baby and never let anybody know you ever had it. Don't freeze up and turn away. There are so many ways of disposing of a baby. Send it to a foundling asylum. No questions will be asked. The baby will have the best of care and grow so strong that some rich couple will insist on adopting it, or you could come back when you are married to a rich man and pretend you took a fancy to it and adopt it yourself.

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"And there's a lot of other ways to get rid of a baby. You could give it the wrong medicine by mistake, or just walk out and forget it. And there's the river; you could drop it into those black waters. And then you're free—baby would never know. He would be ever so much better off. And you would be free.

"You must be free. You must get a little taste of life. You've a right to it. You lived in a little stupid village all your years—and now you're in the city. Listen to it! It would be yours for the asking. And it gives riches and glory to the pretty girls it likes. But you must go to it as a girl, not as a poor, broken, ragged thing, lugging a sickly baby with no name. Get rid of the baby, my dear. It will die, anyway. It will starve and sicken. Put it out of its misery. That medicine on your wash-stand—an overdose of that and you can say it was a mistake. Who can prove it wasn't? Then you are free. You'll have hundreds of friends, and a career, and a motor of your own, and servants, and a beautiful home. Don't waste your youth, my dear. Invest your beauty where it will bring big proceeds.

"See those lights off there—the big lights with the name of that woman in electric letters? She came to town poorer than you and with a worse name. Now she is rich and famous. And the Countess of—What's-her-name? She was poor and bad, but she didn't let any old-fashioned ideas of remorse hold her back. Go on; get rid of the brat. Go on!"

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Hilda clutched the baby closer and moved away to shield her from this grim counselor. When she turned again she was alone. The woman had gone, but the air trembled with her fierce wisdom. She was ruthless, but how wise!

The lights flaring up into the sky carried that other woman's name. Her picture was everywhere. She had been poor and wicked. Now she was a household word, respected because she was rich.



She had succeeded.

There came a lilting of music on a breeze. They were dancing, somewhere. The tango "coaxed her feet." Her body swayed with it.

If she were there, men would quarrel over her, rush to claim her—as they had done even in the village before she threw herself away on the most worthless, shiftless of the lot, who got her into trouble and deserted her. It was not her business to starve for his baby.

The baby began to fret again, to squawk with vicious explosions of ugly rage; it puled and yowled. It was a nuisance. It caught a fistful of her hair and wrenched till the tears of pain rushed to her eyes. She unclasped the little talons, ran to the wash-stand, took up an ugly bottle and poured out enough to put an end to that nauseating wail.

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She bent over to lift the baby to the glass. Its lips touched her bosom. Its crying turned to a little chortle like a brook's music. It pommelled her with hands like white roses. The moon rested on its little head and made its fuzz of hair a halo. She paused, adoring it sacredly like another Madonna.

A soft tap at the door. She put the fatal glass away and turned guiltily. A dark little woman was there, and a soft, motherly voice spoke. It must be Mrs. Braywood's. She could not have suspected, for her tone was all of affection.

"I heard your child laughing, my dear—and crying. I don't know which went to my heart deeper. I just had to come to see it. It is so marvelous to be a mother. I've been married for ten years, and my husband and I have prayed and waited. But God would not send us a baby. He saved that honor for you. And such an honor and glory and power! To be a mother! To be a rose-bush and have a white bud grow upon your stem, and bloom! Oh, you lucky child, to be selected for such a privilege! You must have suffered; you must be suffering now; but there's nothing worth while that doesn't cost pain.

"It occurred to me that—don't misunderstand me, my child, but—well, the landlady said you were poor; she was in doubt of the room rent; so I thought—perhaps you might not want the baby as much as I do.

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"I hoped you might let me take him. I'd be such a good mother to him. I'd love him as if he were my own, and my husband would pay you well for him. We'd give him our own name, and people should never know that he—that you—that we weren't really his parents. Give him to me, won't you? Please! I beg you!"

Hilda whirled away from her pleading hands and clenched the baby so hard that it cried a little. The sound was like that first wail of his she had ever heard. Again it went into her heart like a little hand seizing and wringing it.

Mrs. Braywood—if it were Mrs. Braywood—was not angry at the rebuff, though she was plainly disheartened. She tried to be brave, and sighed.

"Oh, I don't wonder you turn away. I understand. I wouldn't give him up if I were in your place. The father must come soon. He won't stay away long. Just let him see the baby and hear its voice and know it is his baby, and he will stand by you.

"He will come to you. He will hear the voice wherever he is, and he will make you his wife. And the baby will make a man of him and give him ambition and inspiration. Babies always provide for themselves, they say. You will have trouble, and you will suffer from the gibes of self-righteous people, and you will be cruelly blamed; but there is only one way to expiate sin, my child, and that is to face its consequences and pay its penalties in full. The only way to atone for a wrong deed is to do the next right thing. Take good care of your precious treasure. Good-by. His father will come soon. He will come. Good-by. Oh, you enviable thing, you mother!"

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And now she was gone. But she had left the baby's value enhanced, and the mother's, too.

She had offered a price for the baby, and glorified the mother. The lonely young country girl felt no longer utterly disgraced. She did not feel that the baby was a mark of Heaven's disfavor, but rather of its favor. She felt lonely no longer. The streets interested her no more. Let those idle revelers go their way; let them dance and laugh. They had no child of their own to adore and to enjoy.

If the baby's father came they would be married. If he delayed—well, she would stumble on alone. The baby was her cross. She must carry it up the hill.

Hilda felt entirely content, but very tired, full of hope that Webster Edie would come to her, but full of contentment, too. She talked to the baby, and he seemed to understand her now. She could not translate his language, but he translated hers.

She slipped out of her day clothes and into her nightgown—and so to bed. She fell asleep with her baby in her arms. Her head drooped back and her parted lips seemed to pant and glow. The moon reached her window and sent in a long shaft of light. It found a great tear on her cheek. It gleamed on her throat bent back; it gleamed on one bare shoulder where the gown was torn; it gleamed on her breast where the baby drowsily clung.

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There was a benediction in the moonlight.

## I

Mrs. Serina Pepperall had called her husband twice without success. It was at that hatefulest hour of the whole week when everybody that has to get up is getting up and realizing that it is Monday morning, and raining besides.

It is bad enough for it to be Monday, but for it to be raining is inexcusable.

Young Horace Pepperall used to say that that was the reason the world didn't improve much. People got good on Sunday, and then it had to go and be Monday. He had an idea that if Sunday could be followed by some other day, preferably Saturday, there would be more happiness and virtue in the world. Mrs. Pepperall used to say that her boy was quite a ph'losopher in his way. Mr. Pepperall said he was a hopeless loafer and spent more time deciding whether he'd ought to do this or that than it would have taken to do 'em both twice. Whereupon Mrs. Pepperall, whose maiden name was Boody—daughter of Mrs. Ex-County-Clerk Boody—would remind her husband that he was only a Pepperall, after all, while her son was at least half Boody. Whereupon her husband would remind her of certain things about the Boody's. And so it would go. But that was other mornings. This was this morning.

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Among all the homes that the sun looked upon—or would have looked upon if it could have looked upon anything and if it hadn't been raining and the Pepperall roof had not been impervious to light, though not to moisture—among them all, surely the Pepperall reveille would have been the least attractive. Homer never got his picture of rosy-fingered Aurora smilingly leaping out of the couch of night from any such home as the Pepperalls' in Carthage.

Serina was as unlike Aurora as possible. Aurora is usually poised on tiptoe, with her well-manicured nails gracefully extended, and nothing much about her except a chariot and more or less chiffon, according to whether the picture is for families or bachelors.

Serina was entirely surrounded by flannelette, of simple and pitilessly chaste design—a hole at the top for her head to go through and a larger one at the other extreme for her feet to stick out at. But it was so long that you couldn't have seen her feet if you had been there. And Papa Pepperall, who was there, was no longer interested in those once exciting ankles. They had been more interesting when there had been less of them. But we'd better talk about the sleeves.

The sleeves were so long that they kept falling into the water where Serina was making a hasty toilet at the little marble-topped altar to cleanliness which the Pepperalls called the "worsh-stand"—that is, the "hand-wash-basin," as Mrs. Hippisley called it after she came back from her never-to-be-forgotten trip to England.

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But then Serina's sleeves had always been falling into the suds, and ever since she could remember she had rolled them up again with that peculiar motion with which people roll up sleeves. This morning, having failed to elicit papa from the bed by persuasion, she made such a racket about her ablutions that he lifted his dreary lids at last. He realized that it was morning, Monday, and raining. It irritated him so that he glared at his faithful wife with no fervor for her unsullied and unwearied—if not altogether unwearisome—devotion. He watched her roll up those sleeves thrice more. Somehow he wanted to scream at the futility of it. But he checked the impulse partly, and it was with softness that he made a comment he had choked back for years. "Serina—" he began.

"Well," she returned, pausing with the soap clenched in one hand.

He spoke with the luxurious leisureliness and the pauses for commas of a nearly educated man lolling too long abed:

"Serina, it has just occurred to me that, since we have been married, you have expended, on rolling back those everlastingly relapsing sleeves of yours, enough energy to have rolled the Sphinx of Egypt up on top of the Pyramid of Cheops."

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Serina was so surprised that she shot the slippery soap under the wash-stand. She went right after it. There may be nymphs who can stalk a cake of soap under a wash-stand with grace, but Serina was not one of them. Her indolent spouse made another cynical comment:

"Don't do that! You look like the Goddess of Liberty trying to peek into the Subway."

But she did not hear him. She was rummaging for the soap and for an answer to his first remark. At length she emerged with both. She stood up and panted.

"Well, I can't see as it would 'a' done me any good if I had have!"

"Had have what?" her husband yawned, having forgotten his original remark.

"Got the Sphinnix on top of the Cheops. And besides, I've been meaning to hem them up; but now that you've gone bankrupt again, and I have to do my own cooking and all—"

"But, my dear Serina, you've said the same thing ever since we were married. What frets me is to

think of the terrible waste of labor with nothing to show for it."

She sniffed, and retorted with all the superiority of the unsuccessful wife of an unsuccessful husband:

"Well, I can't see as you're so smart. Ever since we been married you been goin' to that stationery-store of yours, and you never learned enough to keep from going bankrupt three times. And now they've shut the shop, and you've nothing better to do than lay in bed and make fun of me that have slaved for you and your children."

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They were always his children when she talked of the trouble they were. Her all too familiar oration was interrupted by the eel-like leap of the soap. This time it described a graceful arc that landed it under the middle of the bed—a double bed at that.

Pepperall had the gallantry to pursue it. He went head first over the starboard quarter of the deck, leaving his feet aboard. Just as he tagged the soap with his fingers his feet came on over after him, and he found himself flat on his back, with his head under the bed and his feet under the bureau.

When the thunder of his downfall had subsided he heard Serina say, "Now that you're up you better stay up."

So he wriggled out from under and got himself aloft, rubbing his indignant back. If Serina was no Aurora rising from the sea, her husband was no Phœbus Apollo. His gown looked like hers, only younger. It had a frivolous little pocket, and the slit-skirt effect on both sides; and it was cut what is called "misses' length," disclosing two of the least attractive shins in Carthage.

He was aching all over and he was angry, and he snarled as he stood at the wash-stand:

"Have you finished with this water?"

"Yes," she said, muffledly, from the depths of a face-towel.

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"Why don't you ever empty the bowl then?" he growled, and viciously tilted the contents into the—must I say the awful word?—the slop-jar—what other word is there?

The water splashed over and struck the bare feet of both icily. They yowled and danced like Piute Indians, and glared at each other as they danced. They glared in a nagged rage that would have turned into an ugly quarrel if a great sorrow had not suddenly overswept them. They saw themselves as they were and by a whim of memory they remembered what they had been. He laughed bitterly:

"It's the first time we've danced together in a long time, eh?"

Her lower lip began to quiver and swell quite independently and she sighed:

"Not much like the dances we used to dance. Oh dear!"

She dropped into a chair and stared, not at her husband, but at the bridegroom of long ago he had shriveled from. She remembered those honeymoon mornings when they had awakened like eager children and laughed and romped and been glad of the new day. The mornings had been precious then, for it was a tragedy to let him go to his shop, as it was a festival to watch from the porch in the evening till he came round the corner and waved to her.

She looked from him to herself, to what she could see of herself—it was not all, but more than enough. She saw her heavy red hands and the coarse gown over her awkward knees, and the dismal slovenliness of her attitude. She felt that he was remembering the slim, wild, sweet girl he had married. And she was ashamed before his eyes, because she had let the years prey upon her and had lazily permitted beauty to escape from her—from her body, her face, her motions, her thoughts.

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She felt that for all her prating of duty she had committed a great wickedness lifelong. She wondered if this were not "the unpardonable sin," whose exact identity nobody had seemed to decide—to grow strangers with beauty and to forget grace.

## II

Whatever her husband may have been thinking, he had the presence of mind to hide his eyes in the water he had poured from the pitcher. He scooped it up now in double handfuls. He made a great splutter and soused his face in the bowl, and scrubbed the back of his neck and behind his ears and his bald spot, and slapped his eminent collar-bones with his wet hand. And then he was bathed.

Serina pulled on her stockings, and hated them and the coarser feet they covered. She opened the wardrobe door as a screen, less from modesty for herself than from sudden disgust of her old corset and her all too sober lingerie. She resolved that she would hereafter deck herself with more of that coquetry which had abruptly returned to her mind as a wife's most solemn duty.

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Then she remembered that they were poorer than they ever had been. Now they could not even run into debt again; for who would give them further credit, since their previous bills had been canceled by nothing more satisfactory than the grim "Received payment" of the bankruptcy

court?

It was too late for her to reform. Her song was sung. And as for buying frills and fallals, there were two daughters to provide for and a son who was growing into the stratum of foppery. With a sigh of dismissal she flung on her old wrapper, whose comfortableness she suddenly despised, and made her escape, murmuring, "I'll call the childern."

She pounded on the boy's door, and Horace eventually answered with his regular program of uncouth noises, like some one protesting against being strangled to death. These were followed by moans of woe, and then by far-off-sounding promises of "Oh, aw ri', I'm git'nup."

Serina moved on to her youngest daughter's door. She had tapped but once when it was opened by "the best girl that ever lived," according to her father; and according to her mother, "a treasure; never gave me a bit of trouble—plain, of course, but so willing!"

Ollie was fully dressed and so was her room, except for the bed, the covers of which were thrown back like a wave breaking over the footboard. In fact, after Ollie had kissed her mother she informed her that the kitchen fire was made, the wash-boiler on, and the breakfast going. [Pg 293]

"You are a treasure!" Serina sighed.

She passed on to the door of Prue. Prue was the second daughter. Rosie, the eldest, had married Tom Milford and moved away. She was having troubles of her own, and children with a regularity that led Serina to dislike Tom Milford more than ever.

Serina knocked several times at Prue's door without response. Then she went in as she always had to. Prue was still asleep, and her yesterday's clothes seemed to be asleep, too, in all sorts of attitudes and all sorts of places. The only regularity about the room was the fact that every single thing was out of place. The dressing-table held a little chaos, including one stocking. The other stocking was on the floor. One silken garter glowed in the southeast corner and one in the northwest. One shoe reclined in the southwest corner and the other gaped in the northeast. But they were pretty shoes.

Her frock was in a heap, but it suggested a heap of flowers. Hair-ribbons and ribboned things and a crumpled sash bedecked the carpet. But the prettiest thing of all was the head half fallen from the pillow and half smothered in the tangled skeins of hair. One arm was bent back over her brow to shut out the sunlight and the other arm dangled to the floor. There was something adorable about the round chin nestling in the soft throat. Her chin seemed to frown with a lovable sullenness. There was a mysterious grace in the very sprawl vaguely outlined by the long wrinkles and ridges of the blankets. [Pg 294]

Serina shook her head over Prue in a loving despair. She was the bad boy of the family, impatient, exacting, hot-tempered, stormy, luxurious, yet never monotonous.

"You can always put your hand on Ollie," Serina would say; "but you never know where Prue is from one minute to the next."

Consequently Ollie was not interesting and Prue was.

They were all afraid of Prue and afraid for her. They all toadied to her and she kept them excited—alarmed, perhaps; angry, oh yes; but never bored.

And there were rewards in her service, too, for she could be as stormy with affection as with mutiny. Sometimes she would attack Serina with such gusts of gratitude or admiration that her mother would cry for help. She would squeeze her father's ribs till he gasped for breath. When she was pleased she would dance about the house like a whirling mænad with ululations of ecstasy. These crises were sharp, but they left a sweet taste in the memory.

So Prue had the best clothes and did the least work. Prue was sent off to boarding-school in Chicago, though she had never been able to keep up with her classes in Carthage; while Ollie—who took first prizes till even the goody-goody boys hated her—stayed at home. She had dreamed of being a teacher in the High, but she never mentioned it, and she studied bookkeeping and stenography in the business college so that she could help her father. [Pg 295]

Prue had not been home long and had come home with bad grace. When her father had found it impossible to borrow more money even to pay his clerks, to say nothing of boarding-school bills, he had to write the truth to Prue. He told her to come again to Carthage.

She did not come back at once and she refused to explain why. As a matter of fact, she had desperately endeavored to find a permanent job in Chicago. It was easy for so attractive a girl to get jobs, but it was hard for so domineering a soul to keep one. She was regretfully bounced out of three department stores in six days for "sassing" the customers and the aisle-manager.

She even tried the theater. She was readily accepted by a stage-manager, but when he found that he could not teach her the usual figures or persuade her to keep in step or line with the rest he regretfully let her go.

It was the regularity of it that stumped Prue. She could dance like a ballerina by herself, but she could not count "one-two-three-four" twice in succession. The second time it was "o-o-one-t'threee-f'r" and next it would be "onety-thry-fo-o-our."

Prue hung about Chicago, getting herself into scrapes by her charm and fighting her way out of [Pg 296]

them by her ferocious pride. Finally she went hungry and came home. When she learned the extent of her father's financial collapse she delivered tirades against the people of Carthage and she sang him up as a genius. And then she sought escape from the depression at home by seeking what gaiety Carthage afforded. She made no effort to master the typewriter and she declined to sell dry-goods.

Serina stood and studied the sleeping girl, that strange wild thing she had borne and had tried in vain to control. She thought how odd it was that in the mystic transmission of her life she had given all the useful virtues to Ollie and none of them to Prue. She wondered what she had been thinking of to make such a mess of motherhood. And what could she do to correct the oversight? Ollie did not need restraint, and Prue would not endure it. She stood aloof, afraid to waken the girl to the miseries of existence in a household where every day was blue Monday now.

Ollie had not waited to be called. Ollie had risen betimes and done all the work that could be done, and stood ready to do whatever she could. Prue was still aloll on a bed of ease. Even to waken her was to waken a March wind. The moment she was up she would have everybody running errands for her. She would be lavish in complaint and parsimonious of help. And yet she was a dear! She did enjoy her morning sleep so well. It would be a pity to disturb her. The rescuing thought came to Serina that Prue loved to take a long hot bath on Monday mornings, because on wash-day there was always a plenty of hot water in the bathroom. On other mornings the hot-water faucet suffered from a distressing cough and nothing more.

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So she tiptoed out and closed the door softly.

### III

At breakfast Ollie waited on the table after compelling Serina to sit down and eat. There was little to tempt the appetite and no appetite to be tempted.

Papa was in the doldrums. He had always complained before of having to gulp his breakfast and hurry to the shop. And now he complained because there was no hurry; indeed, there was no shop. He must set out at his time of years, after his life of independent warfare, to ask for enlistment as a private in some other man's company—in a town where vacancies rarely occurred and where William Pepperall would not be welcome.

The whole town was mad at him. He had owed everybody, and then suddenly he owed nobody. By the presto-change-o of bankruptcy his debts had been passed from the hat of unpaid bills to the hat of worthless accounts.

Serina was as dismal as any wife is when she is faced with the prospect of having her man hanging about the house all day. A wife in a man's office hours is a nuisance, but a man at home in household office hours is a pest. This was the newest but not the least of Serina's woes.

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Horace was even glummer than ever, as soggy as his own oatmeal. At best he was one of those breakfast bruins. Now he was a bear that has been hit on the nose. He, too, must seek a job. School had seemed confining before, but now that he must go to work, school seemed like one long recess.

Even Ollie was depressed. Hers was the misery of an active person denied activity. She had prepared herself as an aid in her father's business, and now he had no business. In this alkali desert of inanition Prue's vivacious temper would have been welcome.

"Where's Prue?" said papa for the fifth time.

Serina was about to say that she was still asleep when Prue made her presence known. Everybody was apprised that the water had been turned on in the bathroom; it resounded throughout the house. It seemed to fall about one's head.

Prue was filling the tub for her Monday morning siesta. She was humming a strange tune over the cascade like another Minnehaha. And from the behavior of the dining-room chandelier and the plates on the sideboard she was evidently dancing.

"What's that toon she's dancing to?" papa asked, after a while.

"I don't know," said Serina.

"I never heard it," said Ollie.

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"Ah," growled Horace, "it's the Argentine tango."

"The tango!" gasped papa. "Isn't that the new dance I've been reading about, that's making a sensation in New York?"

"Ah, wake up, pop!" said Horace. "It's a sensation here, too."

"In Carthage? They're dancing the tango in our home town?"

"Surest thing you know, pop. The whole burg's goin' bug over it."

"How is it done? What is it like?"

"Something like this," said Horace, and, rising, he indulged in the prehistoric turkey-trot of a year

ago, with burlesque hip-snaps and poultry-yard scrapings of the foot.

"Stop it!" papa thundered. "It's loathsome! Do you mean to tell me that my daughter does that sort of thing?"

"Sure! She's a wonder at it."

"What scoundrel taught my poor child such—such—Who taught her, I say?"

"Gosh!" sniffed Horace, "sis don't need teachin'. She's teachin' the rest of 'em. They're crazy about her."

"Teaching others! My g-g-goodness! Where did she learn?"

"Chicago, I guess."

"Oh, the wickedness of these cities and the foreigners that are dragging our American homes down to their own level!"

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"I guess the foreigners got nothin' on us," said Horace. "It's a Namerican dance."

"What are we coming to? Go tell Prue to come here at once. I'll put a stop to that right here and now."

Serina gave him one searing glance, and he understood that he could not deliver his edict to Prue yet awhile. He heard her singing even more barbaric strains. The chandelier danced with a peculiar savagery, then the dance was evidently quenched and subdued. Awestruck yowls from above indicated that Prue was in hot water.

"This is the last straw!" groaned papa, with all the wretchedness of a father learning that his daughter was gone to the bad.

#### IV

Prue did not appear below-stairs for so long that her father had lost his magnificent running start by the time she sauntered in all sleek and shiny and asked for her food. She brought a radiant grace into the dull gray room; and Serina whispered to Will to let her have her breakfast first.

She and Ollie waited on Prue, while the father paced the floor, stealing sidelong glances at her, and wondering if it were possible that so sweet a thing should be as vicious as she would have to be to tango.

When she had scoured her plate and licked her spoon with a child-like charm her father began to crank up his throat for a tirade. He began with the reluctant horror of a young attorney cross-examining his first murderer:

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"Prue—I want to—to—er—Prue, do you—did you—ever—This—er—this tango business—Prue—have you—do you—er—What do you know about it?"

"Well, of course, papa, they change it so fast on you it's hard to keep up with it, but I was about three days ahead of Chicago when I left there. I met with a man who had just stepped off the twenty-hour train and I learned all he knew before I turned him loose."

In a strangled tone the father croaked, "You dance it, then?"

"You bet! Papa, stand up and I'll show you the very newest roll. It's a peach. Put your weight on your right leg. Say, it's a shame we haven't a phonograph! Don't you suppose you could afford a little one? I could have you all in fine form in no time. And it would be so good for mamma."

Papa fell back into a chair with just strength enough to murmur, "I want you to promise me never to dance it again."

"Don't be foolish, you dear old bump-on-a-log!"

"I forbid you to dance it ever again."

She laughed uproariously: "Listen at the old Skee-zicks! Get up here and I'll show you the cutest dip."

When at last he grew angry, and made her realize it, she flared into a tumult of mutiny that drove him out into the rain. He spent the day looking for a job without finding one. Horace came home wet and discouraged with the same news. Ollie, the treasure, however, announced that she had obtained a splendid position as typist in Judge Hippisley's office, at a salary of thirty dollars a month.

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William was overjoyed, but Serina protested bitterly. She and Mrs. Judge Hippisley had been bitter social rivals for twenty years. They had fought each other with teas and euchre parties and receptions from young wifhood to middle-aged portliness. And now her daughter was to work in that hateful Anastasia Hippisley's old fool of a husband's office? Well, hardly!

"It's better than starving," said Ollie, and for once would not be coerced, though even her disobedience was on the ground of service. After she had cleared the table and washed the dishes she set out for her room, lugging a typewriter she had borrowed to brush up her speed on.

Prue had begged off from even wiping the dishes, because she had to dress. As Ollie started up-stairs to her task she was brought back by the door-bell. She ushered young Orton Hippisley into the parlor. He had come to take Prue to a dance.

When papa heard this mamma had to hold her hand over his mouth to keep him from making a scene. He was for kicking young Hippisley out of the house.

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"And lose me my job?" gasped Ollie.

The overpowered parent whispered his determination to go up-stairs and forbid Prue to leave. He went up-stairs and forbade her, but she went right on binding her hair with Ollie's best ribbon. In the midst of her father's peroration she kissed him good-by and danced down-stairs in Ollie's new slippers. Her own had been trotted into shreds.

Papa sat fuming all evening. He would not go to bed till Prue came home to the ultimatum he was preparing for her. From above came the tick-tock-tock of Ollie's typewriter. It got on his nerves, like rain on a tin roof.

"To think of it—Ollie up-stairs working her fingers to the bone to help us out, and Prue dancing her feet off disgracing us! To think that one of our daughters should be so good and one so bad!"

"I can't believe that our little Prue is really bad," Serina sighed.

"Yet girls do go wrong, don't they?" her husband groaned. "This morning's paper prints a sermon about the tango. Reverend Doctor What's-his-name, the famous New York newspaper preacher, tears the whole tango crowd to pieces. He points out that the tango is the cause of the present-day wickedness, the ruin of the home!"

Serina was dismal and terrified, but from force of habit she took the opposite side.

"Oh, they were complaining of divorces long before the tango was ever heard of. That same preacher used to blame them on the bicycle, then on the automobile and the movies. And now it's the tango. It'll be flying-machines next."

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Papa was used to fighting with mamma, and he roared with fine leoninity: "Are you defending your daughter's shamelessness? Do you approve of the tango?"

"I've never seen it."

"Then it must be just because you always encourage your children to flout my authority. I never could keep any discipline because you always fought for them, encouraged them to disobey their father, to—to—to—"

She chanted her responses according to the familiar family antipathy antiphony. They talked themselves out eventually; but Prue was not home. Ollie gradually typewrote herself to sleep and Prue was not home. Horace came in from the Y. M. C. A. bowling-alley and went to bed, and Prue was not home.

The old heads nodded. The sentinels slept. At some dimly distant time papa woke with a start and inquired, "Huh?"

Mamma jumped and gasped, "Who?"

They were shivering with the after-midnight chill of the cold room, and Prue was not home. Papa snapped his watch open and snapped it shut; and the same to his jaw:

"Two o'clock! And Prue not home. I'm going after her!"

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He thrust into his overcoat, slapped his hat on his aching head, flung open the door. And Prue came home.

She was alone! And in tears!

## V

As papa's overcoat slid off his arms and his hat off his head she tore down her gloves, tossed her cloak in the direction of the hat-tree and stumbled up the stairs, sobbing. Her mother caught her hand.

"What's the matter, honey?"

Prue wrenched loose and went on up.

Father and mother stared at her, then at each other, then at the floor. Each read the same unspeakable fear in the other's soul. Serina ran up the stairs as fast as she could. William automatically locked the doors and windows, turned out the lights, and followed.

He paused in the upper hall to listen. Prue was explaining at last.

"It's that Orton Hippisley," Prue sobbed.

"What—what has he done?" Serina pleaded, and Prue sobbed on:

"Oh, he got fresh! Some of these fellas in this town think that because a girl likes to have a good

time and knows how to dance they can get fresh with her. I didn't like the way Ort Hippisley held me and I told him. Finally I wouldn't dance any more with him. I gave his dances to Grant Beadle till the last; then Ort begged so hard I said all right. And he danced like a gentleman. But on the way home he—he put his arm round me. And when I told him to take it away he wouldn't. He said I had been in his arms half the evening before folks, and if I hadn't minded then I oughtn't to mind now. And I said: 'Is that so? Well, it's mighty different when you're dancing.' And he said, 'Oh no, it isn't,' and I said, 'Oh yes, it is.' And he tried to kiss me and I hauled off and smashed him right in the nose. It bloodied all over his dress soot, and I'm glad of it."

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Somehow Papa Pepperall felt such an impulse to give three cheers that he had to put his own hand over his mouth. He tiptoed to his room, and when mamma appeared to announce with triumph, "I guess Prue hasn't gone to the bad yet," papa said: "Who said she had? Prue is the finest girl in America!"

"I thought you were saying—"

"Why can't you ever once get me right? I was saying that Prue is too fine a girl to be allowed to mingle with that tango set. I'm going to cowhide that Hippisley cub. And Prue's not going to another one of those dances."

But he didn't. And she did.

## VI

Ollie was up betimes the next morning to get breakfast and make haste to her office. She was so excited that she dropped a stove-lid on the coalscuttle just as her mother appeared.

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"For mercy's sake, less noise!" Serina whispered. "You'll wake poor Prue!"

Ollie next dropped the tray she had just unloaded on the table. Serina was furious. Ollie whispered:

"I'm so nervous for fear I've lost my job at Judge Hippisley's, now that Prue had to go and slap Orton."

"Always thinking of yourself," was Serina's rebuke. "Don't be so selfish!"

But Ollie's fears were wasted. Orton Hippisley might have boasted of kisses he did not get, but not of the slaps that he did. He had gained a new respect for Prue, and at the first opportunity pleaded for forgiveness, eying her little fist the while. He begged her to go with him to a dance at his home that evening.

She forgave him for the sake of the invitation—and she glided and dipped at the judge's house while Ollie spent the evening in his office trying to finish the day's work. Her speed was not yet up to requirements. Prue's speed was.

Other girls watched Prue manipulating her members in the intricate mechanisms of the latest dances. They begged her to teach them, but she laughed and said: "It's easy. Just watch what I do and do the same."

So Raphael told his pupils and Napoleon his subordinates.

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That night Ollie and Prue reached home at nearly the same time. Ollie told how well she was getting along in the judge's office. Prue told how she had made wall-flowers of everybody else in Mrs. Hippisley's parlor. Let those who know a mother's heart decide which daughter Serina was the prouder of, the good or the bad.

She told William about it—how Ollie had learned to type letters with both hands and how Prue got there with both feet. And papa said, "She's a great girl!"

And that was singular.

## VII

A few mornings later Judge Hippisley stopped William on the street and spoke in his best bench manner:

"Will, I hate to speak about your daughter, but I've got to."

"Why, Judge, what's Ollie done? Isn't she fast enough?"

"Ollie's all right. I'm speaking of Prue. She's entirely too fast. I want you to tell her to let my son alone."

"Why, I—you—he—"

"My boy was clerking in Beadle's hardware-store, learning the business and earning twelve dollars a week. And now he spends half his time dancing with that dam—daughter of yours. And Beadle is going to fire him if he doesn't 'tend to business better."

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"I—I'll speak to Prue," was all Pepperall dared to say. The judge had too many powers over him to be talked back to.



Papa spoke to Prue and it amused her very much. She said that old Mr. Beadle had better speak to his own boy, who was Orton's fiercest rival at the dances. And as for the fat old judge, he'd better take up dancing himself.

The following Sunday three of the Carthage preachers attacked the tango. One of them used for his text Matthew xiv:6, and the other used Mark vi:22. Both told how John the Baptist had lost his head over Salome's dancing. Doctor Brearley chose Isaiah lix:7 "Their feet run to evil ... their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; wasting and destruction are in their paths."

Mr. and Mrs. Pepperall and Ollie sat under Doctor Brearley. Prue had slept too late to be present. Doctor Brearley blamed so many of the evils of the world on the tango craze that if a visitor from Mars had dropped into a pew he might have judged that the world had been an Eden till the tango came. But then Doctor Brearley had always blamed old things on new things.

It was a ferocious sermon, however, and the wincing Pepperalls felt that it was aimed directly at them. When Doctor Brearley denounced modern parents for their own godlessness and the irreligion of their homes, William took the blame to himself. On his way home he announced his determination to resume the long-neglected family custom of reading from the Bible. [Pg 310]

After the heavy Sabbath dinner had been eaten—Prue was up in time for this rite—he gathered his little flock in the parlor for a solemn while. It had been his habit to choose the reading of the day at random—he called it "letting the Lord decide." The big rusty-hinged Bible fell open with a loud puff of dust several years old. Papa adjusted his spectacles and read what he found before him:

"Nehemiah x: 'Now those that sealed were, Nehemiah, the Tirshatha, the son of Hachaliah, and Zidkijah, Seraiah, Azariah, Jeremiah, Pashur, Amariah, Malchijah, Hattush ...'" He began to breathe hard. He was lost in an impenetrable forest of names, and he could not pronounce one of them. He sneaked a peek ahead, dimly made out "Bunni, Hizkijah, Magpiash and Hashub," and choked.

It looked like sacrilege, but he ventured to close the Book and open it once more.

This time he happened on the last chapter of the Book of Judges, wherein is the chronicle of the plight of the tribe of Benjamin, which could not get women to marry into it. The wife famine of the Benjamites was not in the least interesting to Mr. Pepperall, but he would not tempt the Lord again. So he read on, while the children yawned and shuffled, Prue especially. [Pg 311]

Suddenly Prue sat still and listened, and papa's cough grew worse. He was reading about the "feast of the Lord in Shiloh yearly," and how the elders of the congregation ordered the children of Benjamin to go and lie in wait in the vineyards.

"And see, and behold, if the daughters of Shiloh come out to dance in dances, then come ye out of the vineyards and catch you every man his wife of the daughters of Shiloh...."

"And the children of Benjamin did so, and took them wives, according to their number, of them that danced, whom they caught: and they went and returned unto their inheritance, and repaired the cities, and dwelt in them...."

"In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes."

He closed the Book and stole a glance at Prue. Her eyes were so bright with triumph that he had to say:

"Of course that proves nothing about dancing. It doesn't say that the Shiloh girls made good wives."

Prue had the impudence to add, "And it doesn't say that the sons of Benjamin were good dancers."

Her father silenced her with a scowl of horror. Then he made a long prayer, directed more at his family than at the Lord. It apparently had an equal effect on each. After a hymn had been mumbled through the family dispersed.

Prue lingered just long enough to capture the Bible and carry it off to her room in a double embrace. Serina and William tried to be glad to see her sudden interest, but they were a little afraid of her exact motive. [Pg 312]

She made no noise at all and did not come down in time to help get supper—the sad, cold supper of a Sunday evening. She slipped into the dining-room just before the family was called. Papa found at his plate a neat little stack of cards, bearing each a carefully lettered legend in Prue's writing. He picked them up, glanced at them, and flushed.

"I dare you to read them," said Prue.

So he read: "'To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven ... a time to mourn and a time to dance.... He hath made every thing beautiful in his time.' Ecclesiastes iii.

"'Let them praise his name in the dance ... for the Lord taketh pleasure in his people.... Praise him with the timbrel and dance.... Praise him upon the loud cymbals.' Psalms cxlix, cl.

"O virgin of Israel ... thou shalt go forth in the dances of them that make merry.... Then shall the virgin rejoice in the dance, both young men and old together.' Jeremiah xxxi.

"We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced.' Matthew xi: 17.

"Michal, Saul's daughter, looked through a window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart.... Therefore Michal the daughter of Saul had no child unto the day of her death.' II Samuel vi: 16, 23."

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Papa did not fall back upon the Shakesperean defense that the devil can quote Scripture to his purpose. He choked a little and filled his hand with the apple-butter he was spreading on his cold biscuit. Then he said:

"It's not that I don't believe in dancing. I don't say all dances are immor'l."

"You better not," said Serina, darkly. "You met me at a dance. We used to dance all the time till you got so's you wouldn't take me to parties any more. And you got so clumsy and I began to take on flesh, and ran short of breath like."

"Oh, there's mor'l dances as well as immor'l dances," William confessed, not knowing the history of the opposition every dance has encountered in its younger days. "The waltz now, or the lancers or the Virginia reel. Even the two-step was all right. But this turkey-trot-tango business—it's goin' to be the ruination of the home. It isn't fit for decent folks to look at, let alone let their daughters do. I want you should quit it, Prue. If you need exercise help your mother with the housework. You go and tango round with a broom awhile. I don't see why you don't try to help your sister, too, and make something useful of yourself. I tell you, in these days a woman ought to be able to earn her own living same's a man. You could get a good position in Shillaber's dry-goods store if you only would."

Prue wriggled her shoulders impatiently and said: "I guess I'm one of those Shiloh girls. I'll just dance round awhile, and maybe some rich Benjamin gent'man will grab me and take me off your hands."

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## VIII

One evening Prue came home late to supper after a session at Bertha Appleby's. An informal gathering had convened under the disguise of a church-society meeting, only to degenerate into a dancing-bee after a few perfunctory formalities.

Prue had just time to seize a bite before she went to dress for a frankly confessed dancing-bout at Eliza Erf's. As she ate with angry voracity she complained:

"I guess I'll just quit going to dances. I don't have a bit of fun any more."

Her father started from his chair to embrace the returned prodigal, but he dropped into Ollie's place as Prue exclaimed:

"Everybody is always at me for help. 'Prue, is this right?' 'Prue, teach me that.' 'Oh, what did you do then?' 'Is it the inside foot or the outside you start on?' 'Do you drop on the front knee or the hind?' 'Do you do the Innovation?' Why, it's worse than teaching school!"

"Why don't you teach school?" said William, feebly. "There's going to be a vacancy in the kindergarten."

Prue sniffed. "I see myself!" And went to her room to dress.

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Her father sank back discouraged. What ailed the girl? She simply would not take life seriously. She would not lift her hand to help. When they were so poor and the future so dour, how could she keep from earning a little money? Was she condemned to be altogether useless, shiftless, unprofitable? A weight about her father's neck till he could shift her to the neck of some unhappy husband?

He remembered the fable of the ant and the locust. Prue was the locust, frivolling away the summer. At the first cold blast she would be pleading with the industrious ant, Ollie, to take her in. In the fable the locust was turned away to freeze, but you couldn't do that with a human locust. The ants just have to feed them. Poor Ollie!

Munching this quinine cud of thought, he went up to bed. He was footsore from tramping the town for work. He had covered almost as much distance as Prue had danced. He was all in. She was just going out.

She kissed him good night, but he would not answer. She went to kiss her mother and Ollie and Horace. Ollie was practising shorthand, and kissed Prue with sorrowing patience. Horace dodged the kiss, but called her attention to an article in the evening paper:

"Say, Prue, if you want to get rich quick whyn't you charge for your tango advice? Says here that teachers are springing up all over Noo York and Chicawgo, and they get big, immense prices."

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"How much?" said Prue, indifferently.

"Says here twenty-five dollars an hour. Some of 'em's earning a couple of thousand dollars a week."

This information went through the room like a projectile from a coast-defense gun. Serina listened with bated breath as Horace read the confirmation. She shook her head:

"It beats all the way vice pays in this world."

Horace read on. The article described how some of the most prominent women in metropolitan society were sponsoring the dances. A group of ladies, whose names were more familiar to Serina than the Christian martyrs, had rented a whole dwelling-house for a dancing couple to disport in, so that the universal amusement could be practised exclusively.

That settled Serina. Whatever Mrs. — and Miss — and the mother of the Duchess of — did was better than right. It was swell.

Prue's frown now was the frown of meditation. "If they charge twenty-five dollars an hour in New York, what ought to be the price in Carthage?"

"About five cents a week," said Serina, who did not approve of Carthage. "Nobody in this town would pay anything for anything."

"We used to pay old Professor Durand to teach us to waltz and polka," said Horace, "in the good old days before pop got the bankruptcy habit."

That night Prue made an experiment. She danced exclusively with Ort Hippisley and Grant Beadle, the surest-footed bipeds in the town. When members of the awkward squad pleaded to cut in she danced away impishly, will-o'-the-wispishly. When the girls lifted their skirts and asked her to correct their footwork she referred them to the articles in the magazines.

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She was chiefly pestered by Idalene Brearley, daughter of the clergyman, and his chief cross.

Finally Idalene Brearley tore Prue from the arms of Ort Hippisley, backed her into a corner, and said:

"Say, Prue, you've got to listen! I'm invited to visit the swellest home in Council Bluffs for a house-party. They call it a week-end; that shows how swell they are. They're going to dance all the time. When it comes to these new dances I'm weak at both ends, head and feet." She laughed shamelessly at her own joke, as women do. "I don't want to go there like I'd never been any place, or like Carthage wasn't up to date. I'm just beginning to get the hang of the Maxixe and the Hesitation, and I thought if you could give me a couple of days' real hard work I wouldn't be such an awful gump. Could you? Do you suppose you could? Or could you?"

Prue looked such astonishment at this that Idalene hastened to say:

"O' course I'm not asking you to kill yourself for nothing. How much would you charge? Of course I haven't much saved up; but I thought if I took two lessons a day you could make me a special rate. How much would it be, d'you s'pose? Or what do you think?"

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Prue wondered. This was a new and thrilling moment for her. A boy is excited enough over the first penny he earns, but he is brought up to earn money. To a girl, and a girl like Prue, the luxury was almost intolerably intense. She finally found voice to murmur:

"How much you gettin' for the lessons you give?"

Idalene had, for the sake of pin money, been giving a few alleged lessons in piano, voice, water-colors, bridge whist, fancy stitching, brass-hammering, and things like that. She answered Prue with reluctance:

"I get fifty cents an hour. But o' course I make a specialty of those things."

"I'm making a specialty of dancing," said Prue, coldly.

Idalene was torn between the bitterly opposite emotions of getting and giving. Prue tried to speak with indifference, but she looked as greedy as the old miser in the "Chimes of Normandy."

"Fifty cents suits me, seeing it's you."

Idalene gasped: "Well, o' course, two lessons a day would be a dollar. Could you make it six bits by wholesale?"

Prue didn't see how she could. Teaching would interfere so with her amusements. Finally Idalene sighed:

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"Oh, well, all right! Call it fifty cents straight. When can I come over to your house?"

"To my house?" gasped Prue. "Papa doesn't approve of my dancing. I'll come to yours."

"Oh no, you won't," gasped Idalene. "My father doesn't dream that I dance. I'm going to let him sleep as long as I can."

Here was a plight! Mrs. Judge Hippisley strolled up and demanded, "What's all this whispering about?"

They explained their predicament. Mrs. Hippisley thought it was a perfectly wonderful idea to take lessons. She would let Prue teach Idalene in her parlor if Prue would teach her at the same time for nothing.

"Unless you think I'm too old and stupid to learn," she added, fishingly.

Prue put a catfish on her hook: "Oh, Mrs. Hippisley, I've seen women much older and fatter and stupider than you dancing in Chicago."

While the hours of tuition were being discussed Bertha Appleby tiptoed up to eavesdrop, and pleaded to be accepted as a pupil. And she forced on the timorous Prue a quarter as her matriculation fee.

Orton Hippisley beau'd Prue home that night, and they paused in an arcade of maples to practise a new step she had been composing in the back of her head.

He was an apt pupil, and when they had resumed their homeward stroll she neglected to make him take his arm away. Encouraged, he tried to kiss her when they reached the gate. She cuffed him again, but this time her buffet was almost a caress. She sighed:

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"I can't get very mad at you, you're such a quick student. I hope your mother will learn as fast."

"My mother!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. She wants me to teach her the one-step."

"Don't you dare!"

"And why not?" she asked, with sultry calm.

"Do you think I'll let my mother carry on like that? Well, hardly!"

"Oh, so what I do isn't good enough for your mother!"

"I don't mean just that; but can't you see—Wait a minute—"

She slammed the gate on his outstretched fingers and he went home fondling his wound.

The next day he strolled by the parlor door at his own home, but Prue would not speak to him and his mother was too busy to invite him in. It amazed him to see how humble his haughty mother was before the hitherto neglected Prue.

Prue would have felt sorrier for him if she had not been so exalted over her earnings.

She had not let on at home about her class till she could lay the proof of her success on the supper-table. When she stacked up the entire two dollars that she had earned by only a few miles of trotting, it looked like the loot the mercenaries captured in that old Carthage which the new Carthage had never heard of.

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The family was aghast. It was twice as much as Ollie had earned that day. Ollie's money "came reg'lar," of course, and would total up more in the long run.

But for Prue to earn anything was a miracle. And in Carthage two dollars is two dollars, at the very least.

## IX

The news that Carthage had a tango-teacher created a sensation rivaling the advent of its first street-car. It gave the place a metropolitan flavor. If it only had a slums district, now, it would be a great and gloriously wicked city.

Prue was fairly besieged with applicants for lessons. Those who could dance a few steps wanted the new steps. Those who could not dance at all wanted to climb aboard the ark.

Mrs. Hippisley's drawing-room did not long serve its purpose. On the third day the judge stalked in. He came home with a chill. At the sight of his wife with one knee up, trying to paw like a horse, his chill changed to fever. His roar was heard in the kitchen. He was so used to domineering that he was not even afraid of his wife when he was in the first flush of rage.

Prue and Idalene and Bertha he would have sentenced to deportation if he had had the jurisdiction. He could at least send them home. He threatened his wife with dire punishments if she ever took another step of the abominable dance.

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Prue was afraid of the judge, but she was not afraid of her own father. She told him that she was going to use the parlor, and he told her that she wasn't. The next day he came home to find the class installed.

He peeked into the parlor and saw Bertha Appleby dancing with Idalene Brearley. Prue was in the arms of old "Tawm" Kinch, the town scoundrel, a bald and wealthy old bachelor who had lingered uncaught like a wise old trout in a pool, though generations of girls had tried every device, from whipping the stream to tickling his sides. He had refused every bait and lived more or less alone in the big old mansion he had inherited from his skinflint mother.

At the sight of Tawm Kinch in his parlor embracing his daughter and bungling an odious dance with her, William Pepperall saw red. He would throw the old brute out of his house. As he made his temper ready Mrs. Judge Hippisley hurried up the hall. She had walked round the block, crossed two back yards and climbed the kitchen steps to throw the judge off the scent. William

could hardly make a scene before these women. He could only protest by leaving the house.

He found that, having let the outrage go unpunished, once, it was hard to work up steam to drive it out the second day. Also he remembered that he had asked Tawm Kinch for a position in his sash-and-blind factory and Tawm had said he would see about it. Attacking Tawm Kinch would be like assaulting his future bread and butter. He kept away from the house as much as he could, sulking like a punished boy. One evening as he went home to supper, purposely delaying as long as possible, he saw Tawm Kinch coming from the house. He ran down the steps like an urchin and seized William's hand as if he had not seen him for a long time.

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"Take a walk with me, Bill," he said, and led William along an unfrequented side street. After much hemming and hawing he began: "Bill, I got a proposition to make you. I find there's a possibility of a p'sition openin' up in the works and maybe I could fit you into it if you'd do something for me."

William tried not to betray his overweening joy.

"I'd always do anything for you, Tawm," he said. "I always liked you, always spoke well of you, which is more 'n I can say of some of the other folks round here."

Tawm was flying too high to note the raw tactlessness of this; he went right on:

"Bill—or Mr. Pepperall, I'd better say—I'm simply dead gone on that girl of yours. She's the sweetest, smartest, gracefulest thing that ever struck this town, and when I—Well, I'm afraid to ask her m'self, but I was thinkin' if you could arrange it."

"Arrange what?"

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"I want to marry her. I know I'm no kid, but she could have the big house, and I can be as foolish as anybody about spending money when I've a mind to. Prue could have 'most anything she wanted and I could give you a good job. And then ever'body would be happy."

## X

Papa did his best to be dignified and not turn a handspring or shout for joy. He was like a boy trying to look sad when he learns that the school-teacher is ill. He managed to hold back and tell Tawm Kinch that this was kind of sudden like and he'd have to talk to the wife about it, and o' course the girl would have to be considered.

He was good salesman enough not to leap at the first offer, and he left Tawm Kinch guessing at the gate of the big house. To Tawm it looked as lonely and forlorn as it looked majestic and desirable to Papa Pepperall, glancing back over his shoulder as he sauntered home with difficult deliberation. His heart was singing, "What a place to eat Sunday dinners at!"

Once out of Tawm Kinch's range, he broke into a walk that was almost a lope, and he rounded a corner into the portico that Judge Hippisley carried ahead of him. When the judge had regained his breath he seized papa by both lapels and growled:

"Look here, Pepperall, I told you to keep your daughter away from my boy, and you didn't; and now Ort has lost his job. Beadle fired him to-day. And jobs ain't easy to get in this town, as you know. And now what's going to happen?"

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William Pepperall was so exultant that he tried to say two things at the same time; that Orton's job or loss of it was entirely immaterial and a matter of perfect indifference. What he said was, "It's material of perfect immaterence to me."

He spurned to correct himself and stalked on, leaving the judge gaping. A few paces off William's knees weakened at the thought of how he had jeopardized Ollie's position; but he tossed that aside with equal "immaterence," for when Prue became Mrs. Kinch she could take Ollie to live with her, or send her to school, or something.

When he reached home he drew his wife into the parlor to break the glorious news to her. She was more hilarious than he had been. All their financial problems were solved and their social position enhanced, as if the family had suddenly been elevated to the peerage.

She was on pins and needles of impatience because Prue was late for supper. She came down at last when the others had heard all about it and nearly finished their food. She had her hat on, and she was in such a hurry that she paid no attention to the fluttering of the covey, or the prolonged throat-clearing of her father, who had difficulty in keeping Serina from blurting out the end of the story first. At length he said:

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"Well, Prue, I guess the tango ain't as bad as I made out."

"You going to join the class, poppa?" said Prue, round the spoonful of preserved pears she checked before her mouth.

Her father went on: "I guess you're one of those daughters of Shiloh like you said you was. And the son of Benjamin has come right out after you. And he's the biggest son of a gun in the whole tribe."

Prue put down the following spoonful and turned to her mother: "What ails poppa, mamma? He

talks feverish."

Serina fairly gurgled: "Prepare yourself for the grandest surprise. You'd never guess."

And William had to jump to beat her to the news: "Tawm Kinch wants to marry you."

"What?"

"Yep."

"What makes you think so?"

"He asked me."

"Asked you!"

Serina clasped her hands and her eyes filled with tears of the rescued. "Oh, Prue, ain't it wonderful? Ain't the Lord good to us?"

Prue did not catch fire from the blaze. She sniffed, "He wasn't very good to Tawm Kinch."

William, bitter with disappointment, snapped: "What do you mean? He's the richest man in town. Some folks say he's as good as worth a hundred thousand dollars."

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"Well, what of it? He'll never learn to dance. His feet interfere."

"What's dancing got to do with it? You'll stop all that foolishness after you've married Tawm."

"Oh, will I? Ort Hippisley can dance better with one foot than Tawm Kinch could dance if he was a centipede."

"Ort Hippisley! Humph! He's lost his job and he'll never get another. You couldn't marry him."

"I'm not in any hurry to marry anybody."

The reaction from hope to confusion, the rejection of the glittering gift he proffered, infuriated the hen-pecked, chickpecked father. He shrieked:

"Well, you're going to marry Tawm Kinch or you're going to get out of my house!"

"Papa!" gasped Ollie.

"Here, dad!" growled Horace.

"William!" cried Serina.

William thumped the table and rose to his full height. He had not often risen to it. And his voice had an unsuspected timbre:

"I mean it. I've been a worm in this house long enough. Here's where I turn. This girl has made me a laughing-stock and a despising-stock long enough. She can take this grand opportunity I got for her or she can pack up her duds and clear out—for good!"

He thumped the table again and sat down trembling with spent rage. Serina was so crushed under the crumbled wall of her air-castles that she could not protest. Olive and Horace felt that since Prue was so indifferent to their happiness they need not consider hers. There was a long, long silence.

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The sound of a low whistle outside stole into the silence. Prue rose and said, quietly:

"Ollie, would you mind packing my things for me? I'll send over for them when I know where I'll be."

Ollie tried to answer, but her lips made no sound. Prue kissed each of the solemn faces round the table, including her father's. They might have been dead in their chairs for all their response. She paused with prophetic loneliness. That low whistle shrilled again.

She murmured a somber, "Good-by, everybody," and went out.

The door closed like a dull "Good-by." They heard her swift feet slowly crossing the porch and descending the steps. They imagined them upon the walk. They heard the old gate squeal a rusty, "Good-by-y—Prue-ue!"

## XI

It was Ort Hippisley, of course, that waited for Prue outside the gate. They swapped bad news. She had heard that he had lost his job, but not that his father had forbidden him to speak to Prue.

Her evil tidings that she had been compelled to choose between marrying Tawm Kinch and banishment from home threw Ort into a panic of dismay. He was a natural-born dancer, but not a predestined hero. He had no inspirations for crises like these. He was as graceful as a manly man could be, but he was not at his best when the hour was darkest. He was at his best when the band was playing.

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In him Prue found somebody to support, not to lean on. But his distress at her distress was so

complete that it endeared him to her war-like soul more than a braver quality might have done. They stood awhile thus in each other's arms like a Pierrot and his Columbine with winter coming on. Finally Orton sighed:

"What in Heaven's name is goin' to become of us? What you goin' to do, Prue? Where can you go?"

Prue's resolution asserted itself. "The first place to go is Mrs. Prosser's boardin'-house and get me a room. Then we can go on to the dance and maybe that'll give us an idea."

"But maybe Mrs. Prosser won't want you since your father's turned you out."

"In the first place it was me that turned me out. In the second place Mrs. Prosser wants 'most anybody that's got six dollars a week comin' in. And I've got that, provided I can find a room to teach in."

Mrs. Prosser welcomed Prue, not without question, not without every question she could get answered, but she made no great bones of the family war. "The best o' families quar'ls," she said. "And half the time they take their meals with me till they quiet down. I'll be losin' you soon."

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Prue broached the question of a room to teach in. To Mrs. Prosser, renting a room had always the joy of renting a room. She said that her "poller" was not used much and she'd be right glad to get something for it. She would throw in the use of the pianna. Prue touched the keys. It was an old boarding-house piano and sounded like a wire fence plucked; but almost anything would serve.

So Prue and Orton hastened away to the party, and danced with the final rapture of doing the forbidden thing under an overhanging cloud of menace. Several more pupils enlisted themselves in Prue's classes. Another problem was solved and a new danger commenced by Mr. Norman Maugans.

The question of music had become serious. It was hard to make progress when the dancers had to hum their own tunes. Prue could not buy a phonograph, and the Prosser piano dated from a time when pianos did not play themselves. Prue could "tear off a few rags," as she put it, but she could not dance and teach and play her own music all at once. Mrs. Hippisley was afraid to lend her phonograph lest the judge should notice its absence.

And now like a sent angel came Mr. Norman Maugans, who played the pipe-organ at the church, and offered to exchange his services as musician for occasional lessons and the privilege of watching Prue dance, for which privilege, he said, "folks in New York would pay a hundred dollars a night if they knew what they was missin'."

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Prue grabbed the bargain, and the next morning began to teach him to play such things as "Some Smoke" and "Leg of Mutton."

At first he played "Girls, Run Along" so that it could hardly be told from "Where Is My Wandering Boy To-night?" and his waltzes were mostly hesitation; but by and by he got so that he fairly tangoed on the pedals, and he was so funny bouncing about on the piano-stool to "Something Seems Tingle-ingle-ingle-ingling So Queer" that the pupils stopped dancing to watch him.

The tango was upon the world like a Mississippi at flood-time. The levees were going over one by one; or if they stood fast they stood alone, for the water crept round from above and backed up from below.

In Carthage, as in both Portlands, Maine and Oregon, and the two Cairos, Illinois and Egypt, the Parises of Kentucky and France, the Yorks and Londons, old and new; in Germany, Italy, and Japan, fathers, monarchs, mayors, editors stormed against the new dance; societies passed resolutions; police interfered; ballet-girls declared the dances immoral and ungraceful. The army of the dance went right on growing.

Doctor Brearley called a meeting of the chief men of his congregation to talk things over and discipline, if not expel, all guilty members. Deacon Luxton was in a state of mind. He dared not vote in favor of the dance and he dared not vote against it. He and his wife were taking lessons from Prue surreptitiously at their own home. Judge Hippisley's voice would have been louder for war if he had not discovered that his wife was secretly addicted to the one-step. Old Doctor Brearley was walking about rehearsing a sermon against it when he happened to enter a room where Idalene was practising. He wrung from her a confession of the depth of her iniquity. This knowledge paralyzed his enthusiasm.

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Sour old Deacon Flugal was loudly in favor of making an example of Prue. His wife was even more violent. She happened to mention her disgust to Mrs. Deacon Luxton:

"I guess this'll put an end to the tango in Carthage!"

"Oh, I hope not!" Mrs. Luxton cried.

"You hope not!"

"Yes, I do. It has done my husband no end of good. It's taken pounds and pounds of fat off him. It brings out the perspiration on him something wonderful. And it's taken years off his age. He's that spry and full of jokes and he's gettin' right spoony. He used to be a tumble cut-up, and then he settled down so there was no livin' with him. But now he keeps at me to buy some new clothes and he's thinkin' of gettin' a tuxeda. His old disp'sition seems to have come back and he's as

cheerful and, oh, so affectionate! It's like a second honeymoon."

Mrs. Luxton gazed off into space with rapture. Mrs. Flugal was so silent that Mrs. Luxton turned to see if she had walked away in disgust. But there was in her eyes that light that lies in woman's eyes, and she turned a delicious tomato-red as she murmured:

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"How much, do you s'pose, would a term of lessons cost for my husband?"

## XII

Somehow the church failed to take official action. There was loud criticism still, but phonographs that had hitherto been silent or at least circumspect were heard to blare forth dance rhythms, and not always with the soft needle on.

Mrs. Prosser's boarders were mainly past the age when they were liable to temptation. At first the presence and activities of Prue had added a tang of much-needed spice to this desert-island existence. They loved to stare through the door or even to sit in at the lessons. But at the first blast of the storm that the church had set up they scurried about in consternation. Mrs. Prosser was informed that her boarding-house was no longer a fit place for church-fearing ladies. She was warned to expurgate Prue or lose the others. Mrs. Prosser regretfully banished the girl.

And now Prue felt like the locust turned away from ant-hill after ant-hill. She walked the streets disconsolately. Her feet from old habit led her past her father's door. She paused to gaze at the dear front walk and the beloved frayed steps, the darling need of paint, the time-gnawed porch furniture, the empty hammock hooks. She sighed and would have trudged on, but her mother saw her and called to her from the sewing-room window, and ran out bareheaded in her old wrapper.

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They embraced across the gate and Serina carried on so that Prue had to go in with her to keep the neighbors from having too good a time. Prue told her story, and Serina's jaw set in the kind of tetanus that mothers are liable to. She sent Horace to fetch Prue's baggage from "old Prosser's," and she re-established Prue in her former room.

When William came slumping up the steps, still jobless, he found the doors locked, front and back, and the porch windows fastened. Serina from an upper sill informed him that Prue was back, and he could either accept her or go somewhere else to live.

William yielded, salving his conscience by refusing to speak to the girl. Prue settled down with the meekness of returned prodigals for whom fatted calves are killed. According to the old college song, "The Prod.," when he got back, "sued father and brother for time while away." That was the sort of prodigal Prue was. Prue brought her classes with her.

Papa Pepperall gave up the battle. He dared not lock his daughter in or out or up. He must not beat her or strangle her with a bowstring or drop her into the Bosphorus. He could not sell her down the river. A modern father has about as much authority as a chained watch-dog. He can jump about and bark and snap, but he only abrades his own throat.

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There were Pepperall feuds all over town. One by one the most conservative were recruited or silenced.

William Pepperall, however, still fumed at home and abroad, and Judge Hippisley would have authorized raids if there had been any places to raid. Thus far the orgies had been confined to private walls. There was, indeed, no place in Carthage for public dancing except the big room in the Westcott Block over Jake Meyer's restaurant, and that room was rented to various secret societies on various nights.

Prue's class outgrew the parlor, spread to the dining-room, and trickled into the kitchen. Here the growth had to stop, till it was learned that if Mr. Maugans played very loud he could be heard in the bedrooms up-stairs. And there a sort of University Extension was practised for ladies only.

And still the demand for education increased. The benighted held out hands pleading for help. Young men and old offered fabulous sums, a dollar a lesson, two dollars! Prue decided that if her mother would stay up-stairs as a chaperon it would be proper to let the men dance there, too.

"But how am I going to cook the meals?" said mamma.

"We'll hire a cook," said Prue. And it was done. She even bought mamma a new dress, and established her above-stairs as a sort of grand duenna.

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Mamma watched Prue with such keenness that now and then, when Prue had to rush down-stairs, mamma would sometimes solve a problem for one of Prue's "scholars," as she called them.

One day papa came home to his pandemonium, jostled through the couple-cluttered hall, stamped up-stairs, and found mamma showing Deacon Flugal how to do the drop-step.

"You trot four short steps backward," mamma was saying, "then you make a little dip; but don't swing your shoulders. Prue says if you want to dance refined you mustn't swing your shoulders or your—your—the rest of you."

Papa was ready to swing his shoulders and drop the deacon through the window, but as he was about to protest the deacon caught mamma in his arms and swept backward, dropping his fourth step incisively on papa's instep, rendering papa *hors de combat*.



By the time William had rubbed witch-hazel into the deacon's heel-mark, the deacon in a glorious "prespiration" had gone home with his own breathless wife ditto. William dragged Serina into the bathroom, the only room where dancing was not in progress. He warned her not to forget that she had sworn to be a faithful wife. She pooh-poohed him and said:

"You'd better learn to dance yourself. Come on, I'll show you the Jedia Luna. It's very easy and awful refined. Do just like I do." [Pg 337]

She put her hands on her hips and began to sidle. She had him nearly sidled into the bathtub before he could escape with the cry of a hunted animal. At supper he thumped the table with another of his resolutions, and cried:

"My house was not built for a dance-hall!"

"That's right, poppa," said Prue; "and it shakes so I'm afraid it'll come down on us. I've been thinking that you'll have to hire me the lodge-room in the Westcott Block. I can give classes there all day."

He refused flatly. So she persuaded Deacon Flugal and several gentlemen who were on the waiting-list of her pupils to arrange it for her.

And now all day long she taught in the Westcott Block. The noise of her music interfered with business—with lawyers and dentists and insurance agents. At first they were hostile, then they were hypnotized. Lawyer and client would drop a title discussion to quarrel over a step. The dentist's forceps would dance along the teeth, and many an uncomplaining bicuspid was wrenched from its happy home, many an uneasy molar assumed a crown. The money Prue made would have been scandalous if money did not tend to become self-sterilizing after it passes certain dimensions.

By and by the various lodge members found their meetings and their secret rites to be so stupid, compared with the new dances, that almost nobody came. Quorums were rare. Important members began to resign. Everybody wanted to be Past Grand Master of the Tango. [Pg 338]

The next step was the gradual postponement of meetings to permit of a little informal dancing in the evening. The lodges invited their ladies to enter the precincts and revel. Gradually the room was given over night and day to the worship of Saint Vitus.

### XIII

The solution of every human problem always opens another. People danced themselves into enormities of appetite and thirst. It was not that food was attractive in itself. Far from it. It was an interruption, a distraction from the tango; a base streak of materialism in the bacon of ecstasy. But it was necessary in order that strength might be kept up for further dancing.

Deacon Flugal put it happily: "Eating is just like stoking. When I'm giving a party at our house I hate to have to leave the company and go down cellar and throw coal in the furnace. But it's got to be did or the party's gotter stop."

Carthage had one good hotel and two bad ones, but all three were "down near the deepo." Almost the only other place to eat away from home was "Jake Meyer's Place," an odious restaurant where the food was ill chosen and ill cooked, and served in china of primeval shapes as if stone had been slightly hollowed out. [Pg 339]

Prue was complaining that there was no place in Carthage where people could dance with their meals and give "teas donsons." Horace was smitten with a tremendous idea.

"Why not persuade Jake Meyer to clear a space in his rest'runt like they do in Chicawgo?"

Prue was enraptured, and Horace was despatched to Jake with the proffer of a magnificent opportunity. Horace cannily tried to extract from Jake the promise of a commission before he told him. Jake promised. Then Horace sprang his invention.

Now Jake was even more bitter against the tango than Doctor Brearley, Judge Hippisley, or Mr. Pepperall. The bar annex to his restaurant, or rather the bar to which his restaurant was annexed, had been almost deserted of evenings since the vicious dance mania raged. The bowling-alley where the thirst-producing dust was wont to arise in clouds was mute. Over his head he heard the eternal Maugans and the myriad-hoofed shuffle of the unceasing dance. When he understood what Horace proposed he emitted the roar of an old uhlan, and the only commission he offered Horace was the commission of murder upon his person.

Horace retreated in disorder and reported to Prue. Prue called upon Jake herself, smilingly told him that all he needed to do was to crowd his tables together round a clear space, revolutionize his menu, get a cook who would cook, and spend about five hundred dollars on decorations. [Pg 340]

"Five hundret thalers!" Jake howled. "I sell you de whole shop for five hundret thalers."

"I'll think it over," said Prue as she walked out.

She could think over all of it except the five hundred dollars. She had never thought that high. She told Horace, and he said that the way to finance anything was to borrow the money from the bank.

Prue called on Clarence Dolge, the bank president she knew best. He asked her a number of personal questions about her earnings. He was surprised at their amount and horrified that she had saved none of them. He advised her to start an account with him; but she reminded him that she had not come to put in, but to take out.

He said that he would cheerfully lend her the money if she could get a proper indorsement on her note. She knew that her father did not indorse her dancing, but perhaps he might feel differently about her note.

"I might get poppa to sign his name," she smiled.

Mr. Dolge exclaimed, "No, thank you!" without a moment's hesitation. He already had a sheaf of papa's autographs, all duly protested.

She went to another bank, whose president announced that he would have to put the very unusual proposal before the directors. Judge Hippisley was most of the directors. The president did not report exactly what the directors said, for Prue, after all, was a woman. But she did not get the five hundred. [Pg 341]

Prue had set her heart on providing Carthage with a *café dansant*. She determined to save her money. Prue saving!

It was hard, too, for shoes gave out quickly and she could not wear the same frock all the time. And sometimes at night she was so tired she just could not walk home and she rode home in a hack. A number of young men offered to buggy-ride her home or to take her in their little automobiles. But they, too, seemed to confuse art and business with foolishness.

Sometimes she would ask Ort to ride home with her, but she wouldn't let him pay for the hack. Indeed he could not if he would. His devotion to Prue's school had cost him his job, and the judge would not give him a penny.

Sometimes in the hack Prue would permit Ort to keep his arm round her. Sometimes when he was very doleful she would have to ask him to put it round her. But it was all right, because they were going to get married when Orton learned how to earn some money. He was afraid he would have to leave Carthage. But how could he tear himself from Prue? She would not let him talk about it.

#### XIV

Now the fame of Prue and her prancing was not long pent up in Carthage. Visitors from other towns saw her work and carried her praises home. Sometimes farmers, driving into town, would hear Mr. Maugans's music through the open windows. Their daughters would climb the stairs and peer in and lose their taste for the old dances, and wistfully entreat Prue to learn them them newfangled steps. [Pg 342]

In the towns smaller than Carthage the anxiety for the tango fermented. A class was formed in Oscawanna, and Prue was bribed to come over twice a week and help.

Clint Sprague, the manager of the Carthage Opera House, which was now chiefly devoted to moving pictures, with occasional interpolations of vaudeville, came home from Chicago with stories of the enormous moneys obtained by certain tango teams. He proposed to book Prue in a chain of small theaters round about, if she could get a dancing partner. She said she had one.

Sprague wrote glowing letters to neighboring theater-managers, but, being theater-managers, they were unable to know what their publics wanted. They declined to take any risks, but offered Sprague their houses at the regular rental, leaving him any profits that might result.

Clint glumly admitted that it wouldn't cost much to try it out in Oscawanna. He would guarantee the rental and pay for the show-cards and the dodgers; Prue would pay the fare and hotel bills of herself, her partner, and Mr. Maugans.

Prue hesitated. It was an expense and a risk. Prue cautious! She would take nobody for partner but Orton Hippisley. Perhaps he could borrow the money from his father. She told him about it, and he was wild with enthusiasm. He loved to dance with Prue. To invest money in enlarging her fame would be divine. [Pg 343]

He saw the judge. Then he heard him.

He came back to Prue and told her in as delicate a translation as he could manage that it was all off. The judge had bellowed at him that not only would he not finance his outrageous escapade with that shameless Pepperall baggage, but if the boy dared to undertake it he would disown him.

"Now you'll have to go," said Prue, grimly.

"But I have no money, honey," he protested, miserably.

"I'll pay your expenses and give you half what I get," she said.

He refused flatly to share in the profits. His poverty consented to accept the railroad fare and food enough to dance on. And he would pay that back the first job he got.

Then Prue went to Clint Sprague and offered to pay the bills if he would give her three-fourths of

the profits. He fumed; but she drove a good bargain. Prue driving bargains! At last he consented, growling.

When Prue announced the make-up of her troupe there was a cyclone in her own home. Papa was as loud as the judge. [Pg 344]

"You goin' gallivantin' round the country with that Maugans idiot and that young Hippisley scoundrel? Well, I guess not! You've disgraced us enough in our own town, without spreading the poor but honorable name of Pepperall all over Oscawanna and Perkinsville and Athens and Thebes."

The worn-out, typewritten-out Ollie pleaded against Prue's lawlessness. It would be sure to cost her her place in the judge's office. It was bad enough now.

Even Serina, who had become a mere echo of Prue, herself went so far as to say, "Really, Prue, you know!"

Prue thought awhile and said: "I'll fix that all right. Don't you worry. There'll be no scandal. I'll marry the boy."

## XV

And she did! Took ten dollars from the hiding-place where she banked her wealth, and took the boy to an Oscawanna preacher, and telegraphed home that he was hers and she his and both each other's.

The news spread like oil ablaze on water. Mrs. Hippisley had consented to take lessons of Prue, but she had never dreamed of losing her eldest son to her. She and Serina had quite a "run-in" on the telephone. William and the judge almost had a fight-out—and right on Main Street, too. [Pg 345]

Each accused the other of fathering a child that had decoyed away and ruined the life of the other child. Both were so scorched with helpless wrath that each went home to his bed and threatened to bite any hand that was held out in comfort. Judge Hippisley had just strength enough to send word to poor Olive that she was fired.

## XVI

The next news came the next day. Oscawanna had been famished for a sight of the world-sweeping dances. It turned out in multitudes to see the famous Carthage queen in the new steps. The opera-house there had not held such a crowd since William J. Bryan spoke there—the time he did not charge admission. According to the Oscawanna *Eagle*: "This enterprising city paid one thousand dollars to see Peerless Prue Pepperall dance with her partner Otto Hipkinson. What you got to say about that, ye scribes of Carthage?"

Like the corpse in Ben King's poem, Judge Hippisley sat up at the news and said: "What's that?" And when the figures were repeated he "dropped dead again."

The next day word was received that Perkinsville, jealous of Oscawanna, had shoveled twelve hundred dollars into the drug-store where tickets were sold. Two sick people had nearly died because they couldn't get their prescriptions filled for twelve hours, and the mayor of the town had had to go behind the counter and pick out his own stomach bitters. [Pg 346]

The Athens theater had been sold out so quickly that the town hall was engaged for a special matinée. Athens paid about fifteen hundred dollars. The Athenians had never suspected that there was so much money in town. People who had not paid a bill for months managed to dig up cash for tickets.

Indignant Oscawanna wired for a return engagement, so that those who had been crowded out could see the epoch-making dances. Those who had seen them wanted to see them again. In the mornings Prue gave lessons to select classes at auction prices.

Wonderful as this was, unbelievable, indeed, to Carthage, it was not surprising. This blue and lonely dispeptic world has always been ready to enrich the lucky being that can tempt its palate with something it wants and didn't know it wanted. Other people were leaping from poverty to wealth all over the world for teaching the world to dance again. Prue caught the crest of the wave that overswept a neglected region.

The influence of her success on her people and her neighbors was bound to be overwhelming. The judge modulated from a contemptuous allusion to "that Pepperall cat" to "my daughter-in-law." Prue's father, who had never watched her dance, had refused to collaborate even that far in her ruination, could not continue to believe that she was entirely lost when she was so conspicuously found. [Pg 347]

Perhaps he was right. Perhaps the world is so wholesome and so well balanced that nobody ever attained enormous prosperity without some excuse for it. People who contribute the beauty, laughter, thrills, and rhythm to the world may do as much to make life livable as people who invent electric lights and telephones and automobiles. Why should they not be paid handsomely?

Prue, the impossible, unimaginable Prue, triumphed home safely with several thousands of

dollars in her satchel. Orton bought a revolver to guard it with, and nearly shot one of his priceless feet off with it. They dumped the money upon the shelf of the banker who had refused to lend Prue five hundred dollars. He had to raise the steel grating to get the bundle in. The receiving teller almost fainted and had to count it twice.

Clint Sprague alone was disconsolate. He had refused to risk Prue's expenses, had forced her to take the lioness's share of the actual costs and the imaginary profits. He almost wept over what he might have had, despising what he had.

Prue ought to have been a wreck; but there is no stimulant like success. In a boat-race the winning crew never collapses. Prue's mother begged her to rest; her doctor warned her that she would drop dead. But she smiled, "If I can die dancing it won't be so bad."

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Even more maddeningly joyful than the dancing now was the rhapsody of income. To be both Salome and Hetty Green! Mr. Dolge figured out her income. At any reasonable rate of interest it represented a capital far bigger than Tawm Kinch's mythical hundred thousand. Mr. Dolge said to William Pepperall:

"Bill, your daughter is the richest man in town. Any time you want to borrow a little money, get her name on your note and I'll be glad to let you have it."

Somehow his little pleasantry brought no smile to William's face. He snapped:

"You mind your own business and I'll mind mine."

"Oh, I suppose you don't have to borrow it," Dolge purred; "she just gives it to you."

William almost wept at this humiliation.

Prue bought out Jake Meyer's restaurant. She spent a thousand dollars on its decoration. She consoled Ollie with a position as her secretary at twenty-five dollars a week and bought her some new dresses.

Her mother scolded poor Ollie for being such a stick as not to be able to dance like her sister and having to be dependent on her. There was something hideously immoral and disconcerting about this success. But then there always is. Prue was whisked from the ranks of the resentful poor to those of the predatory rich.

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Prue established Horace as cashier of the restaurant. She wanted to make her father manager, but he could not bend his pride to the yoke of taking wages from his child. If she had come home in disgrace and repentance he could have been a father to her.

The blossoming of what had been Jake Meyer's place into what Carthage called the "Palais de Pepperall" was a festival indeed. The newspapers, in which at Horace's suggestion Prue advertised lavishly, gave the event head-lines on the front page. The article included a complete catalogue of those present. This roster of forty "Mesdames" was thereafter accepted as the authorized beadroll of the Carthage Four Hundred. Mrs. Hippisley was present and as proud as Judy. But the judge and William Pepperall were absent, and Prue felt an ache in a heart that should have been so full of pride. She and Orton rode home in a hack and she cried all the way. In fact, he had to stick his head out and tell the driver to drive round awhile until she was calm enough to go home.

A few days later, as Prue was hurrying along the street looking over a list of things she had to purchase for her restaurant, she encountered old Doctor Brearley, who was looking over a list of subscribers to the fund for paying the overdue interest on the mortgage on the new steeple. He was afraid the builders might take it down.

In trying to pass each other Prue and the preacher fell into an involuntary tango step that delighted the witnesses. When Doctor Brearley had recovered his composure, and before he had adjusted his spectacles, he thought that Prue was Bertha Appleby, and he said:

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"Ah, my dear child, I was just going to call on you and see if you couldn't contribute a little to help us out in this very worthy cause."

Prue let him explain, and then she said:

"Tell you what I'll do, Doctor: I'll give you the entire proceeds of my restaurant for one evening. And I'll dance for you with my husband."

Doctor Brearley was aghast when he realized the situation. He was afraid to accept; afraid to refuse. He was in an excruciating dilemma. Prue had mercy on him. She said:

"I'll just announce it as an idea of my own. You needn't have anything to do with it."

The townspeople were set in a turmoil over Prue's latest audacity. Half the church members declared it an outrage; the other half decided that it gave them an opportunity to see her dance under safe auspices. Foxy Prue!

## XVII

The restaurant was crowded with unfamiliar faces, terrified at what they were to witness. Doctor Brearley had not known what to do. It seemed so mean to stay away and so perilous to go. His

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daughter solved the problem by telling him that she would say she had made him come. He went so far as to let her drag him in. "But just for a moment," he explained. "He really must leave immediately after Mr. and Mrs. Hippisley's—er—exercises." He apparently apologized to the other guests, but really to an outraged heaven.

He trembled with anxiety on the edge of his chair. The savagery of the music alarmed him. When Prue walked out with her husband the old Doctor was distressed by her beauty. Then they danced and his heart thumped; but subtly it was persuaded to thump in the measure of that unholy Maxixe. He did not know that outside in the street before the two windows stood two exiled fathers watching in bitter loneliness.

He saw a little love drama displayed, and reminded himself that, after all, some critics said that the Song of Solomon was a kind of wedding drama or dance. After all, Mrs. Hippisley was squired by her perfectly proper and very earnest young husband—though Orton in his black clothes was hardly more than her shifting shadow.

The old preacher had been studying his Cruden, and bolstering himself up, too, with the very Scriptural texts that Prue had written out for her stiff-necked father. He had met other texts that she had not known how to find. The idea came to the preacher that, in a sense, since God made everything He must have made the dance, breathed its impulse into the clay.

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This daughter of Shiloh was an extraordinarily successful piece of workmanship. There was nothing very wicked surely about that coquettish bending of her head, those playful escapes from her husband's embrace, that heel-and-toe tripping, that lithe elusiveness, that joyous psalmody of youth.

Prue was so pretty and her ways so pretty that the old man felt the pathos of beauty, so fleet, so fleeting, so lyrical, so full of—Alas! The tears were in his eyes, and he almost applauded with the others when the dance was finished. He bowed vaguely in the direction of the anxious Prue and made his way out. She felt rebuked and condemned and would not be comforted by the praise of others. She did not know that the old preacher had encountered on the sidewalk Judge Hippisley. Doctor Brearley had forgotten that the judge had not yet ordered his own decision reversed, and he thought he was saying the unavoidable thing when he murmured:

"Ah, Judge, how proud you must be of your dear son's dear wife. I fancy that Miriam, the prophetess, must have danced something like that on the banks of the Red Sea when the Egyptians were overthrown."

Then he put up the umbrella he always carried and stumbled back to his parsonage under the star-light. His heart was dancing a trifle, and he escaped the scene of wrath that broke out as soon as he was away.

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For William Pepperall had a lump in his throat made up of equal parts of desire to cry and desire to fight, and he said to Judge Hippisley with all truculence:

"Look here, Judge! I understand you been jawin' round this town about my daughter not being all she'd ought to be. Now I'm goin' to put a stop to that jaw of yours if I have to slam it right through the top of your head. If you want to send me to jail for contemp' of court, sentence me for life, because that's the way I feel about you, you fat old—"

Judge Hippisley put up wide-open hands and protested:

"Why, Bill, I—I just been wonderin' how I could get your daughter to make up with me. I been afraid to ask her for fear she'd just think I was toadyin' to her. I think she's the finest girl ever came out of Carthage. Do you suppose she'd make up and—and come over to our house to dinner Sunday?"

"Let's ask her," said William, and they walked in at the door.

## XVIII

Early one morning about six months from the first dismal Monday morning after William Pepperall's last bankruptcy, Serina wakened to find that William was already up. She had been oversleeping with that luxury which a woman can experience only in an expensive and frilly nightie combined with hemstitched linen sheets. She opened her heavy and slumber-contented eyes to behold her husband in a suit of partly-silk pajamas. He was making strange motions with his feet. "What on earth you doing there?" she yawned, and William grinned.

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"Yestiddy afternoon the judge was showin' me a new step in this Max Hicks dance. It's right cute. Goes like this."

Mamma Pepperall watched him cavort a moment, then sniffed contemptuously, and rolled out like a fireman summoned.

"Not a bit like it! It goes like this."

A few minutes later the door opened and Ollie put her head in.

"For Heaven's sake be quiet! You'll wake Prue, and she's all wore out; and she's only got an hour more before they have to get up and take the train for Des Moines."

The old rascals promised to be good, but as soon as she had gone they wrangled in whispers and danced on tiptoes. Suddenly Prue put her head in at the door and gasped:

"What in Heaven's name are you and poppa up to? Do you want to wake Orton?"

Papa had to explain:

"I got a new step, Prue. Goes like this. Come on, mamma."

Serina shyly took her place in his arms; but they had taken only a few strides when Prue hissed: [Pg 355]

"Sh-h! Don't do it! Stop it!"

"Why?"

"In the first place it's out of date. And in the second place it's not respectable."

Then the hard-working locust, having rebuked the frivolous ants, went back to bed.

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## "A" AS IN "FATHER"

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### I

For two years life at Harvard was one long siesta to Orson Carver, 2d. And then he fell off the window-seat. Orson Carver, 1st, ordered him to wake up and get to work at once. Orson announced to his friends that he was leaving college to pay an extensive visit to "Carthage" and it sounded magnificent until he added, "in the Middle West."

A struggling young railroad had succumbed to hard times out there, and Orson senior had been appointed receiver. It was the Carthage, Thebes & Rome Railroad, connecting three towns whose names were larger than their populations.

Since Orson had seemed unable to decide what career to choose, if any, his father decided for him—decided that he should take up railroading and begin at the beginning, which was the office at Carthage. And Orson went West to "grow up young man with the country."

Carthage bore not the faintest resemblance to the moving-picture life of the West; he didn't see a single person on horseback. Yet his mother thought of him as one who had vanished into the Mojave desert. She wrote to warn him not to drink the alkali water. [Pg 357]

Young Orson, regarding the villagers with patient disdain, was amazed to find that they were patronizing him with amusement. They spoke of his adored Boston as an old-fogy place with "no git-up-and-git."

Orson's mother was somewhat comforted when he wrote her that the young women of Carthage were noisy rowdies dressed like frumps. She was a trifle alarmed when she read in his next letter that some of them were not half bad-looking, surprisingly well groomed for so far West, and fairly attractive till they opened their mouths. Then, he said, they twanged the banjo at every vowel and went over the letter "r" as if it were a bump in the road. He had no desire for blinders, but he said that he would derive comfort from a pair of ear-muffs. By and by he was writing her not to be worried about losing him, for there was safety in numbers, and Carthage was so crowded with such graces that he could never single out one siren among so many. The word "siren" forced his mother to conclude that even their voices had ceased to annoy him. She expected him to bring home an Indian squaw or a cowgirl bride on any train.

And so Orson Carver was by delicate degrees engulfed in the life of Carthage. He was never assimilated. He kept his own "dialect," as they called it.

The girl that Orson especially attended in Carthage was Tудie Litton, as pretty a creature as he could imagine or desire. For manifest reasons he affected an interest in her brother Arthur. And Arthur, with a characteristic brotherly feeling, tried to keep his sister in her place. He not only told her that she was "not such a much," but he also said to Orson: [Pg 358]

"You think my sister is some girl, but wait till you see Em Terribery. She makes Tудie look like something the pup found outside. Just you wait till you see Em. She's been to boarding-school and made some swell friends there, and they've taken her to Europe with 'em. Just you wait."

"I'll wait," said Orson, and proceeded to do so.

But Em remained out of town so long that he had begun to believe her a myth, when one day the word passed down the line that she was coming home at last.

That night Tудie murmured a hope that Orson would not be so infatuated with the new-comer as to cast old "friends" aside. She underlined the word "friends" with a long, slow sigh like a heavy pen-stroke, and not without reason, for the word by itself was mild in view of the fact that the "friends" were seated in a motionless hammock in a moon-sheltered porch corner and holding on to each other as if a comet had struck the earth and they were in grave danger of being flung off the planet.

Orson assured Tудie: "No woman exists who could come between us!" And a woman must have been supernaturally thin to achieve the feat at that moment.

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But even Tудie, in her jealous dread, had no word to say against the imminent Em. Everybody spoke so well of her that Orson had a mingled expectation of seeing an Aphrodite and a Sister of Charity rolled into one.

Now Carthage was by no means one of those petty towns where nearly everybody goes to the station to meet nearly every train. But nearly everybody went down to see Em arrive. Foremost among the throng was Arthur Litton. Before Em left town he and she had been engaged "on approval." While she was away he kept in practice by taking Liddy Sovey to parties and prayer-meetings and picnics. Now that Em was on the way home Arthur let Liddy drop with a thud and groomed himself once more to wear the livery of Em's fiancé.

When the crowd met the train it was recognized that Arthur was next in importance to Em's father and mother. Nobody dreamed of pushing up ahead of him. On the outskirts of the *mêlée* stood Orson Carver. He gave railroad business as the pretext for his visit to the station, and he hovered in the offing.

As the train from the East slid in, voices cried, "Hello, Em!" "Woo-oo!" "Oh, Em!" "Oh, you Emma!" and other Carthage equivalents for "Ave!" and "all hail!"

Orson saw that a girl standing on the Pullman platform waved a handkerchief and smiled joyously in response. This must be Em. When the train stopped with a pneumatic wail she descended the steps like a young queen coming down from a dais.

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She was gowned to the minute; she carried herself with metropolitan poise; her very hilarity had the city touch. Orson longed to dash forward and throw his coat under her feet, to snatch away the porter's hand-step and put his heart there in its place. But he could not do these things un-introduced. He hung back and watched her hug her mother and father in a brief wrestling-match while Arthur stood by in simpering homage.

When she reached out her hand to Arthur he wrung it and clung to it with the dignity of proprietorship and a smirk that seemed to say: "I own this beautiful object, and I could kiss her if I wanted to. And she would like it. But I am too well bred to do such a thing in the presence of so many people."

Orson was not close enough to hear what he actually said. The glow in his eyes, however, was enough. Then Em visibly spoke. When her lips moved Arthur stared at her aghast; seemed to ask her to repeat what she said. She evidently did. Now Arthur looked askance as if her words shocked him.

Her father and mother, too, exchanged glances of dismay and chagrin. The throng of friends pressing forward in noisy salutation was silenced as if a great hand were clapped over every murmurous mouth.

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Orson wondered what terrible thing the girl could have spoken. There was nothing coarse in her manner. Delicacy and grace seemed to mark her. And whatever it was she said she smiled luminously when she said it.

The look in her eyes was incompatible with profanity, mild soever. Yet her language must have been appalling, for her father and mother blushed and seemed to be ashamed of bringing her into the world, sorry that she had come home. The ovation froze away into a confused babble.

What could the girl have said?

## II

Orson was called in by the station agent before he could question any of the greeters. When he was released the throng had dispersed. The Terriberrys had clambered into the family surrey and driven home with their disgrace.

But that night there was a party at the Littons', planned in Emma's honor. Tудie had invited Orson to be present.

He found that the one theme of conversation was Emma. Everybody said to him, "Have you seen Emma?" and when he said "Yes," everybody demanded, "Have you heard her?" and when he said "No" everybody said, "Just you wait!"

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Orson was growing desperate over the mystery. He seized Newt Elkey by the arm and said, "What does she do?"

"What does who do?"

"This Miss Em Terriberry. Everybody says, 'Have you heard her?'"

"Well, haven't you?"

"No! What under the sun does she say?"

"Just you wait. 'Shh!'"

Then Emma came down the stairs like a slowly swooping angel.

She had seemed a princess in her traveling-togs; in her evening gown—! Orson had not seen such a gown since he had been in Paris. He imagined this girl poised on the noble stairway of the Opéra there. Em came floating down upon these small-town girls with this fabric from heavenly looms, and reduced them once for all to a chorus.

But there was no scorn in her manner and no humility in her welcome. The Carthage girls frankly gave her her triumph, yet when she reached the foot of the stairs and the waiting Arthur she murmured something that broke the spell. The crowd rippled with suppressed amusement. Arthur flushed.

Orson was again too remote to hear. But he could feel the wave of derision, and he could see the hot shame on Arthur's cheeks. Emma bent low for her train, took Arthur's arm, and disappeared into the parlor where the dancing had begun.

Orson felt his arm pinched, and turned to find Tудie looking at him. "This is our dance," she said, "unless you'd rather dance with her." [Pg 363]

"With her? With Miss Terriberri, you mean?"

"Naturally. You were staring at her so hard I thought your eyes would roll out on the floor."

There was only one way to quell this mutiny, and that was to soothe it away. He caught Tудie in his arms. It was strenuous work bumping about in that little parlor, and collisions were incessant, but he wooed Tудie as if they were afloat in interstellar spaces.

They collided oftenest with Arthur and his Emma, for the lucky youth who held that drifting nymph seemed most unhappy in his pride. The girl was talking amiably, but the man was grim and furtive and as careless of his steering as a tipsy chauffeur.

Orson forgot himself enough to comment to Tудie, "Your brother doesn't seem to be enjoying himself."

"Poor boy, he's heartbroken."

"Why?"

"He's so disappointed with Em."

"I can't see anything wrong with her."

"Evidently not; but have you heard her?"

In a sudden access of rage Orson stopped short in the middle of the swirl, and, ignoring the battery of other dancers, demanded, "In Heaven's name, what's the matter with the girl?"

"Nothing, I should judge from the look on your face after your close inspection." [Pg 364]

"Oh, for pity's sake, don't begin on me; but tell me—"

"Talk to her and find out," said Tудie, with a twang that resounded as the music came to a stop. "Oh, Em—Miss Terriberri, this is Mr. Carver; he's dying to meet you."

She whirled around so quickly that he almost fell into the girl's arms. She received him with a smile of self-possession: "Chahmed, Mr. Cahveh."

Orson's Eastern ears, expecting some horror of speech, felt delight instead. She did not say "charmed" like an alarm-clock breaking out. She did not trundle his name up like a wheelbarrow. She softened the "a" and ignored the "r."

Tудie rolled the "r" on his ear-drums as with drum-sticks, and by contrast the sound came to him as: "Misterr Carrverr comes from Harrvarrd. He calls it Havvad."

"Oh," said Em, with further illumination, "I woah the Hahvahd colohs the lahst time I went to a game."

Orson wanted to say something about her lips being the perfect Havvad crimson, but he did not quite dare—yet. And being of New England, he would always be parsimonious with flatteries.

Tудie hooked her brother's arm and said with an angelic spitefulness, "We'll leave you two together," and swished away.

Orson immediately asked for the next dance and Em granted it. While they were waiting for the rheumatic piano to resume they promenaded. Orson noted that everybody they passed regarded them with a sly and cynical amusement. It froze all the language on his lips, and the girl was still breathing so fast from the dance that she apologized. Orson wanted to tell her how glorious she looked with her cheeks kindled, her lips parted, and her young bosom panting. But he suppressed the feverish impulse. And he wondered more and more what ridiculous quality the Carthaginians could have found in her who had returned in such splendor. [Pg 365]

The piano exploded now with a brazen impudence of clamor. Orson opened his arms to her, but she shook her head: "Oh, I cahn't dahnce again just yet. You'd bettah find anothah pahtnah."

She said it meekly, and seemed to be shyly pleased when he said he much preferred to sit it out.



And they sat it out—on the porch. Moonlight could not have been more luscious on Cleopatra's barge than it was there. The piazza, which needed paint in the daylight, was blue enameled by the moon. The girl's voice was in key with the harmony of the hour and she brought him tidings from the East and from Europe. They were as grateful as home news in exile.

He expected to have her torn from him at any moment. But, to his amazement, no one came to demand her. They were permitted to sit undisturbed for dance after dance. She was suffering ostracism. The more he talked to her the more he was puzzled. Even Arthur did not appear. Even the normal jealousy of a fiancé was not evident. Orson's brain grew frantic for explanation. The girl was not wicked, nor insolent. She plainly had no contagious disease, no leprosy, no plague, not even a cold. Then why was she persecuted?

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He was still fretting when the word was passed that supper was ready, and they were called in. Plates and napkins were handed about by obliging young gallants; chicken salad and sandwiches were dealt out with a lavish hand, and ice-cream and cake completed the banquet.

Arthur had the decency to sit with Em and to bring her things to eat, but he munched grimly at his own fodder. Orson tagged along and sat on the same sofa. It was surprising how much noise the guests made while they consumed their food. The laughter and clatter contrasted with the soft speech of Em, all to her advantage.

When the provender was gone, and the plates were removed, Tudie whisked Orson away to dance with her. As he danced he noted that Em was a wall-flower, trying to look unconcerned, but finally seeking shelter by the side of Tudie's mother, who gave her scant hospitality.

Tudie began at once, "Well, have you found out?"

"No, I haven't."

"Didn't you notice how affected she is?"

"No more than any other girl."

"Oh, thank you! So you think I'm affected."

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"Not especially. But everybody is, one way or another—even the animals and the birds."

"Really! And what is my affectation?"

"I don't know, and I wouldn't tell you if I did. What's Miss Terriberly's?"

"Didn't you dahnce with her?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's it."

"What's that?"

"She says 'dahnce,' doesn't she?"

"I believe she does."

"Well, she used to say 'dannce' like the rest of us."

"What of it? Is it a sin to change?"

"It's an affectation."

"Why? Is education an affectation?"

"Oh! so you call the rest of us uneducated?"

"For Heaven's sake, no! You know too much, if anything. But what has that to do with Miss Terriberly?"

Because their minds were at such loggerheads their feet could not keep measure. They dropped out of the dance and sought the porch, while Tudie raged on:

"She has no right to put on airs. Her father is no better than mine. Who is she, anyway, that she should say 'dahnce' and 'cahn't' and 'chahmed'?"

Orson was amazed at the depths of bitterness stirred up by a mere question of pronunciation. He answered, softly: "Some of the meekest people in the world use the soft 'a.' I say 'dahnce.'" [Pg 368]

"Oh, but you can't help saying it."

"Yes, I could if I tried."

"But you were born where everybody talks like that. Em was born out here."

"She has traveled, though."

"So have I. And I didn't come back playing copy-cat."

"It's natural for some people to mimic others. She may not be as strong-minded as you are." He thought that rather diplomatic. "Besides 'dannce' and 'cann't' aren't correct."

"Oh yes, they are!"

"Oh no, they're not! Not by any dictionary ever printed."

"Then they'd better print some more. Dictionaries don't know everything. They're very inconsistent."

"Naturally."

"Now you say 'tomahto' where I say 'tomayto.'"

"Yes."

"Why don't you say 'potahto'?"

"Because nobody does."

"Well, nobody that was born out here says 'dahnce' and 'cahn't.'"

"But she's been East and in Europe, and—where's the harm of it, anyway? What's your objection to the soft 'a'?"

"It's all right for those that are used to it."

"But you say 'father.' Why don't you say 'rather' to rhyme with it?"

"Don't be foolish."

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"I'm trying not to be."

"Well, then, don't try to convince me that Em Terriberry is a wonderful creature because she's picked up a lot of foreign mannerisms and comes home thinking she's better than the rest of us. We'll show her—the conceited thing! Her own father and mother are ashamed of her, and Arthur is so disgusted the poor boy doesn't know what to do. I think he ought to give her a good talking to or break off the engagement."

Orson sank back stunned at the ferocity of her manner. He beheld how great a matter a little fire kindleth. It was so natural to him to speak as Miss Terriberry spoke that he could not understand the hatred the alien "a" and the suppressed "r" could evoke among those native to the flat vowel and the protuberant consonant. He was yet to learn to what lengths disputes could go over quirks of speech.

### III

The very "talking to" that Tudie believed her brother ought to give his betrothed he was giving her at that moment at the other end of the porch. Arthur had hesitated to attempt the reproof. It was not pleasant to broach the subject, and he knew that it was dangerous, since Em was high-spirited. Even when she expressed a wonder at the coolness of everybody's behavior he could not find the courage for the lecture seething in his indignant heart.

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He was worrying through a perfunctory consolation: "Oh, you just imagine that people are cold to you, Em. Everybody's tickled to death to have you home. You see, Em—"

"I wish you wouldn't call me Em," she said.

"It's your name, isn't it?"

"It's a part of my old name; but I've changed Emma to Amélie. After this I want to be called Amélie."

If she had announced her desire to wear trousers on the street, or to smoke a pipe in church, or even to go in for circus-riding, he could not have been more appalled than he was at what she said.

"Amélie?" he gasped. "What in the name of—of all that's sensible is that for?"

"I hate Em. It's ugly. It sounds like a letter of the alphabet. I like Amélie better. It's pretty and I choose it."

"But look here, Em—"

"Amélie."

"This is carrying things too blamed far."

He was not entirely heedless of her own welfare. He had felt the animosity and ridicule that had gathered like sultry electricity in the atmosphere when Emma had murmured at the station those words that Orson had not heard.

Orson, seated with Tudie at one end of the porch, heard them now at the other end of the porch as they were quoted with mockery by Arthur. Orson and Tudie forgot their own quarrel in the supernal rapture of eavesdropping somebody's else wrangle.

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"When you got off the train," Arthur groaned, "you knocked me off my pins by what you said to your father and mother."

"And what did I say?" said Em in innocent wonder.

"You said, 'Oh, my dolling m'mah, I cahn't believe it's you!'"

"What was wrong with that?"

"You used to call her 'momma' and you called me 'darrling.' And you wouldn't have dared to say 'cahn't'! When I heard you I wanted to die. Then you grabbed your father and gurgled, 'Oh, p'pah, you deah old angel!' I nearly dropped in my tracks, and so did your father. And then you turned to me and I knew what was coming! I tried to stop you, but I couldn't. And you said it! You called me 'Ahthuh!'"

"Isn't that your name, deah?"

"No, it is not! My name is 'Arrthurr' and you know it! 'Ahthuh!' what do you think I am? My name is good honest 'Arrthurr.'" He said it like a good honest watch-dog, and he gnarred the "r" in the manner that made the ancients call it the canine letter.

Amélie, born Emma, laughed at his rage. She tried to appease him. "I think 'Ahthuh' is prettiah. It expresses my tendah feelings bettah. The way you say it, it sounds like garrgling something."

But her levity in such a crisis only excited her lover the more. "Everybody at the station was laughing at you. To-night when you traipsed down the stairs, looking so pretty in your new dress, you had to spoil everything by saying: 'What a chahming pahty. Shall we dahnce, Ahthuh?' I just wanted to die."

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The victim of his tirade declined to wither. She answered: "I cahn't tell you how sorry I am to have humiliated you. But if it's a sin to speak correctly you'll have to get used to it."

"No, I won't; but you'll get over it. You can live it down in time; but don't you dare try to change your name to Amélie. They'd laugh you out of Carthage."

"Oh, would they now? Well, Amélie is my name for heahaftah, and if you don't want to call me that you needn't call me anything."

"Look here, Em."

"Amélie."

"Emamélie! for Heaven's sake don't be a snob!"

"You're the snob, not I. There's just as much snobbery in sticking to mispronunciation as there is in being correct. And just as much affectation in talking with a burr as in dropping it. You think it's all right for me to dress as they do in New York. Why shouldn't I talk the same way? If it's all right for me to put on a pretty gown and weah my haiah the most becoming way, why cahn't I improve my name, too? You cahn't frighten me. I'm not afraid of you or the rest of your backwoods friends. Beauty is my religion, and if necessary I'll be a mahtah to it."

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"You'll be a what?"

"A mahtah."

"Do you mean a motto?"

"I mean what you'd call a marrtyrr. But I won't make you one. I'll release you from our engagement, and you can go back to Liddy Sovey. I understand you've been rushing her very hahd. And you needn't take me home. I'll get back by the gahden pahth."

She rose and swept into the house, followed by her despairing swain.

Orson and Tudie eavesdropped in silence. Tudie was full of scorn. Amélie's arguments were piffle or worse to her, and her willingness to undergo "martyrdom" for them was the most arrant pigheadedness, as the martyrdom of alien creeds usually is.

Orson, the alien, was full of amazement. Here was a nice young man in love with a beautiful young woman. He had been devoted for years, and now, because she had slightly altered her habits in one vowel and on consonant, their love was curdled.

#### IV

Greater wars have begun from less causes and been waged more fiercely. They say that an avalanche can be brought down from a mountain by a whispered word. Small wonder, then, that the murmur of a vowel and the murder of a consonant should precipitate upon the town of Carthage the stored-up snows of tradition. Business was dull in the village and any excitement was welcome. Before Emma's return there had been a certain slight interest in pronunciation.

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Orson Carver had for a time stimulated amusement by his droll talk. He had been suspected for some time of being an impostor because he spoke of his university as "Havvad." The Carthaginians did not expect him to call it "Harrvarrd," as it was spelled, but they had always understood that true graduates called it "Hawvawd," and local humorists won much laughter by calling it "Haw-haw-vawd." Orson had bewildered them further by a sort of cockneyism of misappropriated letters. He used the flat "a" in words where Carthaginians used the soft, as in

his own name and his university's. He saved up the "r" that he dropped from its rightful place and put it on where it did not belong, as in "idear." He had provoked roars of laughter one evening when a practical joker requested him to read a list of the books of the Bible, and he had mentioned "Numbas, Joshuar, Ezrar, Nehemiar, Estha, Provubbs, Isaiar, Jeremiar."

Eventually he was eclipsed by another young man sent to a post in the C., T. & R. Railroad by an ambitious parent—Jefferson Digney, of Yale. Digney, born and raised in Virginia and removed to Georgia, had taken his accent to New Haven and taken it away with him unsullied. His Southern speech had given Carthage acute joy for a while.

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Arthur Litton had commented once on the contrast between Orson and Jefferson. "Neither of you can pronounce the name of his State," said Arthur. "He calls it 'Jawja' and you call it 'Jahjar.'"

"What should it be?"

"Jorrjuh."

"Really!"

"You can't pronounce your own name."

"Oh, cahn't I?"

"No, you cahn't I. You call it 'Cavveh.' He calls it 'Cyahvah.'"

"What ought it to be?"

"Carrvurr—as it's spelt."

Yet another new-comer to the town was an Englishman, Anthony Hopper, a younger son of a stock-holder abroad. He was not at all the Englishman of the stage, and the Carthaginians were astonished to find that he did not drop his "h's" or misapply them. And he never once said "fawncy," but flat "fancy." He did not call himself "Hanthony 'Opper," as they expected. But he did take a "caold bahth in the mawning."

With a New Englander, an old Englander, and an Atlantan in the town, Carthage took an astonishing interest in pronunciation that winter. When conversation flagged anybody could raise a laugh by referring to their outlandish pronunciations. Quoting their remarks took the place of such parlor games as trying to say "She sells sea shells," or "The sea ceaseth and it sufficeth us."

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The foreigners entered into the spirit of it and retorted with burlesques of Carthagese. They were received with excellent sportsmanship. One might have been led to believe that the Carthaginians took the matter of pronunciation lightly, since they could laugh tolerantly at foreigners. This, however, was because the foreigners had missed advantages of Carthaginian standards.

Emma Terriberry's crime was not in her pronunciation, but in the fact that she had changed it. Having come from Carthage, she must forever remain a Carthaginian or face down a storm of wrath. Her quarrel with her lover was the beginning of a quarrel with the whole town.

Arthur Litton became suddenly a hero, like the first man wounded in a war. The town rallied to his support. Emma was a heartless wretch, who had insulted a faithful lover because he would not become as abject a toady to the hateful East as she was. Her new name became a byword. Her pronunciations were heard everywhere in the most ruthless parody. She was accused of things that she never had said, things that nobody could ever say.

They inflicted on her the impossible habit of consistency. She was reported as calling a hat a "hot," a rat a "rot," of teaching her little sister to read from the primer, "Is the cot on the mot?" Pronunciation became a test of character. The soft "r" and the hard "a" were taken as proofs of effeminate hypocrisy.

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Carthage differed only in degree, not in kind, from old Italy at the time of the "Sicilian Vespers," when they called upon everybody to pronounce the word "ciceri." The natives who could say "chee-cheree" escaped, but the poor French who could come no nearer than "seeseree" were butchered. Gradually now in Carthage the foreigners from Massachusetts, Georgia, England, and elsewhere ceased to be regarded with tolerance. Their accents no longer amused. They gave offense.

In the railroad office there were six or seven of these new-comers. They were driven together by indignation. They took up Amélie's cause; made her their queen; declined invitations in which she was not included; gave parties in her honor: took her buggy-riding. Each had his day.

A few girls could not endure her triumph. They broke away from the fold and became renegades, timidly softening their speech. This infuriated the others, and the town was split into Guelph and Ghibelline.

Amélie enjoyed the notoriety immensely. She flaunted her success. She ridiculed the Carthage people as yokels. She burlesqued their jargon as outrageously as they hers.

The soda-water fountains became battle-fields of backbiting and mockery. The feuds were as bitter, if not as deadly, as those that flourished around the fountains in medieval Italian towns. Two girls would perch on the drug-store stools back to back, and bicker in pretended ignorance

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of each other's presence. Tudie Litton would order "sahsahpahrillah," which she hated, just to mock Amélie's manner; and Amélie, assuming to be ignorant of Tudie's existence, would retort by ordering "a strorrbrury sody wattur." Then each would laugh recklessly but miserably.

The church at which the Terriberrys worshiped was almost torn apart by the matter. The more ardent partisans felt that Amélie's unrepentant soul had no right in the sacred edifice. Others urged that there should be a truce to factions there, as in heaven. One Sunday dear old Dr. Brearley, oblivious of the whole war, as of nearly everything else less than a hundred years away, chose as his text Judges xii: 6:

"Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand."

If the anti-Amélie had needed any increase of enthusiasm they got it now. They had Scripture on their side. If it were proper for the men of Gilead, where the well-known balm came from, to slay forty-two thousand people for a mispronunciation, surely the Carthaginians had authority to stand by their "alturrs" and their "fi-urs" and protect them from those who called them "altahs" and "fiahs."

No country except ours could foster such a feud. No language except the chaos we fumble with could make it possible. By and by the war wore out of its own violence. People ceased to care how a thing was said, and began to take interest again in what was said. Those who had mimicked Amélie had grown into the habit of mimicry until they half forgot their scorn. The old-time flatness and burr began to soften from attrition, to be modified because they were conspicuous. You would have heard Arthur subduing his twang and unburring the "r." If you had asked him he would have told you his name was either "Arthuh" or "Athur."

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Amélie and her little bodyguard, on the other hand, grew so nervous of the sacred emblems that they avoided their use. When they came to a word containing an "a" or a final "r" they hesitated or sidestepped and let it pass. Amélie fell into the habit of saying "couldn't" for "cahn't," and "A. M." for "mawning."

People began to smile when they met her, and she smiled back. Slowly everybody that had "not been speaking" began speaking, bowing, chatting. Now, when one of the disputed words drifted into the talk, each tried to concede a little to the other's belief, as soldiers of the blue and the gray trod delicately on one another's toes after peace was decreed. Everybody was now half and half, or, as Tudie vividly spoke it, "haff and hahf." You would hear the same person say "haff-pahst ten," "hahf-passt eleven," and "hahf-pahst twelve."

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Carthage became as confused in its language as Alsace-Lorraine.

## V

All through this tremendous feud Orson Carver had been faithful to Amélie. Whether he had given Tudie the sack or she him was never decided. But she was loyal to her dialect. He ceased to call; Tudie ceased to invite him. They smiled coldly and still more coldly, and then she ceased to see him when they met. He was simply transparent.

Orson was Amélie's first cavalier in Carthage. He found her mightily attractive. She was brisk of wit and she adored his Boston and his ways. She was sufficiently languorous and meek in the moonlight, too—an excellent hammock-half.

But when the other Outlanders had begun to gather to her standard it crowded the porch uncomfortably.

Dissension rose within the citadel. Orson's father had fought Jefferson's father in 1861-65. The great-grandfathers of both of them had fought Anthony Hopper's forefathers in '76-83. The pronunciations of the three grew mutually distasteful, and dreadful triangular rows took place on matters of speech.

Amélie sat in silence while they wrangled, and her thoughts reverted to Arthur Litton. He had loved her well enough to be ashamed of her and rebuke her. She was afraid that she had been a bit of a snob, a trifle caddish. She had aired her new accent and her new clothes a trifle too insolently. Old customs grew dear to her like old slippers. She remembered the Littons' shabby buggy and the fuzzy horse, and the drives Arthur and she had taken under the former moons.

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Her father and mother had shocked her with their modes of speech when she came home, and she had ventured to rebuke them. She felt now that they ought to have spanked her. A great tenderness welled up in her heart for them and their homely ways. She wanted to be like them.

The village was taking her back into its slumberous comfortableness.

She would waken from her reveries to hear the aliens arguing their alien rules of speech. It suddenly struck her that they were all wrong, anyway. She felt an impulse to run for a broom and sweep them off into space. She grew curt with them. They felt the chill and dropped away, all but Orson. At last his lonely mother bullied his father into recalling him from the Western wilds.

He called on Amélie to bid a heartbreaking good-by. He was disconsolate. He asked her to write to him. She promised she would. He was excited to the point of proposing. She declined him

plaintively. She could never leave the old folks. "My place is here," she said.

He left her and walked down the street like a moving elegy.

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He suffered agonies of regret till he met a girl on the East-bound train. She was exceedingly pretty and he made a thrilling adventure of scraping acquaintance with her mother first, and thus with her. They were returning to Boston, too. They were his home folks.

When at last the train hurtled him back into Massachusetts he had almost forgotten that he had ever been in Carthage. He had a sharp awakening.

When he flung his arms about his mother and told her how glad he was to see her, her second exclamation was: "But how on uth did you acquiah that ghahstly Weste'n accent?"

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One evening in the far-off Middle West the lonely Amélie was sitting in her creaking hammock, wondering how she could endure her loneliness, plotting how she could regain her old lover. She was desperately considering a call upon his sister. She would implore forgiveness for her sin of vanity and beg Tудie's intercession with Arthur. She had nearly steeled herself to this glorious contrition when she heard a warning squeal from the front gate, a slow step on the front walk, and hesitant feet on the porch steps.

And there he stood, a shadow against the shadow. In a sorrowful voice he mumbled, "Is anybody home?"

"I am!" she cried. "I was hoping you would come."

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"No!"

"Yes. I was just about ready to telephone you."

There was so much more than hospitality in her voice that he stumbled forward. Their shadows collided and merged in one embrace.

"Oh, Amélie!" he sighed in her neck.

And she answered behind his left ear: "Don't call me Amélie any more. I like Em better from you! It's so shorrt and sweet—as you say it. We'll forget the passt forreverr."

"Am! my dolling!"

"Oh, Arrthurr!"

## THE END

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