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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ONCE TO EVERY MAN ***



"IT WAS FOR ME--YOU WENT. DON'T YOU--DIDN'T YOU KNOW IT WAS--JUST BECAUSE OF YOU--THAT I WANTED THEM--AT--ALL?"

ONCE TO EVERY MAN

BY
LARRY EVANS

ILLUSTRATED BY
ANTON OTTO FISCHER



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TO
MINE OWN PEOPLE

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ONCE TO EVERY MAN

CHAPTER I

The most remarkable thing about the boy was his eyes--that is, if any man with his spread of shoulder and masculine grace of flat muscled hips could be spoken of any longer as a boy, merely because his years happened to number twenty-four.

They, however--the eyes--were gray; not a too light, off-color, gleaming gray, but more the tone of slate, deep when one chanced to find oneself peering deep into them. And they were old. Any spontaneity of youth which might have flashed from them at one time had faded entirely and left a sort of wistful sophistry behind, an almost plaintive hunger which made the pity of his shoulder-stoop--still mercifully only a prophecy of what the next twenty years of toil might leave it--an even more pitiful thing. His sheer bigness should have been still unspoiled; instead it was already beginning to lose its rebound; it was growing imperceptibly slack, like the springy stride of a colt put too soon to heavy harness.

Late afternoon was giving way to nightfall--a long shadowed twilight that was heavy with the scent of spring in spite of the scattered patches of wet snow that still lurked in the swamp holes. As the boy stood, facing toward the east and the town that sprawled in the hollow, his great, shoulder-heavy body loomed almost like a painted figure against the cool red background of the horizon. Even in spite of the pike-pole which he grasped in one hand and the vividly checkered blanket coat that wrapped him, the illusion was undeniable. Stripped of them and equipped instead with a high steeple-crowned hat and wide buckled shoes, his long half-saddened face and lean body might have been a composite of all the Puritan fathers who had wrestled with the rock-strewn acres behind him, two hundred years and more before.

Denny Bolton was waiting--Young Denny, the townsfolk preferred to call him, to distinguish him from Old Denny of the former generation. Somehow, although he had never mentioned it to anybody, it seemed to him that he had always been waiting for something--he hardly knew just what it was himself--just something that was drearily slow in the coming.

His home, the farmhouse of the Boltons, for which the straggling village of Boltonwood below had been named, was nearest of all the outlying places on the post route, yet last of all to be served, for when the rural delivery had been established they had begun delivery at the other end of the circle. Young Denny had never been able to understand quite why it was so--but it was, for all that. And with the minister, too, it happened, although not so often, for the minister of Boltonwood called at almost every door on his rounds and stayed longer at each, so sometimes for months at a time he never got around to the shabby place on the hill at all. But the boy believed that he did understand this and often he smiled to himself over it, without any bitterness--just smiled half wistfully. He lived alone in the tumble-down old house and did his own cooking and--well, even a most zealous man of the gospel might have beamed more heartily upon better cooks than was Denny, without any great qualms of conscience.

One other reason existed, or at least Young Denny imagined that it did, but whenever he stopped to think about it--a thing he had come to do more and more often in the last few months--he never smiled. Instead, his lips straightened until the wistful quirk at the corners disappeared into a straight line and his eyes smouldered ominously.

There was a select circle of white-haired old men--the village old guard--which sat in nightly session about the fat-bellied old wood-stove in the Boltonwood Tavern. It convened with the first snowfall of the winter and broke up long after the ice had gone out in the spring; and this circle, when all other topics had been whipped over at fever heat, until all the zest of bitter contradiction was gone from them, always turned at last with a delightful sort of unanimity to the story of the night when Old Denny had died--the Bolton of the former generation.

An almost childish enthusiasm tinged their keen relish for the tale. They squirmed and puckered their wrinkled old faces and shivered convulsively, just as a child might have shivered over a Bluebeard horror, as they recalled how Old Denny had moaned in agony one moment that night, and then screamed horribly the next for the old stone demijohn that always stood in the corner of the kitchen. They remembered, with an almost astonishing wealth of detail, that he had frothed at the mouth and blasphemed terribly one instant, and then wept, in the very same breath--wept hopelessly, like the uncouth, overgrown, frightened boy who knelt at the bedside.

The strangest part of the whole thing was that not one of them had realized at the time, or ever recalled since, that Old Denny's eyes were sane when he wept that night and blurred with madness when he cursed. But then, too, that would have smashed the dramatic element of the whole tale to flinters. They never missed a scene or a sob, however, in the re-telling, and they always ended it with an ominous tilt of the head and a little insinuating crook of the neck toward the battered, weather-torn old house where Young Denny had lived on alone since that last bad night. It was very much as though they had said aloud, "He's the next--he'll go just like the rest."

Perhaps they never really thought of it, and perhaps it was because Young Denny's failure to fulfil their prophecy had really embittered them, but the whole village had given the boy plenty of solitude in the last few years in which to become on terms of thorough intimacy with the

demijohn which still occupied its place in the kitchen corner.

And yet that stone demijohn was almost the only tangible reminder there was left of the Bolton who had gone before. There were a few in the village who wondered how, in the three intervening years, the big silent, shambling boy had managed to tear from his acres money enough to clear the place of its debt--the biggest thing by far in his heritage. Eight hundred dollars was a large sum in Boltonwood--and Denny's acres were mostly rocks. Old Denny would have sold the last scythe and fork in the dilapidated barn to fill the stone jug, save for the fact that fork and scythe had themselves been too dilapidated to find a purchaser.

But the same scythe had an edge now and a polish where the boy's hands had gripped and swung it, and it took a flawlessly clear-grained piece of ash to make a shaft that would stand the forkfuls of hay which his shoulders heaved, without any apparent effort, into the mow. The clapboards on the house, although still unpainted, no longer whined in the wind; they were all nailed tight. And still the circle around the stove in the Boltonwood Tavern tilted its head--tilted it ominously--as if to say: "Just wait a bit, he'll come to it--wait now and see!" But the prophecy's fulfilment, long deferred, was making them still more bitter--strangely bitter--toward the boy, who stood alone at sundown watching the road that wound up from the village.

All this Young Denny knew, not because he had been told, but because the part of him that was still boy sensed it intuitively. He was just as happy to be let alone, or at least so he told himself, times without end, for it gave him a chance to sleep. And tonight as he stood at the crest of the hill before the dark house, waiting for Old Jerry to come along with the mail, he was glad, too, that his place was the last on the route. It gave him something to look forward to during the day--something to expect--for although he rarely received a letter or, to be more exact, never, the daily newspaper was, after all, some company. And then there were the new farm implement catalogues and seed books, with their dyspeptic looking fruits and vegetables. They made better reading than nothing at all.

But it was not the usual bundle of papers which came at the end of each week for which Young Denny was waiting. Old Jerry, who drove the post route, and had driven it as long as Denny could remember, was late tonight--he was even later than usual for Saturday night--and Denny's hand tightened nervously upon the shaft of the pike-pole as he realized the cause of the delay.

For many weeks he had heard but little else mentioned on the village streets on his infrequent trips after groceries and grain. The winter sledding was over; the snow had gone off a month back with the first warm rain; just that afternoon he had made the last trip behind his heavy team down from the big timber back on the ridges, but during that month the other drivers with whom he had been hauling logs since fall had talked of nothing but the coming event.

From where he stood, looking out across the valley, Young Denny could see the huge bulk of the Maynard homestead--Judge Maynard's great box of a house--silhouetted against the skyline, and back of it high piles of timber--framing and sheathing for the new barn that was going up. For Judge Maynard was going to give a barn-raising--an old-fashioned barn-raising such as the hill country had not seen in twenty years.

Already Young Denny knew that there were to be two team captains who would choose from among the best men that the country boasted, the very pick of strength and endurance and daring. And these, when the word was given, would swarm up with mallet and lock-pin over their half of the allotted work, in the race to drive home the last spike and wedge into place the last scantling. For days now with a grave sort of satisfaction which he hardly understood himself, Young Denny had time after time put all his strength against a reluctant log, skidding timber back on the hillside, and watched the lithe pike-pole bend half double under the steadily increasing strain. Somehow he felt very sure that one or the other of the captains would single him out; they couldn't afford to pass him by.

But in that one respect only was Judge Maynard's barn-raising to be like those that had passed down into history a score of years back. Every other detail, as befitted the hospitality of the wealthiest man in the hill country, was planned on a scale of magnificence before unheard of, and Denny Bolton stood and touched furtively with the tip of his tongue lips that were dry with the glamour of it all.

It was to be a masquerade--the dance which followed on the wide, clean floors--not the kind of a masquerade which the church societies gave from time to time to eke out the minister's salary and which, while he had never attended, Young Denny had often heard described as "poverty-parties," because everybody wore the oldest of his old clothes--but a marvelously brilliant thing of hired costumes. It did not mean so much to him, this last, and yet as he thought of it his tight lips twisted into a slow smile and his eyes swung from their hungry contemplation of the great Maynard house to a little clump of brushwood which made a darker blot against the black shadow of the hill from the crest of which the Judge's place dominated the surrounding country. Little by little Denny Bolton's lean face lost its hint of hardness; the lines that ran from his thin nose to the corners of his lips disappeared as he smiled--smiled with whimsical gentleness--at the light that glimmered from a single window through the tangled bushes, twinkling back at him unblinkingly.

There was a tiny cottage behind that light, a little drab cottage of a half dozen rooms. It stood, unpainted and unkempt, in a wedge-shaped acre of neglected garden which, between high weeds and uncut shrubbery, had long before gone to straggling ruin. And that wedge-shaped acre which cut a deep fissure in the edge of the immaculate pastures of Boltonwood's wealthiest

citizen was like a barbed thorn in Judge Maynard's side.

The latter was not a judge in reality; partly the size of the cash balance which rumor whispered he carried at the county bank, partly the fact that he was the only lawyer in that section, had earned him the title. But every trick of his tricky trade which he could invent he had brought against the owner of that little, dilapidated cottage in a vain effort to force him to sell. And yet the acre of neglect and ruin still clung like an unsightly burr to the hem of his smooth-rolling acres.

The people of Boltonwood were given to calling John Anderson a fool, and not alone because he persisted in his senseless antagonism of a man as great in the township as was Judge Maynard. There was at least one other reason. It was almost twenty years now since the day when John Anderson had first appeared in the stern old hill town, bringing with him a frail slip of a woman with great, moist violet-blue eyes and tumbled yellow hair, whose very white and gold prettiness had seemed to their puritanical eyes the flaunting of an ungodly thing. There was a transparent pallor in her white skin and heavy shadows beneath her big dark eyes that made them seem even larger and duskier. A whispered rumor went around that she was not too strong--that it was the brisk keen air for which John Anderson had brought her to the hills.

The little drab cottage had been white then and there was scarcely a day but what the passers-by saw the slender girl, in soft fluttering things that contrasted painfully with their dingy calico, the thick gleaming mass of hair that crowned her head wind-tossed into her eyes, standing with her face buried in an armful of crimson blossoms in the same garden where the weeds were now breast high, or running with mad, childish abandon between the high hedgerows. And many a night after it was too dark to see they heard the man's heavier bass underrunning the light treble of her laughter which, to their sensitive ears, was never quite free from a tinge of mockery.

CHAPTER II

For a year or more it was like that, and then the day came which, with dawn, found John Anderson changed into a gray-haired, white-faced man, whose eyes always seemed to be looking beyond one, and who spoke but seldom, even when he was spoken to. During the month that followed that night hardly a person in the village heard a word pass his lips, except, perhaps, those members of the church societies who had volunteered to help care for the baby.

He locked himself up in the small shop which occupied the back room of the house and day after day he worked there alone in a deadly quiet, strangely mechanical fashion. Sometimes far into the night they heard the tap-tap of his mallet as he chipped away, bit by bit, on a slender shaft of white marble, until more than one man in those days shook his head dubiously and vouchsafed his neighbor the information that John Anderson "wa'n't quite right."

A month passed during which the steady chip-chip scarcely ever ceased; and yet, when the work was finally finished and set up over the fresh little mound in the grounds behind the church, and they came to stand before it, they found nothing ready for them to say. For once the tongues of the hillsfolk were sobered into silence.

It was like her--that slim little white statue--so like her in its pallor and frailty of feature and limb that they only gasped and then fell to whispering behind their hands at the resemblance. And somehow, too, as they stared, their faces failed to harden as they had always hardened before, whenever they rebuked her slim, elfish untidiness, for upon the face of stone, which was the face of his wife, John Anderson's chisel had left a fleeting, poignantly wistful smile that seemed touched with the glory of the Virgin Mother herself.

They merely stood and stared--the townsfolk--and yet they only half understood, for when it was noised about the street a few days later that John Anderson had given up forever his occupation of chiseling tombstones for the bleak Boltonwood cemetery--an occupation which at least had yielded him a bare living--and had locked himself up in that back room to "putter with lumps of clay," he was instantly convicted of being queer in the eyes of the entire thrifty community, even without his senseless antagonism of the Judge in the years that followed to clinch the verdict.

After the first few weeks that followed that night the village saw less and less of the man who went on living alone in the small white cottage with only the child to keep him company--the girl-child whom he had named Dryad, perhaps in a blind, groping hunger for beauty, perhaps in sheer revolt against the myriad Janes and Anns and Marthas about him. His hair was snow white before she was half grown; he was an old man, wrinkled of face and vacant of eye, who bent always over the bench in his back-room shop too engrossed with his work even to note that, day by day, her face and slim body and tumbled yellow hair grew more and more like the face which was always smiling up at him from the shaping clay or marble.

Months passed before he opened his lips again for speech. Then he began to talk; he began to murmur little, disjointed intimate phrases of endearment to the stone face growing under his fingers--phrases that were more than half unintelligible to strange ears--until as the habit grew

there came long periods, days at a time, when he carried on an uncannily one-sided conversation with the empty air before him, or, as the villagers often hinted, with some one whom his eyes alone could see.

But as the years went by even this novelty lost its spice with long familiarity. The cottage at the edge of town went from straggling neglect to utter ruin, but John Anderson still clung to it with a senseless stubbornness over which they often shook their heads in pity--in heartfelt commiseration for the Judge who had to endure this eyesore at his very doors, in spite of all his shrewdness or the reputed size of his balance at the County National.

But if time had dimmed their interest in the father, it had only served to whet their keen curiosity over the girl, who, in the intervening eighteen years, had changed from a half-starved, half-clad child that flashed through the thickets like a wild thing, into a long slender-limbed creature with wide, duskily violet eyes and shimmering, tumbled hair--a creature of swift, passionate moods who, if they could only have known it, was startlingly like the wild things for which he had named her.

They were not given to the reading of heathen mythology, the people of Boltonwood, and so they could not know. But with every passing day they did realize that Dryad Anderson's fiercely wistful little face was growing more and more like that of the little statue in the grounds behind the church--the stone face of John Anderson's frail bride of a year--long since turned a dull, nondescript gray by the sun and weather.

She had the same trick of smiling with her eyes when there was no mirth lurking in the corners of her full lips, the same full-throated little laugh that carried the faintest hint of mockery in its thrill. Year by year her slim body lost its unformed boyishness in a new soft roundness which her long outgrown skirt and too scant little waist failed completely to conceal. And the hillsfolk were given to shaking their heads over her now, just as the generation before had done, for to cap it all--the last straw upon the back of their toleration--Dryad Anderson had "took up" with Denny Bolton, Young Denny, the last of his name. Nothing more was needed to damn her forever in the eyes of the hills people, although they could not have explained just why, even if they had tried.

And Young Denny, waiting there in the thickening dusk before his own dark place, smiled gravely back at that single blinking light in the window of the cottage squatting under the hill--he smiled with whimsical gentleness, a man's smile that softened somehow the hard lines of jaw and lip. It was more than three years now since the first night when he had stood and watched for it to flash out across the valley before he had turned and gone to set a lamp in the dark front windows behind him in answer to it.

He could never remember just how they had agreed upon that signal--there had never been any mutual agreement--but every Saturday night since that first one, three years back, he had come in from his week's work, ploughing or planting or teaming back in the timber and waited for it to call to him, just at dusk, across the valley.

His hand went tentatively to his chin, absently caressing his lean cheeks as he remembered that day. Late in the afternoon he had found a rabbit caught fast in a snare which he had set deep in the thicket, and the little animal had squealed in terror, just as rabbits always squeal, when he leaned and took it from the trap. And when he had straightened to his feet with it clutched fast in his arms, to look for a club with which to end its struggles quickly, his eyes had lifted to encounter the stormy eyes of the girl who had flashed up before him as silently as a shadow from the empty air.

Her two small brown fists were tight clenched against her breast; she was breathing in short irregular gasps as if she had been running hard.

At first Denny Bolton had been too amazed to do more than stare blankly into her blazing eyes; then before that burning glare his face began to redden consciously and his gaze dropped, wavering from her face to the little blouse so long outgrown that it strained far open across the girl's round throat, doubly white by contrast below the brown line where the clear tan ended.

His glance went down from the fierce little face to the tight skirt, shiny from long wear and so short that the hem hung high above her slim ankles; and from there down to the cracked, broken shoes, string-laced and sized too large for her fine drawn feet. They were old and patched--the stockings--so thickly darned that there was little of the original fabric left, but for all the patches there were still wide gashes in them, fresh torn by the thorns, through which the flesh beneath showed very white.

Her face colored, too, as Young Denny's uncomfortable scrutiny passed over her. It flamed painfully from throat to hair and then went very white. She tried vainly with one hand to close the gap at her throat, while the other struggled to settle the dingy old skirt a little lower on her childish hips. But her hot eyes clung unwaveringly to the boy's face. Suddenly she lifted one hand and pointed a quivering finger at the furry mass palpitating in his arms.

"What are you going to do with it?" she demanded.

Young Denny started at the question. The uncompromising directness of the words startled him even more than had her first swift, silent coming. Involuntarily, spasmodically his arms closed until the rabbit squealed again in an ecstasy of terror.

"Why, I--I reckon to eat him!" he blurted at last, and then his face grew hotter than ever at the baldness of the answer.

It was hard to follow the change that flashed over her face as she became conscious of his blundering, clumsy embarrassment. It came too quickly for that, but the angry light faded from her eyes and her lips began to curve in the faintest of quizzical smiles. She even forgot the too short skirt and gaping blouse to raise both hands toward him in coaxing coquetry.

"Please let him go," she wheedled softly. "Please let him go--for me!"

Young Denny backed away a step from her upturned face and outstretched hands, grinning a little as he slowly shook his head. It bewildered him--puzzled him--this swift change to supplication.

"Can't," he refused laconically. "I--I got to have him to eat."

His voice was calmly final and for no other reason than to learn what she would do next, because already the boy knew that the soft creature throbbing against him was to have its freedom again. No one, at least since he could remember, had ever before smiled and asked Denny Bolton to "do it--for me." For one flashing instant he saw her eyes flare at his candid refusal; then they cleared again with that same miraculous swiftness. Once more the corners of her lips lifted pleadingly, arched with guileful, provocative sweetness.

"Please," she begged, even more softly, "please--because I ask you to!"

Once more Young Denny shook his head.

Standing there before his dark house, still smiling vaguely at the light across the valley his fingers tentatively caressed his lean cheeks where her fingernails had bit deep through the skin that day. He never remembered how it had happened--it all came too swiftly for recollection--but even before he had finished shaking his head the tempting smile had been wiped from her lips, her little face working convulsively with rage, before she sprang at him--sprang with lithe, lightning, tigerlike ferocity that sent him staggering back before her.

Her hands found his face and tore deep through the skin before he could lift his wide-flung arms to protect it. And then, almost before he realized what had happened, she stood back, groping blindly away from him until her hands found a birch sapling. She clung to it with a desperately tight clasp as if to hold herself erect. A little spot of red flecked her own lip where her locked teeth had cut through. She swayed a moment, dizzily, the too-tight little waist gaping at her throat as she struggled for breath.

"There--there!" she gasped at him voicelessly. "There," she whispered through her white lips, "now will you let him go?"

And Denny Bolton had stood that afternoon in wondering silence, gazing back into her twitching, distorted face without a word while the blood oozed from the deep cuts in his cheeks and dripped noisily upon the dry leaves. Once he turned and followed with his eyes the mad flight of the rabbit through the underbrush; and then turned slowly back to her.

"Why, he's gone already," he stated with a gentle gravity that was almost ponderous. And with a deliberation which he meant more to comfort than to conciliate: "I--I aimed to let him go, myself, right from the first time you asked me--after a while!"

She cried over him that afternoon--cried not as he had known other girls to cry, but with long noiseless gasps that shook her thin shoulders terribly. Her eyes swam with great drops that hung from her lashes and went rolling silently down her small face while she washed out the cuts with one sleeve ruthlessly wrenched from her blouse and soaked in the brook nearby.

But in almost the same breath while she crooned pityingly over him she bade him--commanded him with a swift, fierce passionate vehemence--to tell her that it did not hurt--did not hurt very much! And before she would let him go that day she made him promise to come back--she promised herself to set a light in the front window of the shabby little cottage to tell him that she had found the plaster--that there was enough left to close the cuts.

There had never been any spoken agreement between them, but since that night, three years ago, Denny Bolton had learned to watch each week end, just at dusk, for the signal to appear. From the first their very loneliness had drawn them together--a childish, starved desire for companionship; and as time passed they only clung the closer, each to the other, as jealously fearful as a marooned man and woman might have been of any harm which might come to the one and leave the other utterly, desolately alone.

Winter and summer Denny Bolton went every Saturday night, close to nightfall, and waited for her to come, except that now, in the last few weeks since the first rumor of the Judge's big barn-raising and masquerade had gone forth, no matter how early he started or how much haste he made, he always found Dryad Anderson there before him. For weeks no other topic had passed the girl's lips, and with each recurring visit to the small clearing hidden back in the thicket near the brook the boy's wonder grew.

Almost from the first day she had decided upon the costume which she would wear. Night after night she sat and made plans in a tumultuous, bubbling flood of anticipation which he could scarcely follow, for it was only after long argument that he had sheepishly surrendered and agreed to "dress up" at all; she sat with a picture torn from an old magazine across her knees--a color-plate of a dancing girl which she meant to copy for herself--poring over it with shining eyes, her breath coming and going softly between childishly curved lips as she devoured every detail of its construction.

It was a thing of brilliantly contrasting colors--the picture which she planned to copy--a

sleeveless waist of dullest crimson and a much bespangled skirt of clinging, shimmering black. And that skirt hung clear to the ankles, swinging just high enough to disclose the gleam of silken stockings and satiny, pointed slippers, with heels of absurdly small girth.

The boy only half understood the feverish hunger which glowed in Dryad Anderson's face, piquantly, wistfully earnest in the dull yellow lantern light as she leaned forward, ticking off each item and its probable cost upon her fingers, and waited doubtfully for him to mock at the expense; and yet, at that, he understood far better than any one else could ever have hoped to comprehend, for Young Denny knew too what it was to wait--to wait for something that was dreadfully slow in the coming.

One other thing marked Judge Maynard's proffered hospitality as totally different from all the other half-similar affairs which Boltonwood had ever known. There were to be invitations--written, mailed invitations--instead of the usual placards tacked up in the village post-office as they always were whenever any public entertainment was imminent, or the haphazard invitations which were passed along by word of mouth and which somehow they always forgot to pass on to the boy who lived alone in the dark house on the hill. There were to be formal, mailed invitations, and Young Denny found it hard waiting that night for Old Jerry, who had never been so late before.

The cool red of the horizon behind him faded to a dusky gray and the dusk thickened from twilight to dark while he stood there waiting, leaning heavily upon the pike-pole, shifting more and more uneasily from one tired foot to the other. He had turned at last to go and set a light in answer to the one which was calling insistently to him from the blackness before the Judge's place when the shrill squeal of complaining axles drifted up to him from far down the long hill road.

Old Jerry came with exasperating slowness that night. The plodding ascent of the fat white mare and creaking buggy was nerve-rackingly deliberate. Young Denny shifted the shaft of his pike-pole to the other hand to wipe his damp palm against the checkered coat as the rig loomed up ahead of him in the darkness. Old Jerry was complaining to himself bitterly in a whining, cracked falsetto.

"'Tain't reg'lar," the boy heard him whimpering. "'Tain't accordin' to law--not the way I figger it, it ain't. The Gov'mint don't expect nobody to work 'til this hour!"

The buggy came to a standstill, with the little, weazened old man leaning far out from the torn leather seat, shading his eyes with one unsteady hand while he peered into the shadows searching for the big-shouldered figure that stepped hesitatingly nearer the wheel. There was something birdlike in the brilliancy of the beady little eyes; something of sparrowlike pertness in the tilt of the old man's head, perked far over to one side.

"Still a-waitin', be ye?" he exclaimed peevishly. "Well, it's lucky you ain't been kept a-standin' there a whole sight longer--half the night, mebby! You would a-been, only for my havin' an orig'nal system for peddlin' them letters that's all my own. It's system does it--but it ain't right, just the same. The Gov'mint don't expect nobody to work more'n eight hours to a stretch, and look at me, two hours late and I ain't home yet! I'd complain, too--I'd complain to the authorities at Washington, only--only"--his thin, high-pitched voice dropped suddenly to a furtively conciliating whisper--"only a-course I don't want to make no trouble for the Judge."

Denny Bolton cleared his throat and shuffled his feet uneasily, but this hint for haste was utterly wasted upon Old Jerry. The latter failed completely to note the strained intensity of the face that was upturned before him and went on grumbling as he leaned over to fumble in the box beneath the seat. And the tirade continued in an unbroken, half-muffled stream until he straightened laboriously again, the boy's usual weekly packet of papers and catalogues in one hand.

"No," he emphasized deliberately, "I wouldn't really go so fur's that--I ain't figgerin' on makin' no complaint--not this time. I got too much regard for the Judge to try to get him into any hot water. But there wa'n't no real use nor reason in his postin' all them invitations to once. He could a-begun back a stretch and kinda run 'em in easy, a little to a time, instead of lumpin' 'em this way, and that would a-give me---"

Young Denny reached out and took the bundle from the extended, unsteady old hand. His own hands were shaking a little as he broke the string and fluttered swiftly through the half dozen papers and pamphlets. Old Jerry never skipped a breath at the interruption.

"But that finishes up the day--that's about the last of it." The thin voice became heavily tinged with pride. "There ain't nobody in the township but what's got his card to that barn-raising by now--delivered right on the nail! That's my system." And then, judiciously: "I guess it's a-goin' to be a real fancy affair, too, at that. Must be it'll cost him more'n a little mite before he gits done feedin' 'em. They was a powerful lot of them invitations."

Slowly Denny Bolton's head lifted. He stood and stared into Old Jerry's peaked, wrinkled face as if he had only half heard the rambling complaint, a strange, bewildered light growing in his eyes. Then his gaze dropped once more, and a second time, far more slowly, his fingers went through the packet of advertisements. Old Jerry was leaning over to unwind the reins from the whipstock when the boy's hand reached out and stopped him.

"Ain't there--wasn't there anything more for me--tonight?" Young Denny inquired gravely.

Jerry paused impatiently. No other question ever caused him quite such keen irritation, for he felt that it was a slur at his reliability.

"More!" he petulantly echoed the question. "More? Why, you got your paper, ain't you? Was you expectin' sunthin' else? Wasn't looking for a letter, now was you?"

Denny backed slowly away from the wheel. Dumbly he stood and licked his lips. He cleared his throat again and swallowed hard before he answered.

"No," he faltered at last, with the same level gravity. "No, I wasn't exactly expectin' a letter. But I kind of thought--I--I was just hopin'---"

His grave voice trailed heavily off into silence. Eyes still numbly bewildered he turned, leaning forward a little, to gaze out across the valley at the great square silhouette of Judge Maynard's house on the opposite ridge, while Old Jerry wheeled the protesting buggy and started deliberately down the hill. Just once more the latter paused; he drew the fat gray mare to a standstill and leaned a last time far out from the seat.

"A-course I didn't mean nothin' when I spoke about complainin' against the Judge," he called back. "You know that, don't you, Denny? You know I was just jokin', don't you?" A vaguely worried, appealing strain crept into the cracked accents. "An' a-course you wouldn't say nothin' about my speakin' like that. I think a whole heap too much of the Judge to even try to git him into trouble--and--and then the Judge--he might--you understand that I was only jokin', don't you, Denny?"

Young Denny nodded his head silently in reply. Long after the shrill falsetto grumbling had ceased to drift back up the hill to him he stood there motionless. After a while the fingers that still clutched the bundle of circulars opened loosely and when he did finally wheel to cross slowly to the kitchen door the papers and catalogues lay unheeded, scattered on the ground where they had fallen.

He stopped once at the threshold to prop his pike-pole against the house corner before he passed aimlessly inside, leaving the door wide open behind him. And he stood a long time in the middle of the dark room, staring dully at the cold, fireless stove. Never before had he given it more than a passing thought--he had accepted it silently as he accepted all other conditions over which he had no control--but now as he stood and stared, it came over him, bit by bit, that he was tired--so utterly weary that the task of cooking his own supper that night had suddenly become a task greater than he could even attempt. The very thought of the half-cooked food sickened him--nauseated him. Motionless there in the dark he dragged one big hand across his dry lips and slowly shook his head.

"They didn't want me," he muttered hoarsely. "It wasn't because they forgot me before; they didn't want me--not even for the strength of my shoulders."

With heavy, shuffling steps he crossed and dropped loosely into a chair beside the bare board table that stood in front of one dingy window. A long time he sat silent, his lean chin propped in his rough palms, eyes burning straight ahead of him into vacancy. Then, little by little, his great shoulders in the vividly checkered coat began to sag--they slumped downward-until his head was bowed and his face lay hidden in the long arms crooked limply asprawl across the table-top.

Once more he spoke aloud, hours later.

"They didn't want me," he repeated dully. "Not even for the work I could do!"

CHAPTER III

It was very quiet in the front room of the little cottage that squatted in the black shadow below Judge Maynard's huge house on the hill. No sound broke the heavy silence save the staccato clip-clip of the long shears in the fingers of the girl who was leaning almost breathlessly over the work spread out on the table beneath the feeble glow of the single oil-lamp, unless the faint, monotonous murmur which came in an endless sing-song from the lips of the stooped, white-haired old figure in the small back room beyond the door could be named anything so definite.

John Anderson's lips always moved when he worked. His fingers, strong and clean-jointed and almost womanishly smooth--the only part of the man not pitifully seared with age--flew with a bewildering nimbleness one moment, only to dwell the next with a lingering caress upon the shaping features before him; and for each caress of his finger tips there was an accompanying, vacantly gentle smile or an uncertainly emphatic nod of the silvered head which gave the one-sided conversation a touch of uncanny reality.

And yet, at regularly recurring intervals, even his busy fingers faltered, while he sat head bent far over to one side as though he were listening for something, waiting for some reply. At every such pause the vacant smile left his face and failed to return immediately. The monotonously inflectionless conversation was still, too, for the time, and he merely sat and stared perplexedly about him, around the small workshop, bare except for the single high-stool that held him and the littered bench on which he leaned.

There was a foot-wide shelf against each wall of that room, fastened waist high from the floor, and upon it stood countless small white statues, all slim and frail of limb, all upturned and

smiling of lip. They were miraculously alike, these delicate white figures, each with a throat-tightening heartache in its wistful face--so alike in form and expression that they might have been cast in a single mold. Wherever his eyes might fall, whenever he turned in one of those endlessly repeated fits of faltering uncertainty, that tiny face was always before him, uplifted of lip, smiling back into John Anderson's vacant eyes until his own lips began to curve again and he turned once more, nodding his head and murmuring contentedly, to the clay upon his bench.

Out in the larger front room, as she hovered over the work spread out before her, the girl, too, was talking aloud to herself, not in the toneless, rambling voice that came from John Anderson's mumbling lips, but in hushed, rapt, broken sentences which were softly tinged with incredulous wonder.

The yellow glow of the single lamp, pushed far across the table from her, where the most of its radiance was swallowed up by the gloom of the uncurtained window, flickered unsteadily across her shining, tumbled hair, coloring the faintly blue, thinly penciled lines beneath her tip-tilted eyes with a hint of weariness totally at variance with the firm little sloping shoulders and full lips, pursed in a childish pout over a mouthful of pins.

The hours had passed swiftly that day for Dryad Anderson; and the last one of all--the one since she had lighted the single small lamp in the room and set it in the window, so far across the table from her that she had to strain more and more closely over her swift flashing scissors in the thickening dusk--had flown on winged feet, even faster than she knew.

Twice, early in the evening she had laid the long shears aside and risen from the matter that engrossed her almost to the exclusion of every other thought, to peer intently out of the window across the valley at the bleak old farmhouse on the crest of the opposite ridge; and each time as she settled herself once more in the chair, hunched boyishly over the table edge, she only nodded her bright head in utter, undisturbed unconsciousness of the passage of time.

"He's late getting home tonight," she told herself aloud, after she had searched the outer darkness in vain for any answering signal, but there was not even the faintest trace of troubled worry in her words. She merely smiled with mock severity.

"He's later than he ought to be--even if it is his last week back in the hills. Next week I'll have to make him wait---"

Her vaguely murmured threat drifted away into nothingness, left unfinished as she rose and stood, hands lightly bracketed upon her hips, scrutinizing the completed work.

"There," she went on softly, sighing in deep relief, "there--that's done--if--if it will only fit."

She removed the cluster of pins from her mouth and unfastened the long strip of newspaper from the section of the old black skirt which she had ripped apart that afternoon for a pattern. It was far too short--that old skirt--to duplicate the long free lines of the brilliant red and black costume of the dancer beside her elbow on the table, but Dryad Anderson's shears, coasting rapidly around the edge of the worn cloth, had left a wide margin of safety at the hem.

The critical frown upon her forehead smoothed little by little while she lifted cautiously that long strip of paper pattern and turned with it dangling from one hip to walk up and down before the tilted mirror at the far end of the room, viewing her reflected image from every possible angle. Even the thoughtful pucker at the corners of her eyes disappeared and she nodded her small head with its loosened mass of hair in judicious satisfaction.

"I do believe that's it," the hushed voice mused on, "or, if it isn't, it is as near as I can ever hope to get it. If--if only it doesn't sag at the heels--and if it does I'll have to---"

Again with a last approving glance flung over one shoulder the murmured comment, whatever it might have been, was finished wordlessly. Her fingers, in spite of their very smallness as strong and straight and clean-jointed as those of the old man bent double over his bench in the back room, lingered absently over the folding of that last paper pattern, and when she finally added it to the top of the stack already folded and piled beside the lamp her eyes had become velvety blank with preoccupation.

From early afternoon, ever since the Judge himself had whirled up to the sagging gate at the end of their rotting boardwalk and clambered out of his yellow-wheeled buckboard to knock with measured solemnity at the front door, Dryad had been rushing madly from task to task and pausing always in just such fashion in the midst of each to stand dreamily immobile, everything else forgotten for the moment in an effort to visualize it--to understand that it was real, after all, and not just a cobweb fabric of her own fancy, like the dreams she was always weaving to make the long week days pass more quickly.

It was more than a few years since the last time Judge Maynard had driven up to the gate of that old, drab cottage; and now standing there with one slim outstretched hand lovingly patting the bundle of paper patterns which represented her afternoon's work, she smiled with gentle derision for the mental picture she had carried all those years of the wealthiest man in Boltonwood.

The paternal, almost bewildering familiar cordiality with which he had greeted her and the pompously jovial urgency of the invitation which he had come to deliver in person, urging acceptance upon her because she "saw entirely too little of the young folks of the town," was hardly in accord with the childish recollection she had carried with her, year after year, of a purple faced, cursing figure who leaned over the rickety old fence that bounded the garden, shook his fists in John Anderson's mildly puzzled face and roared threats until he had to cease

from very breathlessness.

A far different Judge had bowed low before her that afternoon when she answered the measured summons at the door--a sleek, twinkling, unctuously solicitous, far more portly Judge Maynard--and Dryad Anderson, who could not know that he had finally come to agree with the rest of the village that he might "catch more flies with molasses than with vinegar," and was ordering his campaign accordingly, flushed in painful memory for the half-clad, half-starved little creature that had clung to John Anderson's rusty coat-tails that other day and glared black, bitter hate back at the man beyond the fence.

Leaning against the table there in the half light of the room, a slow smile curled back the corners of her lips, still childishly quizzical in contrast with that slim roundness of body which was losing its boyish liveness in a new slender fullness that throbbed on the threshold of womanhood. She smiled deprecatingly as she lifted one hand to search in the breast of the blouse that was always just enough outgrown to fail of closing across her throat, and drew out the thing which the Judge had delivered with every possible flourish, barely a few hours back.

Already the envelope was creased and worn with much handling, but the square card within, thickly, creamily white, was still unspotted. As if it were a perishably precious thing her fingers drew it with infinite care from its covering, and she leaned far across the table to prop it up before her where the light fell brightest. Pointed chin cupped in her palms, she lay devouring with hungry eyes the words upon its polished surface.

"--- requests the pleasure of," she picked up the lines which she already knew by rote; and then, "Miss Dryad Anderson's company," in the heavy sprawling scrawl which she knew must have come from the Judge's own pen.

Suddenly her two hands flashed out and swept the card up to crush it against her with passionate impetuosity.

"Oh, you wonderful thing!" she crooned over it, a low laugh that was half a sob bubbling in her throat. "You wonderful thing! And to think that I've had you all the afternoon--almost all day--and he's had to wait all this time for his to come. He's had to wait for Jerry to bring his with the mail--and Jerry is so dreadfully slow at times."

Lingeringly, as though she hated to hide it, her fingers thrust the card back inside its envelope. And she was tucking it away in its warm hiding place within the scant fullness of the white blouse when the clock on the wall behind her began to beat out the hour with a noisy whir of loosened cogs.

"Hours and hours," she murmured, counting the strokes subconsciously.

And then as the growing total of those gong strokes beat in upon her brain, all the dreamy preoccupation faded from her face. The little compassionate smile which had accompanied the last words disappeared before the swift, taut change that straightened her lips. She whirled, peering from startled eyes up at the dim old dial, refusing to believe her own count; and as she stood, body tensely poised, gazing incredulously at the hands, she realized for the first time how fast the hours had flown while she bent, forgetful of all else, over her paper patterns.

The table rocked dangerously as she crowded her body between it and the windowsill and, back to the light, stood staring with her face cupped in her hands out into the blackness. Far across the valley the dilapidated farmhouse on the ridge showed only a blurred blot against the skyline.

Minutes the girl stood and watched. The minutes lengthened interminably while the light for which she waited failed to show through the dark, until a dead white, living fear began to creep across her face--a fear that wiped the last trace of childishness from her tightened features.

"He's late," she whispered hoarsely. "It's the last week, and it's just kept him later than usual!"

But there was no assurance in the words that faltered from her lips. They were lifelessly dull, as though she were trying to convince herself of a thing she already knew she could not believe.

As long as she could she stood there at the window, doggedly fighting the rising terror that was bleaching her face; fighting the dread which was never quite asleep within her brain--the dread of that old stone demijohn standing in the corner of the kitchen, which for all her broken pleading Young Denny Bolton had refused with a strange, unexplained stubbornness to remove--until that rising terror drove her away from the pane.

One wide-flung arm swept the stack of neatly folded patterns in a rustling storm to the floor as she pushed her way out from the narrow space between table edge and sill. The girl did not heed them or the lamp, that rocked drunkenly with the tottering table. She had forgotten everything--the thick white square of cardboard, even the stooped old man in the small back room--in the face of the overwhelming fear that reason could not fight down. Only the peculiarly absolute silence that came with the sudden cessation of his droning monotone checked the panic haste of her first rush. With one hand clutching the knob of the outer door she turned back.

John Anderson was sitting twisted about on his high stool, gazing after her in infantile, perplexed reproach, his long fingers clasped loosely about the almost finished figure over which he had been toiling. As the girl turned back toward him his eyes wandered down to it and he began to shake his head slowly, vacantly, hopelessly. A low moaning whimper stirred her lips; then the hand tight-clenched over the knob slackened. She ran swiftly across to him.

"What is it, dear?" Her voice broke, husky with fright and pity. "Tell me--what is the matter?"

Won't it come right tonight?"

With shaking hands she leaned over him, smoothing the shining hair. At the touch of her fingers he looked up, staring with pleading uncertainty into her quivering face before he shook his head.

"It--it don't smile," he complained querulously. His fingers groped lightly over the small face of clay. "I--I can't make it smile--like the rest."

Sudden terror contorted the thin features, a sheer ecstasy of terror as white-lipped as that which marred the face of the girl who bent above him.

"Maybe I've forgotten how she smiled!" he whispered fearfully. "Maybe I'll never be able to---"

Dryad's eyes flitted desperately around the room, along the shelves laden with those countless figures--all white and finely slender, all upturned of face. Again a little impotent gasp choked her; then, eyes filling hotly at that poignantly wistful smile which edged the lips of each, she stooped and patted reassuringly the trembling hands before she stepped a pace away from him.

"You've not forgotten, dear. Why, you mustn't be frightened like that! We know, you and I, don't we, that you never could forget? You're just tired. Now, that's better--that's brave! And now--look! Isn't this the way--isn't this the way it ought to be?"

Face uptilted, bloodless lips falling apart in the faintest of pallid smiles, she swayed forward, both arms outstretched toward him. And as she stood the wide eyes and straight nose and delicately pointed chin of her colorless face took line for line the lines of all those, chalky white, against the wall.

For a moment John Anderson's eyes clung to her--clung vacant with hopeless doubt; then they glowed again with dawning recollection. He, too, was smiling once more as his fingers fluttered in nervous haste above the lips of the clay face on the bench before him, and almost before the girl had stepped back beside him he had forgotten that she was there.

"Marie!" she heard him murmur. "Marie, why, you mustn't be afraid! We'll never forget--you and I--we never could forget!"

Even while she waited another instant those plastic earthen lips began to curl--they began to curve with hungry longing like all the rest. He was talking steadily now, mumbling broken fragments of sentences which it was hard to understand. Her hand hovered a moment longer over his bowed head; once at the door she paused and looked back at him.

"It's only for a little while," she promised unsteadily. "I--I have to go--but it's only for a little while. I'll be back soon--so soon! And you'll be safe until I come!"

He gave no sign that he had heard, not even so much as a lifted glance. But as she drew the door shut behind her she heard him pick up the words, caressingly, after her.

"You'll be safe, Marie," he whispered. "It'll be only for a little while, now. You'll be safe till I come." An ineffably peaceful smile flickered across his face. "We couldn't forget--why, of course, we couldn't forget--you and I!"

With the short black skirt lifted even higher above her ankles that she might make still more speed, Dryad turned into the dark path that twisted crookedly through the brush to the open clearing beside the brook and from there on to the black house on the hill.

She ran swiftly, madly, through the darkness, with the wild, panic-stricken, headlong abandon of a hunted thing, finding the narrow trail ahead of her by instinct alone. Only once she overran it, but that once a low hanging branch, face high, caught her full across the forehead and sent her crashing back in the underbrush. Just once she put one narrow foot in its loosely flapping shoe into the deep crevice between two rocks and gasped aloud with the pain of the fall that racked her knees. When she groped out and steadied herself erect she was talking--stammering half incoherent words that came bursting jerkily from her lips as she tore on.

"Help me ... in time ... God," she panted, "Just this once ... get to him ... in time. Lord, forgive ... own vanity. Oh, God, please in time!"

Small feet drumming the harder ground, she flashed up the last rise and across the yard to the door of that unlighted kitchen. Her hands felt for the latch and failed to find it; then she realized that it was already open--the door--but her knees, all the strength suddenly drained from them at the black quiet in that room, refused to carry her over the threshold. She rocked forward, reaching out with one hand for the frame to steady herself, and in that same instant the man who lay a huddled motionless heap across the table top, moved a little and began to speak aloud.

"They didn't want me," he muttered, and the words came with muffled thickness. "Not even for the strength of my shoulders."

She took one faltering step forward--the girl who stood there swaying in the doorway--and stopped again. And the man lifted his head and laughed softly, a short, ugly rasping laugh.

"Not even for the work I could do," he finished.

And then she understood. She tried to call out to him, and the words caught in her throat and choked her. She tried again and this time her voice rang clear through the room.

"Denny," she cried, "Denny, I've come to you! Strike a light! I'm here, Denny, and--oh, I'm afraid--afraid of the dark!"

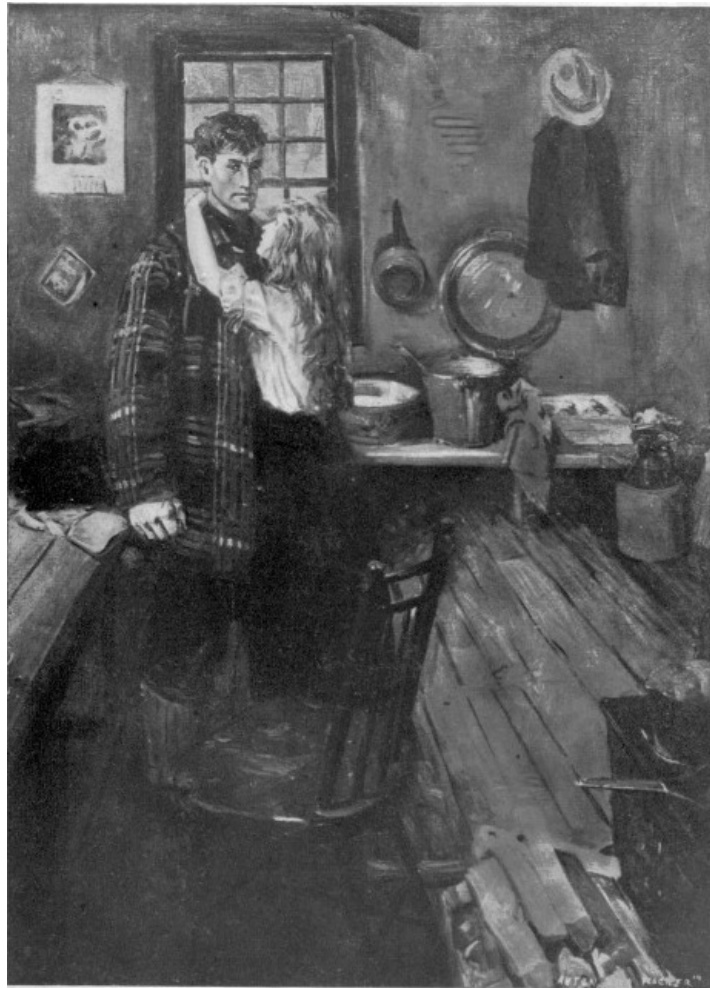
Before he could rise, almost before his big-shouldered body whirled in the chair toward her, her swift rush carried her across to him. She knelt at his knees, her thin arms clutching him with desperate strength. Denny Bolton felt her body shudder violently as he leaned over, dumb with bewilderment, and put his hands on her bowed head.

"Thank God," he heard her whispering, "thank God--thank God!"

But far more swiftly than his half numbed brain could follow she was on her feet the next instant, tense and straight and lancelike in the gloom.

"Damn 'em," she hissed. "Damn 'em--damn 'em--damn 'em!"

His fingers felt for and found a match and struck it. Her face was working convulsively, twisted with hate, both small fists lifted toward the huge house that crowned the opposite hill. It made him remember that first day when he had looked up, with the rabbit struggling in his arms, and found her standing there in the thicket before him, only now the fury that blazed in her eyes was not for him. There was a rough red welt across her forehead only half hidden by the tumbled hair that cascaded to her waist, torn loose from its scant fastenings by the whipping brush. And as he stood with the flame of the flickering match scorching his fingers, Denny Bolton remembered all the rest--he remembered the light that still burned unanswered in the window across the valley. He bowed his head.



"HOLD ME TIGHT--OH! HOLD ME TIGHTER! FOR THEY FORGOT ME, TOO, DENNY; THEY FORGOT ME TOO!"

"I--I forgot," he faltered at last. "I did not know it was so late. I must have been--pretty tired."

Slowly the girl's clenched hands came away from her throat while she stared up into his face, brown and lean and very hard and bitter. The ashen terror upon her own cheeks disappeared with a greater, growing comprehension of all that lay behind that dully colorless statement. For just a moment her fingers hovered over the opening at the neck of her too small blouse and felt the thick white card that lay hidden within, before she lifted both arms to him in impulsive compassion, trying to smile in spite of the wearily childish droop at the corners of her lips.

"I know, Denny," she quavered. "I--I understand." Her arms slipped up around his neck. "Hold me tight--oh, hold me tighter! For they forgot me, too, Denny; they forgot me, too!"

As his arms closed about her slim body she buried her bright head against the vividly checkered coat and sobbed silently--great noiseless gasps that shook her small shoulders terribly. Once, after a long time, when she held his face away to peer up at him through brimming eyes, she saw that all the numb bitterness was gone from it--that he had forgotten all else save her own hurt.

"Why, you mustn't feel so badly for me," she told him then, warmly tremulous of mouth. "I--I don't mind now, very much. Only"--her voice broke unsteadily--"only I did want to go just once where all the others go; I wanted them to see me just once in a skirt that's long enough for me--and--and to wear stockings without any patches, and silk, Denny, silk--next to my skin!"

CHAPTER IV

At her first swift coming when she had cried out to him there in the dark and run across to kneel at his knees, a dull, shamed flush had stained his lean cheeks with the realization that, in his own great bitterness he had failed even to wonder whether she had been forgotten, too.

Now as his big hand hovered over the tumbled brightness of her hair, loose upon his sleeve, that hot shame in turn disappeared. After the quivering gasps were all but stilled, he twice opened his lips as if to speak, and each time closed them again without a word. He was smiling a faint, gravely gentle smile that barely lifted the corners of his lips when she turned in his arms and lifted her face once more to him.

"We don't mind very much," she repeated in a half whisper. "Do we--either of us--now?"

Slowly he shook his head. With effortless ease he stooped and swung her up on one arm, seating her upon the bare table before the window. Another match flared between his fingers and the whole room sprang into brightness as he touched the point of flame to the wick of the lamp bracketed to the wall beside him.

She sat, leaning forward a little, both elbows resting upon her slim knees, both feet swinging pendulum-like high above the floor, watching with a small frown of curiosity growing upon her forehead, while he stooped without a word of explanation and dragged a bulky package from the table and placed it beside her. Then she sighed aloud, an audible sigh of sheer surprise after he had broken the string and drawn aside the paper wrapper.

Just as they had seemed in the picture they lay there under her amazed eyes--the pointed, satiny black slippers of the dancing girl, with their absurdly slender heels and brilliant buckles, and filmy stockings to match. And underneath lay two folded squares of shimmering stuff, dull black and burnished scarlet, scarce thicker than the silk of the stockings themselves.

The faint, vaguely self-conscious smile went from Denny Bolton's lips while he stood and watched her bend and touch each article, one by one--the barest ghost of contact. Damp eyes glowing, lips curled half open, she lifted her head at last and gazed at him, as he stood with hands balanced on his hips before her.

A moment she sat immobile, her breath coming and going in soft, fluttering gasps, and looked into his sober, questioning face; then she turned again and picked up one web-like stocking and held it against her cheek, as hotly tinted now beneath its smooth whiteness as the shining scarlet cloth beside her.

He heard her murmur to herself little, broken, incoherent phrases that he could not catch.

"Denny," he heard her whisper, "Denny--Denny!"

And then, with the tiny slippers huddled in her lap, her hands flashed out and caught his face and drew it down against the too-small white blouse, open at the throat.

"Man--man," she said, and he felt her breast rise and fall, rise and fall, against his cheek. "Man, you didn't understand! It--it wasn't the clothes, Denny, but--but I'm all the gladder, I think, because you're so much of a man that you couldn't, not even if I tried a hundred years to explain."

He drew the chair at the side of the table around in front of her and dropped into it. With a care akin to reverence he lifted one slipper and held it outstretched at arm's length upon his broad palm.

"I--I hadn't exactly forgotten, tonight," he told her. "I'd watched for the light, and I meant to bring them--when I came." His steady eyes dropped to her slim, swinging feet. "They're the smallest they had in any shop at the county-seat," he went on, and the slow smile came creeping back across his face. "I crossed over through the timber late last night, after we had broken camp, and I--I had to guess the size. Shall we--try them on?"

She reached out and snatched the small thing of satin and leather away from him with mock jealous impetuosity, a little reckless gurgle of utter delight breaking from her lips.

"Over these," she demanded, lifting one foot and pointing at the thickly patched old stocking above the dingy, string-tied shoe. "You--you are trying to shame me, Denny--you want to make me confess they are too small!"

Then, almost in the same breath, all the facetious accusation left her face. Even the warm glow of wonder which had lighted her wet eyes gave way to a new seriousness.

"No one has ever told me," she stated slowly, "but I know it is so, just the same. Somehow,

because it was to be the first party I had ever attended--or--or had a chance to attend, I thought it must be all right, just once, for you to buy me these. There was no one else to buy them, Denny, and maybe I wanted to go so very much I made myself believe that it was all right. But there isn't any party now--for us. And--and men don't buy clothes for women, Denny--not until they're married!"

Her face was tensely earnest while she waited for the big man before her to answer. And Young Denny turned his head, staring silently out of the opposite window down toward the village, dark now, in the valley below. He cleared his throat uncertainly.

"Do they?" She was leaning forward until her hair brushed his own. "Do they, Denny?" A rising inflection left the words hanging in midair.

"I don't know just what the difference is," he began finally, his voice very deliberate. "I've often tried to figure it out, and never been quite able to get it straight"--he nodded his head again toward the sleeping village--"but we--we've never been like the rest, anyhow. And--and anyway," he reached out one hand and laid it upon her knees, "we're to be married, too--when--when--"

With swift, caressing haste she lifted the slippers that lay cradled in her lap and set them back inside the open package. Lightly she swung herself down and stood before him, both hands balanced upon his shoulders. For just the fraction of a moment her eyes lifted over his head, flickering toward the stone demijohn that stood in the far, shadowy corner near the door. Her voice was trembling a little when she went on.

"Then let me come soon, Denny," she begged. "Can't it be soon? Oh, I'm going to keep them!" One hand searched behind her to fall lightly upon the package upon the table. "They're--they're so beautiful that I don't believe I could ever give them back. But do we have to wait any longer--do we? I can take care of him, too."

Vehemently she tilted her head toward the little drab cottage across under the opposite hill.

"He hardly ever notices when I come or go. I--I want to come, Denny. I'm lonesome, and--and--" her eyes darkened and swam with fear as she stared beyond him into the dusky corner near the door, "why can't I come now, before some time--when it might be--too late?"

He reached up and took her hands from his shoulders and held them in front of him, absently contemplating their rounded smoothness. She bent closer, trying to read his eyes, and found them inscrutable. Then his fingers tightened.

"And be like them?" he demanded, and the words leaped out so abruptly that they were almost harsh. "And be like all the rest," he reiterated, jerking his head backward, "old and thin, and bent and worn-out at thirty?" A hard, self-scathing note crept into the words. "Why, it--it took me almost a month--even to buy these!"

He in turn reached out and laid a hand upon the bundle behind her. But she only laughed straight back into his face--a short, unsteady laugh of utter derision.

"Old?" she echoed. "Work! But I--I'd have you, Denny, wouldn't I?" Again she laughed in soft disdain. "Clothes!" she scoffed. And then, more serious even than before: "Denny, is--is that the only reason, now?"

The gleam that always smoldered in Denny Bolton's eyes whenever he remembered the tales they told around the Tavern stove of Old Denny's last bad night began to kindle. His lips were thin and straight and as colorless as his suddenly weary face as he stood and looked back at her. She lifted her hands and put them back upon his shoulders.

"I'm not afraid--any more--to chance it," she told him, her lips trembling in spite of all she could do to hold them steady. "I'm never afraid, when I'm with you. It--it's only when I'm alone that it grows to be more than I can bear, sometimes. I'm not afraid. Does it--does it have to stay there any longer, in the corner, Denny? Aren't we sure enough now--you and I--aren't we?"

He stopped back a pace--his big body huge above her slenderness--stepped away from the very nearness of her. But as she lifted her arms to him he began to shake his head--the old stubborn refusal that had answered her a countless number of times before.

"Aren't we?" she said again, but her voice sounded very small and bodiless and forlorn in the half dark room.

He swung one arm in a stiff gesture that embraced the entire valley.

"They're all sure, too," his voice grated hoarsely, "They're all sure, too--just as sure as we could ever be--and there's a whole town of them!"

She was bending silently over the table, retying the bundle, when he crossed back to her side, a lighted lantern dangling in one hand.

"I don't know why myself," he tried to explain. "I only know I've got to wait. And I don't even know what I'm waiting for--but I know it's got to come!"

She would not lift her head when he slipped his free arm about her shoulders and drew her against him. When he reached out to take the package from her she held it away from him, but her voice, half muffled against his checkered coat, was anything but hard.

"Let *you* carry them?" she murmured. "Why--I wouldn't trust them to any other hands in the world but my own. You can't even see them again--not until I've finished them, and I wear them--for you."

With head still bowed she walked before him to the open door. But there on the threshold she stopped and flashed up at him her whimsically provoking smile.

"Tell me--why don't you tell me, Denny," she commanded imperiously, "that I'm prettier than all the others--even if I haven't the pretty clothes!"

When the ridges to the east were tinged with the red of a rising sun, Denny Bolton was still sitting, head propped in his hands, at the table before the window, totally oblivious to the smoking lamp beside him, or to anything else save the square card which he had found lying there beneath the table after he had taken her back across the valley to John Anderson's once-white cottage. He rose and extinguished the smoking wick as the first light of day began to creep through the room.

"--- requests the pleasure of Miss Dryad Anderson's company," he repeated aloud. And then, as he turned to the open door and the work that was waiting for him, in a voice that even he himself had never before heard pass his lips:

"And she could have gone--she could have, and she didn't--just because---"

His grave voice drifted off into silence. As if it were a perishably precious thing, he slipped the square card within its envelope and buttoned the whole within his coat.

CHAPTER V

As far back as he could remember Denny could not recall a single day when Old Jerry had swung up the long hill road that led to his lonesome farmhouse on the ridge at a pace any faster than a crawling walk. Nor could he recollect, either, a single instance when he had chanced to arrive at that last stop upon the route much before dark.

And yet it was still a good two hours before sundown; only a few minutes before he had driven his heavy steaming team in from the fields and turned toward the ladder that mounted to the hayloft, when the familiar shrill complaint of ungreased axles drifted up to him from the valley.

With a foot upon the first rung Young Denny paused, scowling in mild perplexity. He had crossed the next moment to the open double doors, as the sound floated up to him in a steadily increasing volume, and was standing, his big body huge in its flannel shirt, open at the throat, and high boots laced to the knees, leaning loosely at ease against the door frame, when the dingy rig with its curtains flapping crazily in the wind lurched around the bend in the road and came bouncing wildly up the rutty grade.

The boy straightened and stiffened, his head going forward a little, for the fat old mare was pounding along at a lumbering gallop--a pace which, in all the time he had watched for it, he had never before beheld. Old Jerry was driving with a magnificent abandon, his hands far outstretched over the dash, and more than that, for even from where he stood Denny could hear him shouting at her in his thin, cracked falsetto--shouting for still more speed.

A rare, amused smile tugged at the corners of Young Denny's lips as he crossed the open yard to the crest of the hill. But when the groaning buggy came to a standstill and Old Jerry flung the reins across the mare's wide back, to dive and burrow in frantic haste under the seat for the customary roll of advertisements, without so much as a glance for the boy who strode slowly up to the wheel, that shadow of a smile which had touched his face faded into concerned gravity. He hesitated a moment, as if not quite certain of what he should do.

"Is there--there isn't any one sick, is there?" he asked at last, half diffidently.

The little, white-haired old man in the buggy jerked erect with startling, automatonlike swiftness at that slow question. For a moment he stood absolutely motionless, his back toward the speaker, his head perked far over to one side as though he refused to believe he had heard correctly. Then, little by little, he wheeled until his strangely brilliant, birdlike eyes were staring straight down into Denny's upturned, anxious face. And as he stared Old Jerry's countenance grew blankly incredulous.

"Sick!" he echoed the boy's words scornfully. "Sick!"

His grotesquely thin body seemed to swell as he straightened himself, and his shrill squeak of a voice took on a new note of pompous importance.

"I guess," he stated impressively, "I reckon, Denny, you ain't heard the news, hev you?" He chuckled pityingly, half contemptuously. "I reckon you couldn't've," he concluded with utter finality.

The old, sullenly bewildered light crept back into Young Denny's gray eyes. He shifted his feet uneasily, shaking his head.

"I--I just got back down from the timber, three days ago," he explained, and somehow, entirely unintentionally, as he spoke the slow statement seemed almost an apology for his lack of information. "I guess I haven't heard much of anything lately--up here. Is it--is it something big?"

Old Jerry hesitated. He felt suddenly the hopeless, overwhelming dearth of words against which he labored in the attempt to carry the tidings worthily.

"Big!" He repeated the other's question. "Big! Why, Godfrey 'Lisha, boy, it's the biggest thing that's ever happened to this town. It--it's terrific! We'll be famous--that's what we'll be! In a week or two Boltonwood'll be as famous as--as--why, we'll be as famous as the Chicago Fair!"

He broke off with a gasp for breath and started fluttering madly through the paper which he had wrenched from Young Denny's bundle of closely wrapped mail, until he found the page he sought.

"There 'tis," he cried, and pointed out a lurid headline that ran half across the head of the sporting section. "There 'tis--or leastwise that's a part on it. But they's more a-comin'--more that that won't be a patch to! But you just take a look at that!"

Young Denny took the paper from his hand with a sort of sober patience, and there across the first three column heads, following the direction of Old Jerry's quivering forefinger, he found his first inkling of the astounding news.

"Jed The Red wins by knockout over The Texan in fourteenth round," ran the red-inked caption.

Word by word he read it through, and a second time his grave eyes went through it, even more painstakingly, as though he had not caught at a single reading all its sensational significance. Then he looked up into the seamed old face above him, a gleam and a quiver with excitement.

"Jed The Red," the boy said in his steady voice. "Jed The Red!" And then, levelly: "Who's he?"

Old Jerry stared at him a moment before he shook his head hopelessly and collapsed with a thud upon the torn seat behind him, in an excess of disgust for the boy's stupidity which he made no effort to conceal.

"Jed who?" he mimicked, his voice shrill with sarcasm. "Now what in time Jed would it be, if 'twa'n't Jeddy Conway--our own Jeddy Conway from this very village? What other Jed is there? Ain't you got no memory at all, when you ought to be proud to be able to say that you went to school with him yourself, right in this town?"

Again Young Denny nodded a silent agreement, but Old Jerry's feverish enthusiasm had carried him far beyond mere anger at his audience's apparent lack of appreciation.

"And that ain't all," he rushed on breathlessly, "not by a lot, it ain't! That ain't nothin' to compare with what's to come. Why, right this minute there's a newspaper writer down to the village--he's from New York and he's been stayin' to the Tavern ever since he come in this morning and asked for a room with a bath--and he's goin' to write up the town. Yes sir-e-e--the whole dad-blamed town! Pictures of the main street and the old place where Jeddy went to school, like as not, and--and"--he hesitated for an instant to recall the exact phrasing--"and interviews with the older citizens who recognized his ability and gave him a few pointers in the game when he was only a little tad. That's what's to follow, and it's comin' out in the New York papers, too--Sunday supplement, colors, maybe, and--and--"

Sudden recollection checked him in the middle of the tumbled flow of information. Leaning far out over the dash, he put all his slight weight against the reins and turned the fat white mare back into the road with astonishing celerity.

"Godfrey, but that makes me think," he gasped. "I ain't got no time to fritter away here! I got to git down to the Tavern in a hurry. He'll be waitin' to hear what I kin tell him."

The thin, wrinkled old face twisted into a hopeful, wheedling smile.

"You know that, don't you, Denny? You could tell him that there wa'n't nobody in the hills knew little Jeddy Conway better'n I did, couldn't you? It--it's the last chance I'll ever git, too, more'n likely.

"Twice I missed out--once when they found Mary Hubbard's husband a-hangin' to his hay mow--a-hangin by the very new clothes-line Mary'd just bought the day before and ain't ever been able to use since on account of her feelin' somehow queer about it--and me laid up to home sick all the time! Everybody else got their names mentioned in the article, and Judge Maynard had his picture printed because it was the Judge cut him down. 'Twa'n't fair, didn't seem to me, and me older'n any of 'em.

"And 'twas just the same when they found Mrs. Higgins's Johnny, who had to go and git through the ice into the crick just the one week in all the winter when I was laid up with a bad foot from splittin' kindling. I begun to think I wasn't ever goin' to git my chance--but it's come. It's come at last--and I got to cut along and be there!"

Once more he leaned over the dash and slapped the old mare's back with the slack of the lines.

"Git there, you," he urged, and the complaining buggy went lurching down the rough road at the same unheard of pace at which it had ascended. Halfway down the hill, after he had lifted the mare from her shuffling fox-trot to a lumbering gallop, Old Jerry turned back for a last shouted word.

"He'll be anxious to git all I can tell him, don't you think?" the shrill falsetto drifted back to the boy who had not stirred in his tracks. "No article would be complete without that, would it? And they's to be pictures--Sunday paper--and--maybe--in colors!"

There was an odd light burning in Denny Bolton's eyes as he stood and watched the crazy conveyance disappear from view. The half hungry, half sullen bewilderment seemed to have

given place to a new confusion, as though all the questions which had always been baffling him had become, all in one breath, an astounding enigma which clamored for instant solution. Not until the shrill scream of the ungreased axles had died out altogether and his eyes fell once more to the vivid streak of red that ran across the top of the sheet still clutched in his hand did Young Denny realize that Jerry had even failed to leave him the rest of his mail--the bulky package of circulars.

He was smiling again as he turned and went slowly toward the back door of the house, but somehow, as he went, the stoop of his big shoulders seemed to have even more than the usual vague hint of weariness in their heavy droop. He even forgot that the hungry team which he had stabled just a few minutes before was still unfed, as he dropped upon the top step and spread the paper out across his knees.

"Jed The Red wins by knockout over The Texan in fourteenth round," he read again and again.

And then, with a slow forefinger blazing the way, he went on through the detailed account of the latest big heavyweight match, from the first paragraph, which stated that "Jed Conway, having disposed of The Texan at the Arena last night, by the knockout route in the fourteenth round, seems to loom up as the logical claimant of the white heavyweight title," to the last one of all, which pithily advised the public that "the winner's share of the receipts amounted to twelve thousand dollars."

It was all couched in the choicest vocabulary of the ringside, and more than once Young Denny, whose literature had been confined chiefly to harvesters and sulky plows, had to stop and decipher phrases which he only half understood at first reading. But that last paragraph he did not fail to grasp.

It grew too dark for him to make out the small type any longer and the boy folded the paper and laid it back across his knees. With his chin resting upon one big palm he sat motionless, staring out beyond his sprawling, unpainted sheds toward the dim bulk of his hilly acres, with their jagged outcroppings of rock.

"Twelve thousand dollars!" He muttered the words aloud, under his breath. Eight hundred in three years had seemed to him an almost miraculous amount for him to have torn from that thin soil with nothing but the strength of his two hands. Now, with a bitterness that had been months in accumulating, it beat in upon his brain with sledgelike blows that he had paid too great a price--too great a price in aching shoulders and numbed thighs.

Methodically, mechanically, his mind went back over the days when he had gone to school with Jed Conway--the same Jed The Red whom the whole town was now welcoming as "our own Jeddy," and the longer he pondered the greater the problem became.

It was hard to understand. From his point of view comprehension was impossible, at that instant. For in those earlier days, when anybody had ever mentioned Jed Conway at all, it had been only to describe him as "good for nothing," or something profanely worse. Young Denny remembered him vividly as a big, freckle-faced, bow-legged boy with red bristly hair--the biggest boy in the school--who never played but what he cheated, and always seemed able to lie himself out of his thievery.

But most vividly of all, he recalled that day when Jed Conway had disappeared from the village between sundown and dawn and failed to return. That was the same day they discovered the shortage in the old wooden till at Benson's corner store. And now Jed Conway had come home, or at least his fame had found its way back, and even Old Jerry, whipping madly toward the village to share in his reflected glory, had, for all the perfection of his "system," failed to leave the very bundle of mail which he had come to deliver.

For a long time Young Denny sat and tried to straighten it out in his brain--and failed entirely. It had grown very dark--too dark for him to make out the words upon it--when he reached into the pocket of his gray flannel shirt and drew out the card which he had found lying upon the kitchen floor that previous Saturday night, after he had lighted Dryad Anderson on her way home through the thickets. But he did not need, or even attempt, to read it.

"And it took me a month," he said aloud to the empty air before him, "almost a month to save fifteen dollars."

He rose at the words, stiffly, for the chill air had tightened his muscles, and stood a moment indecisively contemplating the lights which were beginning to glimmer through the dusk in the hollow, before he, too, took the long road to the village down which Old Jerry had rattled a scant hour or two before.

CHAPTER VI

The Tavern "office" was crowded and hazy with acrid blue smoke. Behind the chairs of the favored members of the old circle, who always sat in nightly conclave about the stove, a long row of men lounged against the wall, but the bitter controversies of other nights were still.

Instead, the entire room was leaning forward, hanging breathlessly upon the words of the short fat man who was perched alone upon the worn desk, too engrossed even to notice Young Denny's entrance that night.

The boy stood for a moment, his hand still clasping the knob behind him, while his eyes flickered curiously over the heads of the crowd. Even before he drew the door shut behind him he saw that Judge Maynard's chair was a good foot in advance of all the others, directly in front of the stranger on the desk, and that the rest of the room was furtively taking its cue from him--pounding its knee and laughing immoderately whenever he laughed, or settling back luxuriously whenever the Judge relaxed in his chair.

Subconsciously Young Denny realized that such had always been the recognized order of arrangement, ever since he could remember. The Judge always rode in front in the parades and invariably delivered the Fourth of July oration. Undisputed he held the one vantage point in the room, but over his amply broad back, as near as he dared lean, bent Old Jerry, his thin face working with alternate hope and half fearful uncertainty.

Denny Bolton would have recognized the man on the desk as the "newspaper writer" from New York from his clothes alone, even without the huge notebook that was propped up on his knees for corroborative evidence. From the soft felt hat, pushed carelessly back from his round, good-natured face, to the tips of his gleaming low shoes, the newcomer was a symphony in many-toned browns. And as Young Denny closed the door behind him he went on talking--addressing the entire throng before him with an easy good-fellowship that bordered on intimate *camaraderie*.

"Just the good old-fashioned stuff," he was saying; "the sort of thing that has always been the backbone of the country. That is what I want it to be. For, you see, it's like this: We haven't had a champion who came from our own real old Puritan stock in years and years like Conway has, and it'll stir up a whole lot of enthusiasm--a whole lot! I want to play that part of it up big. Now, you're the only ones who can give me that--you're the only men who knew him when he was a boy--and right there let's make that a starter! What sort of a youngster was he? Quite a handful, I should imagine--now wasn't he?"

The man on the desk crossed one fat knee over the other, tapping a flat-heeled shoe with his pencil. He tilted the brown felt hat a little farther back from his forehead and winked one eye at the Judge in jovial understanding. And Judge Maynard also crossed his knees, tucked his thumbs into his waistcoat pockets, and winked back with equal joviality.

"Well, ye-e-s," he agreed, and the agreement was weightily deliberate. "Ye-e-s, quite a handful was Jeddy."

One pudgy hand was uplifted in sudden, deprecatory haste, as though he would not be misunderstood.

"Nothing really wrong, of course," he hurried to add with oratorical emphasis. "Nothing like that! There never was anything mean or sneaking about Jeddy, s'far as I can recollect. Just mischievous--mischievous and up and coming all the time. But there were folks," Judge Maynard's voice became heavy with righteous accusation--"it's always that way, you understand--and there were folks, even right here in Jeddy's own village, who used to call him a bad egg. But I--I knew better! Nothing but mischievousness and high spirits--that's what I always thought. And I said it, too--many's the time I said--"

The big shouldered boy near the door shifted his position a little. He leaned forward until he could see Judge Maynard's round, red face a little more distinctly. There was an odd expression upon Denny Bolton's features when the fat man in brown lifted his eyes from his notebook, eyes that twinkled with sympathetic comprehension.

"---That it was better a bad egg than an omelette, eh?" he interrupted knowingly.

The Judge pounded his knee and rocked with mirth.

"Well, that's just about it--that's just about as near as words could come to it," he managed to gasp, and the circle behind him rocked, too, and pounded its knee as one man.

The man on the desk went on working industriously with his pencil, even while he was speaking.

"And then I suppose he was pretty good with his hands, too, even when he was a little shaver?" he suggested tentatively. "But then I don't suppose that any one of you ever dreamed that you had a world's champion, right here at home, in the making, did you?"

The whole room leaned nearer. Even the late comer near the door forgot himself entirely and took one step forward, his narrowing gray eyes straining upon the Judge's face.

Judge Maynard again weighed his reply, word for word.

"We-e-ll, no," he admitted. "I don't believe I can say that I downright believed that he'd make a world's champion. Don't believe's I could truthfully state that I thought that. But I guess there isn't anybody in this town that would ever deny but what I did say more than once that he'd make the best of 'em hustle--ye-e-s, sir, the very best of 'em, some day!"

The speaker turned to face the hushed room behind him, as if to challenge contradiction, and Young Denny, waiting for some one to speak, touched his dry lips with the tip of his tongue. But no contradiction came. Instead Old Jerry, leaning across the Judge's broad back, quavered breathlessly.

"That's jest it--that's jest as it was--right to a hair. It was system done it--system right from the

very beginning. And many's the time the Judge says to me--says he---

Old Jerry never finished, for Judge Maynard lifted one hand majestically and the little white-haired old man's eager corroboration died on his lips. He shrank back into abashed silence, his lips working wordlessly.

"As I was saying," the Judge then proceeded ponderously, "I recognized he had what one could call--er--"

"Class?" the man on the desk broke in again with his engaging smile.

"Well, yes," the other continued, "or, as I was about to call it, talent. From the very first that was very apparent, but then, of course, a man in my position in the community could scarcely have been the one to encourage him openly. But he was pretty good, even as a little shaver! Why, there was nothing among the boys that he wouldn't tackle--absolutely nothing! Size, sir, never made any difference to him--not a particle. Jeddy Conway fight---!"

Again he turned to the close-packed circle behind him as if mere words were too weak things to do the question justice. And this time as he turned his eyes met squarely those of the gray-shirted figure that was staring straight back at him in a kind of fascination. For one disconcerted instant Judge Maynard wavered; he caught his breath before that level scrutiny; then with a flourish of utter finality he threw up one pudgy hand.

"There's one of 'em right now," he cried. "There's Young Denny Bolton, who went to school with him, right here in this town. Ask *him* if Jed Conway was pretty handy as a boy! Ask him," he leered around the room, an insinuating accent that was unmistakable underrunning the words. Then a deep-throated chuckle shook him. "But maybe he won't tell--maybe he's still a little mite too sensitive to talk about it yet. Eh, Denny--just a little mite too sensitive?"

Denny Bolton failed to realize it at that moment, but there was a new quality in the Judge's chuckling statement--a certain hearty admission of equality which he had only a second before denied to Old Jerry's eager endeavor to help. The eyes of the fat man in brown lifted inquiringly from the notebook upon his knees and followed the direction of the Judge's outstretched finger. He was still grinning expansively--and then as he saw more clearly through the thick smoke the face which Judge Maynard was indicating, the grin disappeared.

Little by little Young Denny's body straightened until the slight shoulder stoop had entirely vanished, and all the while that his gaze never wavered from the Judge's face his eyes narrowed and his lips grew thinner and thinner. The confused lack of understanding was gone, too, at last, from his eyes. He even smiled once, a fleeting, mirthless smile that tugged at the corners of his wide mouth. For the moment he had forgotten the circle of peering faces. The room was very still.

It was the man on the desk who finally broke that quiet, but when he spoke his voice had lost its easily intimate good-fellowship. He spoke instead in a low-toned directness.

"So you went to school with Jed The Red, did you?" he asked gravely. "Knew him when he was a kid?"

Slowly Denny Bolton's eyes traveled from the Judge's face. His lips opened with equal deliberation.

"I reckon I knew him--pretty well," he admitted.

The eyes of the man in brown were a little narrower, too, as he nodded thoughtfully.

"Er--had a few set-to's with him, yourself, now and then?"

He smiled, but even his smile was gravely direct. Again there was a heavy silence before Young Denny replied.

Then, "Maybe," he said, noncommittally. "Maybe I did."

The throbbing silence in that room went all to bits. Judge Maynard wheeled in his chair toward the man on the desk and fell to pounding his knee again in the excess of his appreciation.

"Maybe," he chortled, "maybe he did! Well--I--reckon!"

And, following his lead, the whole room rocked with laughter in which all but the man in brown joined. He alone, from his place on the desk, saw that there was a white circle about the boy's tight mouth as Young Denny turned and fumbled with the latch before he opened the door and passed quietly out into the night. He alone noticed, but there was the faintest shadow of a queer smile upon his own lips as he turned back to the big notebook open on his knees--a vaguely unpleasant smile that was not in keeping with the rotund jollity of his face.

For a moment Denny Bolton stood with his strained white face turned upward, the roar in the room behind him beating in his ears; then he turned and went blindly up the road that wound toward the bleak house on the hill--he went slowly and unsteadily, stumbling now and again in the deep ruts which it was too dark for him to see.

It was only when he reached the crest of the hill, where Old Jerry had failed to remember to leave him his mail that afternoon, that he recalled his own failure to feed the team with which he had been ploughing all day back in the fields. And in the same blind, automatic fashion he crossed and threw open the door of the barn.

The interior was dark, blacker even than the thick darkness of the night outside. Young Denny, muttering to himself, forgot to strike a light--he even forgot to speak aloud to the nervous

animals in the stalls until his fingers, groping ahead of him, touched something sleek and warm and brought him back to himself. Then, instinctively, although it was too late, he threw up one big shoulder to protect his face before he was lifted and hurled crashing back against the wall by the impact of the heavy hoofs that catapulted out of the blackness. A moment the boy stood, swayed sickeningly, and sank to his knees. Then he began to think clearly again, and with one hand clasped over the great, jagged gash which the glancing iron shoe had laid open across his chin, he reached up and found a cross beam and dragged himself erect.

"Whoa, Tommy, whoa boy!" he soothed the dancing horse. "Steady, it's only me, boy!" he stammered, and supporting himself against the wall he groped again until he found the feedbin and finished his day's work.

It was even darker in the bare kitchen when he lurched dizzily through the door. Once as he was feeling his way along the wall, searching for a light, his feet stumbled on a hard rounded object against the wainscoting, and as it toppled over its contents ran with a slopping gurgle over the floor.

Then his fingers found the light. Holding himself with one hand, he lifted the little lamp with its blackened chimney from its bracket and raised it until it illuminated his features reflected in the small square mirror that hung against the wall. For a long time he stood and looked. The blood that oozed from the ugly bruise upon his chin was splashing in warm drops to the floor; his face was paper white, and strangely taut and twisted with pain, but the boy noticed neither the one nor the other. Straight back into his own eyes he stared--stared steadily for all that his big shoulders were swaying drunkenly. And for the first time that he could ever recollect Young Denny Bolton laughed--laughed with real mirth.

He placed the smoking lamp upon the bare board table and turned. As if they could still hear him--the circle about the Tavern stove in the valley below--he lifted both hard fists and tightened them until the heavy muscles beneath his shirt bunched and quivered like live things.



"DRYAD, IT'S ALL RIGHT--IT'S ALWAYS BEEN ALL RIGHT--WITH US!
THEY LIED--THEY LIED AND THEY KNEW THEY WERE LYING!"

"Size never made any difference to him?" he repeated the Judge's word aloud, with a drawling interrogation. "Size never made any difference to him?"

He laughed again, softly, as if there were a newly discovered humor about it all which must be jealously guarded.

"It never had to make any difference," the drawling voice went on, "it didn't have to--because Jed Conway was always the biggest boy in the school!"

His nostrils were dilating, twitching with the thin, sharp odor of the overturned demijohn which was rising and thickening in the room. His eyes fell and for the first time became conscious of it lying there at his feet. And he stooped and picked it up, lifting it between both hands until it was level with his face--until it was held at arm's length high above his head. Then his whole body snapped forward and the glass from the broken window pane jingled musically on the floor as the jug crashed out into the night.

Young Denny stood and smiled, one side of his chin a gash of crimson against the dead white of his face. Again he lifted his fists.

"He never whipped me," he challenged the lights in the hollow, "he never whipped me--and he never tried but once! I--I--ain't never been--whipped--yet!"

There had been no sound to herald her coming as she darted up to the door. Reeling giddily there in the middle of the room, he had not even heard the one low cry that she choked back as she stopped at the threshold, but he half turned that moment and met the benumbed horror of Dryad Anderson's eyes. Minute after minute he merely stood and stared back at her stupidly, while bit by bit every detail of her transformation began to penetrate his brain, still foggy with the force of the blow that had laid his chin wide open. Her tumbled hair was piled high upon her head; she was almost tall with the added height of the high-heeled satin slippers; more slender than ever in the bespangled clinging black skirt and sleeveless scarlet waist which the old cloak, slipping unheeded from her shoulders, had disclosed.

As his brain began to clear Young Denny forgot the dripping blood that made his white face ghastly, he forgot the stinging odor of the broken demijohn, thick in the room--forgot everything but Judge Maynard's face when the latter had looked up and found him standing at the Tavern door. He knew now what the light was that had lurked in their shifty depths; it was fear--fear that he--Young Denny--might speak up in that moment and disclose all the hypocrisy of his suave lies. He even failed to see the horror in the eyes of the girl before him. Sudden, reckless laughter rang from his lips.

"Dryad," he cried out. "Dryad, it's all right--it's always been all right--with us! They lied--they lied and they knew they were lying!"

She shrank back, as if all the strength had been drained from her knees, as he lurched unsteadily across toward her and reached out his arms. But at the touch of his hands upon her shoulders the power of action came rushing back into her limbs. She shuddered and whirled--and shook off his groping fingers. Her own hands flashed out and held his face away from her.

"Don't you touch me!" she panted huskily. "Oh, you--you--don't you even dare to come near me!"

He tried to explain--tried to follow her swift flight as she leaped back, but his feet became entangled in the cloak on the floor and brought him heavily to his knees. He even tried to follow her after she had been swallowed up in the shadows outside, until he realized dully that his shuffling feet would not go where his whirling head directed them. Once he called out to her, before he staggered back to the kitchen door, and received no answer.

With his hands gripping the door frame he eased himself down to the top step and sat rocking gently to and fro.

"S'all right," he muttered once, his tongue thick with pain. "S'always been all right!"

And he laughed aloud, a laugh of utter confidence in spite of all its unsteadiness.

"Twelve thousand dollars," he said, "and--and he never whipped me! He never could--not the best day he ever lived!"

CHAPTER VII

Denny Bolton never quite knew at what hour of that long black night he reached the final decision; there was no actual beginning or ending or logical sequence to the argument in the back of his brain which led up to it, to crystallize into final resolve.

He merely sat there in the open door of his half-lighted kitchen, swaying a little from side to side at first, giddy with the pain of that crashing blow that had laid open his chin; then balancing, motionless as the thick shadows themselves, in a silence that was unbroken save for the creaking night noises about him and the rhythmic splash of the warm drops that fell more and more slowly from the gaping, unheeded wound, he groped back over the succession of events of that afternoon and night, reconstructing with a sort of dogged patience detail after detail which was waveringly uncertain of outline, until with the clearing of his numbed brain they stood out once again in sane, well-ordered clarity. And as they gradually took shape again each detail grew only more fantastically unbelievable.

It seemed ages since he had stood against the closed door of the Tavern office and seen Judge Maynard turn and falter before his unsuspected presence--days and days since he had stood

there and watched that round moon-like face flush heavily with the first shock of surprise, and realized that the startled light in the shifty eyes of Boltonwood's most prominent citizen was part fear, part appeal, that he, Denny Bolton, whose name in the estimation of that same village stood for all that was at the other extreme, would confirm and support his barefaced lying statement. It was more than merely fantastic; and yet, at that, sitting there in the dark, Young Denny still found something in the recollection that was amusing--far more amusing than he had imagined anything so simple ever could be.

And already, although it was scarcely hours old, the rest of it, too, was tinged with an uncanny unreality that was not far removed from the bodiless fabric of nightmare itself: Those great, catapulting hoofs which had thundered against him from the darkness and beaten him back, a half-senseless heap, against the barn wall; the blind, mad rage, as much a wildly hysterical abandonment of utter joy as anything else, which had surged through him when, with the stinging odor of the overturned jug in his nostrils, he had stooped and straightened and sent the old stone demijohn, that had stood sentinel for years in the corner near the door, splintering its way through the window into the night; and, last of all, the sick horror of the girl's face as she recoiled before him came vividly before his eyes, and his own strange impotence of limb and lip when he had tried to follow and found that his feet would not obey the impulse of his brain, tried to explain only to find that his tongue somehow refused at that moment to voice the words he would have spoken.

That was hardest of all to believe--most difficult to visualize--and he would not give it full credence until he had reached out behind him in the dark and found the bit of a cloak which, slipping from her shoulders, become entangled in his stumbling feet and brought him crashing to his knees. The feel of that rough cloth beneath his hand was more than enough to convince him, and swiftly, unreasonably, the old bitter tide of resentment began to creep back upon him--bitter resentment of her quick judgment of him, which like that of the village, had condemned in the years that were past, even without a hearing.

"She thought," he muttered slowly aloud to himself, "she thought I had--" He left the sentence unfinished to drift off into a long brooding silence; and then, many minutes later: "She didn't even wait to ask--to see--to let me tell her--"

One hand went tentatively to the point of his chin--his old, vaguely preoccupied trick of a gesture--and the wet touch of that open wound helped to bring him back to himself. A moment longer he sat, trying to make out the stained figures that were invisible even though he held them a scant few inches from his eyes, before he rose, stretching his legs in experimental doubt at first, and passed inside. And once more he stood before the square patch of mirror on the wall, with the small black-chimneyed lamp lifted high in one hand, just as he had stood earlier that same night, and scanned his own face.

All trace of resentment left his eyes as he realized the ghastly pallor of those features--all the ragged horror of that oozing welt which he had only half seen in that first moment when he was clinging to consciousness with clenched teeth. It was not nice to look at, and the light that replaced that sudden flare of bitterness was so new that he did not even recognize it himself at first.

It was a clearer, steadier, surer thing than he had ever known them to reflect before; all hint of lost-dog sophistication was gone; even the smile that touched his thin, pain-straightened lips was different somehow. It was just as whimsical as before, and just as half-mirthless--gentle as it always had been whenever he thought at all of her--but there was no wistful hunger left in it, and little of boyishness, and nothing of lurking self-doubt.

"Why, she couldn't have known," he went on then, still murmuring aloud. "She couldn't have been expected to believe anything else. I--I'm not much to look at--just now."

He even forgot that he had tried to follow her--forgot that her cloak had thrown him sprawling in the doorway.

"I ought to have told her," he condemned himself. "I shouldn't have let her go--not like that."

In the fullness of this new certainty of self that was setting his pulses hammering, he even turned toward the sleeping town, thickly blanketed by the shadows in the valley, in a sudden boyish burst of generosity.

"Maybe they didn't mean to lie, either," he mused thoughtfully. "Maybe they haven't really meant to lie--all this time. They could have been mistaken, just as she was tonight--they certainly could have been that."

He found and filled a basin with cold water and washed out the cut until the bleeding had stopped entirely. And then, with the paper which that afternoon's mail had brought--the sheet with the astounding news of Jed The Red, which Old Jerry prophesied would put Boltonwood in black letters on the map of publicity--spread out on the table before him, he sat until daybreak poring over it with eyes that were filmed with preoccupation one moment and keenly strained the next to make out the close-set type.

Not long before dawn he reached inside his coat and brought out a bit of burnished white card and set it up in front of him against the lamp. There was much in the plump, black capitals and knobby script of Judge Maynard's invitation which was very suggestive of the man himself, but Young Denny failed to catch the suggestion at that moment.

He never quite knew when that decision became final, nor what the mental process was which brought it about. Nor did he even dream of the connection there might have been between it

and that square of cardboard lying in front of him. Just once, as the first light came streaking in through the uncurtained window beside him, he nodded his head in deliberate, definite finality.

"Why, it's the thing I've been waiting for," he stated, something close akin to wonder in his voice. "It's just a man's size chance. I'd have to take it--I'd have to do that, even if I didn't want to--for myself."

And later, while he was kindling a fire in the stove and methodically preparing his own breakfast, he paused to add with what seemed to be absolute irrelevance:

"Silk--silk, next to her skin!"

There were only two trains a day over the single-track spur road that connected Boltonwood with the outer world beyond the hills; one which left at a most unreasonably inconvenient hour in the early morning and one which left just as inconveniently late at night. Denny Bolton, who had viewed from a distinctly unfavorable angle any possible enchantment which the town might chance to offer, settled upon the first as the entirely probable choice of the short, fat, brown-clad newspaper man, even without a moment's hesitation to weigh the merits of either. And the sight of the round bulk of the latter, huddled alone upon a baggage truck before the deserted Boltonwood station-shed, fully vindicated his judgment.

It was still only a scant hour since daybreak. Heavy, low-hanging clouds in the east, gray with threatening rain, cut off any warmth there might have been in the rising sun and sharpened the raw wind to a knifelike edge. The man on the truck was too engrossed with the thoughts that shook his plump shoulders in regularly recurring, silent chuckles, and a ludicrously doleful effort to shut off with upturned collar the draft from the back of his neck, to hear the boy's approaching footsteps. He started guiltily to his feet in the very middle of a spasmodic upheaval, to stand and stare questioningly at the big figure whose fingers had plucked tentatively at his elbow, until a sudden, delighted recognition flooded his face. Then he reached out one pudgy hand with eager cordiality.

"Why, greetings--greetings!" he exclaimed. "Didn't quite recognize you with your--er--decoration." His eyes dwelt in frank inquisitiveness upon the ragged red bruise across Young Denny's chin. "You're the member who stood near the door last night, aren't you--the one who didn't join to any marked degree in the general jubilee?"

Young Denny's big, hard hand closed over the outstretched pudgy white one. He grinned a little and slowly nodded his head.

"Thought so," the man in brown rambled blithely on, "and glad to see you again. Glad of a chance to speak to you! I wanted most mightily to ask you a few pertinent questions last night, but it hardly seemed a fitting occasion."

He tapped Young Denny's arm with a stubby forefinger, one eyelid drooping quizzically.

"*Entre nous*--just 'twixt thee and me," he went on, "and not for publication, was this Jeddy Conway, as you knew him, all that your eminent citizenry would lead a poor gullible stranger to believe, or was he just a small-sized edition of the full-blown crook he happens to be at the present stage of developments? Not that it makes any difference here," he tapped the big notebook under his arm, "but I'm just curious, a little, because the Jed The Red whom I happen to know is so crooked nowadays that his own manager is afraid to place a bet on him half the time. See?"

Denny smiled comprehendingly. He shifted his big body to a more comfortable and far less awkward position.

"I see," he agreed.

Somehow, where it would have been an utter impossibility to have spoken lightly to him the night before, he found it very easy now to understand and meet half way the frivolity of the fat, grinning man before him.

"Well, when he left town about eight years ago, his going was just a trifle hasty. He--he took about everything there was in the cash-drawer of Benson's store with him--except maybe a lead slug or two--and there are some who think he only overlooked those."

The gurgle of sheer delight that broke from the lips of the man in brown was spontaneously contagious.

"Just about as your servant had it figured out last night," he fairly chirped. Then he slipped one hand through the crook of Denny's elbow. "I guess I'll have to take a chance on you. It's too good to keep all to myself." He led the way back to the empty truck. "And you ought to be safe, too, for judging from the sentiments that were expressed after you left last night, you--er--don't run very strong with this community, either."

Again he paused, his eyelid cocked in comical suggestion. Instead of narrowing ominously, as they might have twelve hours before, Denny's own eyes lighted appreciatively at the statement. He even waited an instant while he pondered with mock gravity.

"I reckon," he drawled finally, "that I'll have to confess that I've never been what you might call a general favorite."

The newspaper man's head lifted a little. He flashed a covertly surprised glance at the boy's sharp profile. It was far from being the sort of an answer that he had expected.

"No, you certainly are not," he emphasized, and then he opened the flat notebook with almost

loving care across his knees.

Young Denny, with the first glimpse he caught of that very first page, comprehended in one illuminating flash the cause of those muffled chuckles which had convulsed that rounded back when he turned the corner of the station-shed a moment before; he even remembered that half-veiled mirth in the eyes of the man who had sat balanced upon the desk in the Tavern office the night before and understood that, too. For the hurriedly penciled sketch, which completely filled the first page of the notebook, needed no explanation--not even that of the single line of writing beneath it, which read:

"I always said he'd make the best of 'em hustle--yes, sir, the very best of 'em!"

It was a picture of Judge Maynard--the Judge Maynard whom Young Denny knew best of all--unctuous of lip and furtively calculating of eye. For all the haste of its creation it was marvelously perfect in detail, and as he stared the corners of the boy's lips began to twitch until his teeth showed white beneath. The fat man grinned with him.

"Get it, do you?" he chuckled. "Get it, eh?"

And with the big-shouldered figure leaning eagerly nearer he turned through page after page to the end.

"Not bad--not bad at all," he frankly admired his own handiwork at the finish. "You see, it was like this. I've been short on anything like this for a long time--good Rube stuff--and so when Conway came through in his match the other night it looked like a providential opportunity--and it certainly has panned up to expectations."

Once more he turned to scan the lean face turned toward him, far more openly, far more inquisitively, this time. It perplexed him, bewildered him--this easy certainty and consciousness of power which had replaced the lost-dog light that had driven the smile from his own lips the night before when he had followed Judge Maynard's beckoning finger.

Hours after the enthusiastic circle about the Tavern stove had dissolved he had labored to reproduce that white, bitter, quivering face at the door, only to find that the very vividness of his memory somehow baffled the cunning of his pencil. There had been more than mere bitterness in those curveless, colorless lips; something more than doubt of self behind the white hot flare in the gray eyes. Now, in the light of day, his eyes searched for it openly and failed to find even a ghost of what it might have been.

"No," he ruminated gently, and he spoke more to himself than the other, "you don't stand deuce high with this community. You're way down on the list." He hesitated, weighing his words, suddenly a little doubtful as to how far he might safely venture. "I--I guess you've--er--disappointed them too long, haven't you?"

The blood surged up under Young Denny's dark skin until it touched his crisp black hair, and the fat man hastened to throw a touch of jocularly into the statement.

"Yep, you've disappointed 'em sorely. But I've been monopolizing all the conversation. I can't convince myself that you've come down here merely to say me a touching farewell. Was there--was there something you wanted to see me about in particular?"

It was the very opening for which Denny had been waiting--the opening which he had not known how to make himself, for his plan for procedure by which he was to accomplish it was just as indistinct as his resolution had been final. He nodded silently, uncertain just how to begin, and then he plunged desperately into the very middle of it.

"I thought maybe you could tell me if this was true or not," he said, and he drew from his pocket the paper which bore the account of Jed The Red's victory over The Texan. A hint of a frown appeared upon the forehead of the man in brown as he took the folded sheet and read where Denny's finger indicated--the last paragraph of all.

"The winner's share of the receipts amounted to twelve thousand dollars," was its succinct burden.

He read it through twice, as if searching for any puzzling phrase it might contain.

"I certainly can," he admitted at last. "I wrote it myself, but it's no doubt true, for all that. Not a very big purse, of course, but then, you know, he isn't really championship calibre. He's just a second-rate hopeful, that's all. It seems hard to find a real one these days. But why the riddle?" he finished, as he handed back the paper.

"Why, I thought if it was true maybe I'd ask you to tell me if I--how I could get a chance at him."

The boy's explanation was even more flounderingly abrupt than his former question had been, but his eyes never wavered from the newspaper man's face. The latter laid his notebook upon the truck with exaggerated care and rose and faced him.

"Another!" he lamented in simulated despair. But the next moment all the bantering light went from his face, while his eyes flashed in lightning-like appraisal over Denny's lean shoulder-heavy body, from his feet, small and narrow in spite of the clumsy high boots, to his clean-cut head, and back again. There was a hint of businesslike eagerness in that swift calculation of possibilities. The boy shifted consciously under the scrutiny.

"It isn't that he never was able to whip me--even when he was a kid," he tried to explain. "It--it's because I don't believe, somehow, that he ever could."

All the strained eagerness disappeared from the face of the pudgy man in brown. He laughed

softly, a short little laugh of amusement at his own momentary folly.

"Whew!" he murmured. "I'm getting to be just as bad as all the rest!"

He felt in a pocket for a card and scribbled an address across its back. A trace of good-natured familiarity--the first hint of superiority that had marked his manner--accompanied his gesture when he extended it in one hand. It savored of the harmless humoring of a childish vagary.

"If you ever did chance to get as far from home as that, there's a man at that address who'd fall on your neck and weep real tears if you happened to have the stuff," he said. "But just one additional word. Maybe I've led you astray a bit. Just because I said that Jed The Red is a second-rater, don't think for a moment that he fights like a schoolboy now. He doesn't--nothing like that!"

He gazed for another second at the boy's thin, grave face, so like, in its very thinness and gravity, all that a composite of its Puritan forbears might have been. And as he became suddenly conscious of that resemblance he reversed the card, a whimsical twist touching his lips, and wrote above his own name, "Introducing the Pilgrim," and put it in the outstretched hand.

"Any idea when you expect to make a start?" he inquired with an elaborate negligence that brought the hot color to the boy's cheeks. But again, at the words, he caught, too, a glimpse of the unshaken certainty that backed their gray gravity.

"Tomorrow, I reckon. It'll take me all of today to get things fixed up so I can leave. I'll take this train in the morning. And they--they ought to have told you at the hotel that it's always a half-hour late."

Young Denny rose.

"Surely--surely," the chubby man agreed. "Nothing like getting away with the bell. And--er--there's one other thing. Of course if it's a little private affair, I'll bow myself gracefully out, but I do confess to a lot of curiosity concerning that small souvenir." His eyes traveled to the red welt across the boy's chin. "May I inquire just how it happened?"

Denny failed to understand him at first; then his finger lifted and touched the wound interrogatively.

"This?" he inquired.

The man in brown nodded.

"Last night," the boy explained, "I--I kind of forgot myself and walked in on the horses in the dark, without speaking to them. I'd forgot to feed before I went to the village. One of them's young yet--and nervous--and--"

The other scowled comprehendingly.

"And so, just for that, they both went hungry till you came to in the morning and found yourself stretched out on the floor, eh?"

Again Young Denny puzzled a moment over the words. He shook his head negatively.

"No-o-o," he contradicted slowly. "No, it wasn't as bad as that. Knocked me across the floor and into the wall and made me pretty dizzy and faint for a little while. But I managed to feed them. I--I'd worked them pretty hard in the timber last week."

The man in brown puckered his lips sympathetically, whistling softly while he considered the damage which that flying hoof had done, and the utter simplicity of the explanation.

"I wonder," he said to himself, "I wonder--I wonder!" And then, almost roughly: "Give me back that card!"

Young Denny's eyes widened with surprise, but he complied without a word. The man in brown stood a moment, tapping his lips with the pencil, before he wrote hastily under the scribbled address, cocked his head while he read it through, and handed it back again.

The belated train was whistling for the station crossing when he thrust out his pudgy white hand in farewell.

"My name's Morehouse," he said, "and I've been called 'Chub' by my immediate friends, a title which is neither dignified nor reverend, and yet I answer to it with cheerful readiness. I tell you this because I have a premonition that we are to meet again. And don't lose that card!"

Young Denny's fingers closed over the outstretched hand with a grip that brought the short, fat man in brown up to his toes. Long after the train had crawled out of sight the boy stood there motionless beside the empty truck, reading over and over again the few scrawled words that underran the line of address.

"Some of them may have science," it read, "and some of them may have speed, but, after all, it's the man that can take punishment who gets the final decision. Call me up if this ever comes to hand."

Which, after all, was not so cryptic as it might have been.

CHAPTER VIII

That drearily bleak day which was to witness the temporary passing of the last of the line of Boltons from the town which had borne their name longer even than the oldest veteran in the circle of regulars which nightly flanked the cracked wood-stove in the Tavern office could recall, brought with it a succession of thrills not second even to those that had been occasioned by the advent of the plump newspaper man from the metropolis, and all his promised works.

And yet, so far as he himself was concerned, Young Denny Bolton was totally oblivious, or at least apparently so, to the very audible hum of astonishment which ripped along behind them when they--he and Judge Maynard of all men--whirled down the main street of the village that morning through the gray mist already heavy as fine rain, to stop with a great flourish of glittering harness buckles and stamping of hoofs before the post-office doors.

It was the busiest hour which the straggling one-story shops along the unpaved thoroughfare knew, this one directly following the unshuttering of the specked, unwashed show-windows, known distinctly as "mail time"--a very certain instant when Old Jerry's measured passage from the office doors to his dilapidated rig at the edge of the boardwalk heralded the opening of the general delivery window within.

It was Old Jerry's hour--the one hour of the day in which his starved appetite for notoriety ever sipped of nourishment--that moment when the small knot of loiterers upon the sidewalk, always, face for face, composed of the same personnel as the unvarying nightly circle about the Tavern stove, gave way before him and the authority of the "Gov'mint" which he personified.

Since that first morning, years back, which had hailed his initial appearance with the mail bags slung over one thin shoulder, he had made the most of that daily entrance upon the stage of publicity. There was always a haughty aloofness in his eyes that killed any word of greeting upon the lips of these same beholders with whom, a few hours later, he was to sit and wrangle in bitterest intimacy; a certain brisk importance of step which was a palpable rebuke to their purposeless unemployment.

Just once this haughty reserve had been assailed. It happened that same first morning when Old Dave Shepard, white of head and womanishly mild of voice, alike the circle's patriarch and most timid member, had stepped forward and laid one unsteady hand upon his arm, some embarrassed word of congratulation trembling on his lips. Old Jerry's bearing upon that one occasion had precluded for all time the possibility of its recurrence. He had stepped back a pace, out of reach of those detaining fingers, and fastened the offender with a stare of such baleful resentment that the latter drew off in pitiful haste for self-effacement. And Jerry's words on that one occasion were still current history.

"I warn you, Mister Shepard," he had shrilled, "that it's a state's prison offense to interfere with a Gov'mint official in the performance of his duty--and if you've got any complaints to make they'll have to be set down reg'lar in writin', so's I can give 'em due consideration!"

Dating from that day Old Jerry's daily appearance had taken on, at least in the eyes of the Tavern regulars, a ceremonious importance that demanded their personal attendance, and although it still lacked a few moments of the hour for which they were waiting, a roll-call would have found their number complete when the yellow-wheeled buckboard of Boltonwood's most important citizen, with its strangely assorted pair of passengers, flashed into view. Denny Bolton was totally oblivious to the stir which their appearance created, but if he was too engrossed with other things to be aware of the breathless hush which followed it, the huge, moon-faced man who occupied the seat of the buckboard with him was conscious of it all to a degree sufficient for both.

From the moment when he had himself answered the summons at the front door of his great, boxlike house on the hill, and found Young Denny standing there, Judge Maynard had sensed a sensation. With unerring judgment he read it in the very carriage of the big-shouldered boy before him, who for the first time in his life failed to uncover his head, with a due amount of reverence, in the presence of the town's great man.

Perhaps with his mind set upon other things that morning Young Denny forgot it, perhaps there was an even deeper reason for his remissness, but the Judge, while he stood and listened to the boy's tersely short explanation of his errand, was himself too taken up with other thoughts to note the omission. He was already formulating the rounded sentences with which he would introduce the subject that night to the circle in the Tavern office.

There was much of the dramatic in the whole situation--much that needed only proper staging and elaboration to make of it a tremendous triumph, a personal triumph, the extent of which he began to foresee with Denny's opening words. And the greater became his consciousness of Denny Bolton's strange new bearing, the clearer he saw all the possibilities of the situation.

To cap it all, the one big, irrefutable fact about which he could build his climax was there all ready before him, ripe for exploitation. It was with an actual effort of the will that the Judge held his brain sufficiently attentive to the boy's words to grasp the reason for his early morning visit, in the face of the fascination which that great, ragged bruise across Denny's chin had for him. Properly displayed, properly played up, the possibilities of that raw, unbandaged wound

were incalculable, and the Judge started almost guiltily from his greedy scrutiny of it to a sudden realization that the boy before him had paused in his recital and was waiting in almost insulting self-possession for a reply.

Many men and some few women had rung boldly at the Judge's front door or, more often, tapped timidly at the entrance in the rear of the house, all bent upon the same errand. For it was a country-wide secret that no one had ever been turned away from those doors with a refusal. If any of those same visitors ever awakened to a realization that the terms of their bargain were far harder to bear than a refusal might have been, they nursed that knowledge in secret.

The Judge was a first mortgage financier, and he scanned each new addition to his already extensive collection with all the elaborate care which a matcher of precious stones might have exercised in the assembling of a fabulous priced string of pearls. It was his practice to scrutinize each transaction from every possible angle, in every degree of light and shade, but in his eagerness that morning he forgot to don for Denny the air of gracious understanding that was half paternal, half deprecating, which he always wore to set the others more at their ease. He even forgot to clear his throat judicially when he asked the boy before him if he had considered sufficiently the gravity of such a step as the placing in pawn of the roof that sheltered him and the ground that gave him food. It may have been because Young Denny, as he stood quietly waiting for his answer, came under neither classification--he was neither pitifully timid nor more pitifully bold--that the Judge omitted the usual pompous formula, or merely that in his eager contemplation of the boy's hurt face he forgot for once his perfectly rehearsed part.

No preoccupation, however, marred the businesslike statement of his terms, but even while he named the amount which he was willing to risk upon Young Denny's arid, rocky acres, and the rate of interest which he felt compelled to demand, his brain was racing far ahead of the matter in hand. It was the Judge himself who engineered the half hour's delay which resulted in the fullest possible audience for their appearance that morning. While he had never attended it himself, except now and then by chance, he knew too well the infallibility of that little knot of regulars who watched Old Jerry's daily departure to have any fears that the first of that day's many thrills would go unseen or unsung. And he timed their arrival to a second.

Old Jerry was in the doorway, ready for his straight-backed descent of the worn steps, when Judge Maynard pulled his smooth gaited pair to a restive standstill before the office and gave the reins into Young Denny's keeping. The throng of old men upon the sidewalk was at the point of opening ranks to allow him to pass through to his tattered buggy, which stood at the roadside, a bare half-length ahead of the Judge's polished equipage. And now those same ranks broke in wild disorder and then closed tighter even than before, while they shifted and struggled for a better view.

They forgot the ceremonious solemnity of the moment and the little, birdlike figure upon the top step trying not to show too plainly upon his face a sense of his own importance--they forgot everything but the portend of the scene which the Judge was handling in so masterful a fashion.

The latter's descent from his seat to the ground was deliberate, even for him; his silent nod to those wide-eyed, loose-jawed old men upon the sidewalk was the very quintessence of secretive dignity, and yet had he taken up his position there on the corner of the uneven boardwalk and cried aloud his sensation, like a bally-hoo advertising the excellence of his own particular side-show, he could not have equaled the results which the very profundity of his silence achieved.

There was a momentous promise in his gravity, a hint of catastrophe in the tilt of his head. Like two receding waves the tight ranks opened before him, clearing a path for his heavy-footed advance to the post-office doors--a lane of bulging eyes and clicking tongues such as Old Jerry in all his days had never provoked. And the latter stood there stock still in the middle of the entrance, too dazed at first to grasp the whole meaning of the situation, until he, too, was swept aside, without so much as a glance or a word, by one majestic sweep of the Judge's hand.

Old Jerry's sparrowlike, thinly, wistful face flamed red, and then faded a ghastly white, but no one seemed conscious at that moment of the ignominy of it all. It was hours later that they recalled it and realized that they had looked upon history in the making. No one noticed the old man's faltering descent of the steps, or saw that he paused in his slow way to the buggy to turn back and stand looking about him in a kind of bewildered desperation. For the gaze of all had swung from the Judge's broad, disappearing back to the face of the boy who was sitting in the buckboard, totally unconscious of that battery of eyes, smiling to himself.

He even chuckled aloud once--Young Denny did--a muffled, reasonless sort of a chuckle, as if he did not even know they were there. It was almost as though he were playing straight into the Judge's own plan, for the effect of the mirth upon the group on the walk was electrical. It sent a shiver of anticipation through it from end to end. And then, like the eyes of one man, their eyes swung back again from the ragged bruise across the boy's chin to meet the Judge as he reappeared.

Yet not one of them so much as dared to whisper the question that was quivering upon the lips of all and burning hungrily in their faded eyes. Once more the wide lane opened magically for him--but again Judge Maynard's measured progress was momentarily barred. Curiosity may have prompted it, and then again it may have been that he was betrayed by the very fury of his desperate, eleventh hour effort to assert his right to the center of that stage--the right of long-established precedent--yet even those two long files of old men gasped aloud their dismay at his temerity when Old Jerry thrust his way forward and planted himself for a second time squarely

in the great man's path.

Half way from the office doors to the yellow-wheeled buckboard, in the very middle of the walk, he stood and stretched out a tentatively restraining hand, just as mild-voiced, white-haired Dave had done years before. And in his high, cracked falsetto, that was tremulously bitter for all that he struggled to lift it to a plane of easy jocularity, he exclaimed:

"Now see here, Judge; what's the meanin' of all this? You ain't turned kidnapper, hev you?"

There came a heavy hush, while the Judge stood and stared down at the thin face trying to smile confidently up at him--a hush that endured while Judge Maynard swept him from head to foot with one shriveling glare and then walked around him without a word--walked around him just as he might have walked around the hitching post at the roadside, or any other object that chanced to bar his way! And this time Old Jerry's face twitched and went whiter even than before.

Nobody laughed, not even after the yellow-wheeled buckboard with its strangely assorted pair of passengers had sped from sight toward the county seat and a legal adjustment of still another mortgage on the Bolton acres. Not a word was spoken until Old Jerry, too, had clambered silently into his own creaking buggy and crawled slowly off up the hill, with a squealing accompaniment of ungreased axles.

And even then, in the argument which began with a swirl of conjecture and ended, hours later, in a torrent of bitter personalities farthest of all from the first question under consideration, they avoided a mention of that regrettable incident just as for some time after its occurrence they avoided each other's eyes, as if they felt somehow that theirs was, after all, the real guilt.

Upon one point alone did they agree; they were unanimous that if Young Denny Bolton's bearing that morning--the angle at which he held his chin, and the huge cut that adorned it, and his causeless mirth--was not entirely damning, it was at least suspicious enough to require more than a little explanation. But that verdict, too, was none other than the very one which the Judge had already planned for them.

CHAPTER IX

Old Jerry drove his route that morning in a numbed, trancelike fashion; or, rather, he sat there upon the worn-out leather seat with the reins looped over the dash, staring straight ahead of him, and allowed the fat old mare to take her own pace. It was she who made the customary stops; he merely dug absent-mindedly beneath the seat whenever she fell to cropping grass at the roadside, and searched mechanically for the proper packet of mail. And twice he was called back to correct mistakes which he admitted were his own with an humbleness that was alarming to the complainant. In all the days of his service he had never before failed to plead extenuating circumstances for any slip that might occur--and to plead with much heat and staccato eloquence. But then, too, in all those years no day had ever equalled the bitter awakening of that morning.

As he reviewed it all, again and again, Old Jerry began to understand that it was not the public rebuff which had hurt so much; for there was that one of the night previous, when the Judge had cut him off in the middle of his eager corroboration of Jed The Red's history, which had not left a trace of a sting twelve hours later. It was more than wounded vanity, although hurt pride was still struggling for a place in his emotions against a shamed, overwhelming realization of his own trifling importance, which could not hold its own against the first interloper, even after years of entrenchment. Judge Maynard's first thrill had been staged without a hitch; he had paved the way for the personal triumph which he meant to achieve that night, but he had accomplished it only at a cost--the loyalty of him who had been, after all, his staunchest supporter.

From that moment Old Jerry's defection from the ranks must be dated, for it was in those bitter hours which followed the yellow-wheeled buckboard's early morning flight down the main street that the old man woke to the fact that his admiration for the Judge was made of anything but immortal stuff. He weighed the Judge in the balance that morning, and half forgot his own woe in marveling at the discrepancies which he discovered.

Self-deceit may or may not be easy of accomplishment. Maybe it is merely a matter of temperament and circumstance, after all. But it is a certainty that the first peep at one's own soul is always the most startling--the most illuminating, always hardest of all to bear. And once stripped of that one garment of grandeur, which he had conjured out of his own great hunger for attention, Old Jerry found a ruthless, half-savage joy in tearing aside veil after veil, until he found himself gazing straight back into the eyes of his own spirit--until he saw the pitiful old fraud he really was, naked there before him.

Just as well as though he had been a party to it he understood the Judge's crafty exhibition of Young Denny's maimed face that morning; he knew without a trace of doubt just what the Judge, in his ominous silence, had meant to insinuate, and what the verdict would be that night

around the Tavern stove. What he could not understand quite was why all of them were so easy to convince--so ready to believe--when only the night before they had sat and heard the Judge's recital of Jed The Red's intimate history for the benefit of the newspaper man from the metropolis which, to name it charitably, had been anything but a literal translation of facts.

Groping back for one single peg upon which to hang the fabric of their oft-reiterated prophesy was alarmingly profitless. There had been nothing, not even one little slip, since Old Denny Bolton's passing on that bad night, years before. And from that realization he fell to pondering with less leadenness of spirit upon what the real facts could be which lay behind Young Denny's sudden transformation. For that also was too real--too evident--for any eyes to overlook.

It was not until long after the hour which witnessed the return flight of the yellow-wheeled buckboard through the village street, leaving behind an even busier hum of conjecture than before, that he awoke to a realization that his opportunity for a solution of the riddle was at least better than that of the wrangling group that had turned traitor before the post-office steps.

Long before he reached the top of the grade that ran up to the bleak house alone on the crest, he was leaning out of his seat, trying to penetrate the double gloom of rain and twilight; but not until he had reined in his horse was he positive that there was no shadowy figure standing there waiting for his arrival.

He could not quite understand the sensation which the boy's absence waked in him at that instant. Days afterward he knew it had been lonesomeness--a rather bewildering loneliness--for no matter what his reception chanced to be along the way, Young Denny's greeting had been infallibly regular.

And another emotion far less difficult to understand began to stir within him as he sat motionless for a time scanning the shapeless bulk of the place, entirely dark save for a single light in the rear room. For the first time he saw how utterly apart from the rest of the town those unpainted old farm buildings were--how utterly isolated. The twinkling lights of the village were mere pin-points in the distance. Each thick shadow beneath the eaves of the house was blacker than he had ever noticed before. Even the soft swish of the rain as it seeped from the sodden shingles, even the very familiar complaint of loose nails lifted by the wind under the clapboards, set his heart pumping faster. All in an instant his sensation-hungry old brain seized upon each detail that was as old as he himself and manufactured, right there on the spot, a sinister something--a something of unaccountable dread, which sent a delightful shiver up and down his thin, bony, old back.

For a while he waited and debated with himself, not at all certain now that he was as keen for a solution of the riddle of that cut which had adorned Young Denny's chin as he had been. And yet, even while he hesitated, feeding his imagination upon the choicest of premonitory tit-bits, he knew he meant to go ahead. He was magnifying the unfathomed peril that existed in his erratic, hair-trigger old brain alone merely for the sake of the complacent pride which resulted therefrom--pride in the contemplation of his own intrepid dare-deviltry.

He could scarcely have put into words just what reception he had imagined was awaiting him; but, whatever it might have been, Young Denny's greeting was full as startling. A worn, dusty, shapeless leather bag stood agape upon the table before the window, and Denny Bolton paused over the half-folded garment in his hands to wheel sharply toward the newcomer as the door creaked open.

For one uncomfortable moment the old adventurer waited in vain for any light of welcome, or even recognition, to flash up in the boy's steady scrutiny. Then the vaguest of smiles began to twitch at the corners of Denny's lips. He laid the coat back upon the table and stepped forward a pace.

"Hello!--Here at last, are you?" he saluted. "Aren't you pretty late tonight?"

Old Jerry swallowed hard at the cheery ease of the words, but his fluttery heart began to pump even faster than when he had sat outside in the buggy debating the advisability of his further advance. That warning premonition had not been a footless thing, after all, for this self-certain, vaguely amused person who stood steadily contemplating him was not the Denny Bolton he had known twenty-four hours before--not from any angle or viewpoint.

Behind the simulated cheer of his greeting there was something else which Old Jerry found disturbingly new and hard to place. In his perplexity the wordless accusation that morning had been correct at that. And Young Denny was smiling widely at him now--smiling openly. The old man shuffled his feet and shifted his gaze from the open wound upon the boy's face as though he feared his suspicion might be read in his eyes. Then he answered Denny's question.

"I--I cal'late I be late--maybe a little," he admitted.

Denny nodded briskly.

"More than a little," he corrected. "I expected you to be along even earlier today! An hour or two, at least."

Even while he was speaking Young Denny turned back to the packing of the big bag on the table. Old Jerry stood there, still shifting from one foot to the other, considering in growing wonder that silent preparation, and waiting patiently for a further explanation of what it meant. At last, when he could no longer endure the suspense, he broke that silence himself.

"Packin' up for a little trip, be you?" he ventured mildly.

There was no progress made or satisfaction gained from Young Denny's short nod. Again the little man bore it as long as he was able.

"Figurin' on bein' gone quite a spell?" he ventured again.

And again the big-shouldered figure nodded a silent affirmative. Old Jerry drew himself up with an air of injured dignity at that inhospitable slight; he even took one step backward toward the door; but that one step, in the face of his consuming curiosity, was as far as he could force himself to go.

"I--I kinda thought you might be leavin'. Why, I--kinda suspicioned it this morning when I seen you ridin' townward with the Jedge."

The boy stuffed the last article into the bulging bag and turned. Old Jerry almost believed that the lack of comprehension in Young Denny's eyes was real until he caught again that hint of amusement behind it. But when Denny started toward him suddenly, without so much as a word, the old man retreated just as suddenly, almost apprehensively, before him.

"You say you was expectin' me," he faltered unsteadily, "but--but if there wa'n't anything special you wanted to see me about, I--I reckon I better be joggin' along. I just kinda dropped in, late's it was, to tell you there wa'n't no mail, and to say--to tell you---"

He stopped abruptly. He didn't like the looks of Denny Bolton's eyes. They were different than he had ever seen them before. If their inscrutability was not actually terrifying, Old Jerry's active imagination at that moment made it so. And never before had he noted how huge the boy's body was in comparison with his own weazened frame. He groped stealthily behind him and found the door catch. The cool touch of the metal helped him a little.

"I--I may be a trifle late--jest a trifle," he hurried on, "but I been hustlin' to git here--that is, ever sense about five o'clock, or thereabouts. There's been something I been wantin' to tell you. I--I jest wanted to say that I hoped it wa'n't anything I might have said or--or kinda hinted at, maybe, nights down to the Tavern, that's druv you out. That's a mighty mean, gossipy crowd down there, anyway, always kinda leadin' a man along till he gits to oversteppin' hisself a little."

It was the first declaration of his own shortcomings that he had ever voiced, an humble confession that was more than half apology born of that afternoon's travail of spirit; but somehow it rang hopelessly inadequate in his own ears at that minute. And yet Young Denny's head came swiftly forward at the words; his eyes narrowed and he frowned as though he were trying to believe he had heard correctly. Then he laughed--laughed softly--and Old Jerry knew what that laugh meant. The boy didn't believe even when he had heard; and his slow-drawled, half-satirical question more than confirmed that suspicion.

"Wasn't at all curious, then, about this?" he inquired, with a whimsical twist to the words.

He touched his chin with the tips of his fingers. Old Jerry's treacherous lips flew open in his eagerness, and then closed barely in time upon the admission that had almost betrayed him.

He was sorry now, too, that he had even lingered to make his apology. That disturbing glint was flaring brighter than ever in Young Denny's eyes. Merely because he was afraid to turn his back to pass out, Old Jerry stood and watched with beadily attentive eyes while the boy crossed and took a lantern from its peg on the wall behind the stove and turned up the wick and lighted it. That unexplained preparation was as fascinating to watch as its purport was veiled.

"You must be just a little curious about it--just a little bit?" Denny insisted gravely. "I thought you'd be--and all the others, too. That's why I was waiting for you--that and something in particular that I did want to ask you, after I'd made you understand."

If the first part of his statement was still tinged with mirth, the second could not possibly have been any more direct or earnest. Without further explanation, one hand grasping his visitor's thin shoulder, he urged him outside and across the yard in the direction of the black bulk of the barn. The rain was still coming down steadily, but neither of them noticed it at that moment. Old Jerry would have balked at the yawning barn door but for that same hand which was directing him and urging him on. His apprehension had now turned to actual fright which bordered close on panic, and he heard the boy's voice as though it came from a great distance.

"---two or three things I'd like to have you understand and get straight," Denny was repeating slowly, "so that--so that if I asked you, you could see that--someone else got them straight, too."

Old Jerry was in no mental condition to realize that that last statement was untinged by any lurking sarcasm. He was able to think of but one thing.

The hand upon his shoulder had loosened its grip. Slowly the little man turned--turned with infinite caution, and what he considered was a very capable attitude of self-defense. And for a moment he refused to believe his own eyes--refused to believe that, in place of the threat of sudden death which he had expected, Young Denny was merely standing there before him, pointing with his free hand at a dark, almost damp stain upon the dusty woodwork behind the stalls. It flashed through his brain then that Denny Bolton had not merely gone the way of the other Boltons--it was not the jug alone that had stood in the kitchen corner, but something far worse than that.

"I got to humor him," he told himself, although he was shivering uncontrollably. "I got to keep a grip on myself and kinda humor him." And aloud, in a voice that was little more than a whisper, he murmured:

"What--what is it?"

"Couldn't you guess--if you had to?"

Denny made the suggestion with appalling calm. Old Jerry clenched his teeth to still their chattering.

"Maybe I could--maybe I could;" and his voice was a little stronger. "I--I'd say it was blood, I reckon, if anyone asked me."

Without a word the boy set the lantern down and walked across the barn to lay one hand upon the flank of the nervous animal in the nearest stall.

"That's what it is," he stated slowly; and again he touched the wound on his chin gingerly. "From this," he went on. "I came in last night to feed--and I--I forgot to speak to Tom here, and it was dark. He--he laced out and caught me--and that's where I landed, there against the wall."

The servant of the "Gov'mint" nodded his comprehension--he nodded it volubly, with deep bows that would have done credit to a dancing master, lest his comprehensions seem in the least bit veiled with doubt. He even clicked his tongue sympathetically, just as the plump newspaper man had done.

"Quite a tap--quite a tap!" he said as soothingly as his uncertain tongue would permit; but he took care to keep a safe distance between himself and his guide when Denny stooped and lifted the lantern and led the way outside.

Now that he was free from that detaining hand upon his shoulder, he contemplated the advisability of a sudden dash for the buggy and flight behind the fat white mare. Nothing but the weakened condition of his own knees and a lack of confidence in her ability to carry him clear kept him from acting instantly upon that impulse. And then the summoning voice of the great blurred figure which had been zigzagging across the grass before him checked him at the very moment of decision.

Young Denny had stopped beside a sapling that stood in a direct line with the kitchen window, and was pointing down at a heap of broken crockery that lay at its foot.

"And if anyone was to ask you," he was deliberately inquiring, "what do you suppose you would say that had been?"

Old Jerry knew! He knew without one chance for doubt; but never before had the truth seemed more overwhelmingly dreadful or surcharged with peril. A dozen diplomatic evasions flashed through his mind, and were all condemned as inadequate for that crisis. He knew that candor was his safest course.

"Why, I--I'd say it looked mighty like a--a broken jug," he quavered, with elaborate interest. "Jest a common, ordinary jug that's kinda got broke, somehow. Yes, sir-e-e, all broke up, as you might say!"

His shrill cackle of a voice caught in his throat, and grew husky, and then broke entirely. Even Young Denny, absorbed as he was in his methodical exhibition of all the evidence, became suddenly aware that the little figure beside him was swallowing hard--swallowing with great, noisy gulps, and he lifted the lantern until the yellow light fell full upon the twitching face below him, illuminating every feature. And he stared hard at all that the light revealed, for Old Jerry's face was very white.

"Jest a little, no-account jug that's got busted," the shrill, bodiless voice went chattering on, while its owner recoiled from the light. "Busted all to pieces from hittin' into a tree!" And then, reassuringly, on a desperate impulse: "But don't you go to worryin' over it--don't you worry one mite! I'm goin' to fix it for you. Old Jerry's a-goin' to fix it for you in the morning, so's it'll be just as good as new! You run right along in now. It's kinda wet out here--and--and I got to be gittin' along toward home."

Absolute silence followed the promise. Young Denny only lowered the lantern--and then lifted it and stared, and lowered it once more.

"Fix it!" he echoed, his voice heavy with wonder. "Fix it?"

Then he noted, too, the chattering teeth and meager, trembling body, and he thought he understood.

"You'd better come along in," he ordered peremptorily. "You come along inside. I'll rake up the fire and you can warm up a bit. I--I didn't think, keeping you out here in the rain. Why, you'll feel better after you've had a little rest. You ought not to be out all day in weather like this, anyway. You're too--too--"

He was going to say too old, but a quick thought saved him. Old Jerry did not want to accompany him; he would have done almost anything else with a light heart; but that big hand had fallen again upon his shoulder, and there was no choice left him.

Young Denny clicked the door shut before them and pulled a chair up before the stove with businesslike haste. After he had stuffed the fire-box full of fresh fuel and the flame was roaring up the pipe, he turned once more and stood, hands resting on his hips, staring down at the small figure slumped deep in its seat.

"I didn't understand," he apologized again, his voice very sober. "I--I ought to have remembered that maybe you'd be tired out and wet, too. But I didn't--I was just thinking of how

I could best show you--these things--so's you'd understand them. You're feeling better now?"

Furtively, from the corners of his eyes, Old Jerry had been watching every move while the boy built up the fire. And now, while Denny stood over him talking so gravely, his head came slowly around until his eyes were full upon that face; until he was able to see clearly, there in the better light of that room, all the solicitude that had softened the hard lines of the lean jaw. It was hard to believe, after all that he had passed through, and yet he knew that it could not be possible--he knew that that voice could not belong to any man who had been nursing a maniacal vengeance behind a cunningly calm exterior.

There was no light of madness in those eyes which were studying him so steadily--studying him with unconcealed anxiety. Old Jerry could not have told how it had come about; but there in the light, with four good solid walls about him, he realized that a miracle had taken place. Little by little his slack body began to stiffen; little by little he raised himself. Once he sighed, a sigh of deeper thankfulness than Young Denny could ever comprehend, for Young Denny did not know the awfulness of the peril through which he had just passed.

"Godfrey" he thought, and the exclamation was so poignantly real within him that it took audible form without his knowledge. "Godfrey 'Lisha, but that was a close call! That's about as narrer a squeak as I'll ever hev, I reckon."

And he wanted to laugh. An almost hysterical fit of laughter straggled for utterance. Only because the situation was too precious to squander, only because he would have sacrificed both arms before confessing the terror which had been shaking him by the throat, was he able to stifle it. Instead, he removed his drenched and battered hat and passed one fluttering hand across his forehead, with just the shade of unsteadiness for which the affair called.

"Yes, I'm a-feelin' better now," he sighed. "Godfrey, yes, I'm a sight better already! Must 'a' been just a little touch of faintness, maybe. I'm kinda subject to them spells when I've been overworked. And I hev been a little mite druv up today--druv to the limit, if the truth's told. Things ain't been goin' as smooth's they might. Why--why, they ain't nobody'd believe what's been crowded into this day, even if I was to tell 'em!"

He filled his lungs again and shoved both feet closer to the oven door.

"But that fire feels real nice," he finished; "real nice and comfortin', somehow. And maybe I could stop just a minute." The old hungry light of curiosity was kindling again, brighter than ever before, in the beady little eyes. "As you was remarkin', back a stretch, you'd been a-waitin' for me to come along. Was they--was they something you wanted to see me about?"

CHAPTER X

The perplexed frown still furrowed Young Denny's forehead. He felt that the fire had wrought a most remarkably swift cure of all that he had feared, but the anxiety faded from his eyes. White head perked forward, balanced a little on one side, birdlike, Old Jerry was waiting for him to pick up the thread which had been broken so long. And now it was the big-shouldered boy who faltered in his words, uncertain just how to begin.

"I--I don't know just how to ask you," he started heavily. "I'm--I am going away. I'm figuring on being gone quite a while, I think. First, just after I had decided to go, some time last night, I made up my mind to ask you to take care of the stock till I came back. I thought maybe it wouldn't be too hard for you--with you coming by at night, anyhow. There's just the one cow and the team, and the hens to feed. And then I--I got to thinkin' that maybe, too, you'd be able to do something else for me, if I sort of explained how things were. There--there wasn't anyone else I could think of who'd be likely to want to do me a favor."

He paused and licked his lips. And Old Jerry, too, furtively touched his with the tip of his tongue. He was waiting breathlessly, but he managed to nod his head a little, encouragingly, as he leaned closer.

"And that was what I was really waiting for," the slow voice went on ponderously. "I saw this morning--anybody could have seen--what the Judge meant them all to believe along the street when we drove through. Somehow things have changed in the last twelve hours. I sort of look at some things differently than I did, and so it was funny, just funny to watch him, and I'm not so blind that I don't know what his story will be tonight down at the Tavern. Not that I care what they say, either. But there is some one who couldn't help believin' it--couldn't believe anything else--after what happened last night." He stopped, groping for words to finish. "And so I--I waited for you to come," he went on lamely. "I took you outside and showed you how it really happened, so that--so that you could tell *her*--the truth."

He nodded over his shoulder--nodded once out across the valley in the direction of John Anderson's small drab cottage huddled in the shadow under the hill. And now, once he had fairly begun, all the diffidence, all the self-consciousness went from his voice. It was only big and low and ponderous, as always, as he went back and told the old man, who sat drinking it in, every detail of that night before, when he had stooped and risen and sent the stone jug crashing

through the window--when he had turned, with blood dripping from his chin, to find Dryad Anderson there in the doorway, eyes wide with horror and loathing. Not until he had reached that point did Old Jerry move or hint at an interruption.

"But why in time didn't you tell her yourself?" he asked then. "Why didn't you explain that old Tom hit you a clip out there in the dark?"

Young Denny's face burned.

"I--I tried to," he explained simply. "I--I started toward her, meaning to explain, but I tripped, there on the threshold, and went down on my knees. I must have been a little sick--a little giddy. And when I got up again she--she was gone."

Old Jerry nodded his head judicially. He sucked in his lips from sheer delight in the thrill of it all, and nodded his head in profound solemnity.

"Jest like a woman--jest like a woman, a-condemnin' of a man without a bit of mercy! Jest like 'em! I ain't never been enticed yet into givin' up my freedom; but many's the time I've said--says I--"

The boy's set face checked him; made him remember. This was no mimic thing. It was real; too real to need play-acting. And with that thought came recollection. All in a flash it dawned on him that this was no man-created situation; it must have something greater than that behind it.

That morning had seen his passing from the circle to which he had belonged as long as the circle had existed. All through that dreary day he had known that he could never go back to it. Just why he could not say, but he felt that that decision was irrevocable. And for that whole day he had been alone--more utterly, absolutely alone than he had ever been in his whole life--yet here was a place awaiting him, needing him. For some reason it was not quite so hard to look straight back into the eyes of that soul which he had discovered that day; it wasn't so hard, even though he knew it now for the pitiful old fraud it really was.

His thin, leathery face was working spasmodically. And it was alight--aglow with a light that came entirely from within.

"Could you maybe explain," he quavered hungrily; "could you kinda tell me--just why it is--you're a-askin' me? It--it ain't jest because you hev to, entirely; now, is it? It ain't because there ain't nothin' else left you to do?"

Denny Bolton sensed immediately more than half of what was behind the question. He shook his head.

"No," he answered steadily. "No, because I'm going to try to tell her again, myself, tonight. It's only partly because maybe I--I won't be able to see her before I go--and part because she--she'd believe you, somehow, I think, when she wouldn't believe any of the rest."

The white-haired old man sighed. His stiffened body slackened as he shifted his feet against the stove.

"Why--why, I kinda hoped it was something like that," he murmured; and he was talking more to himself than to Denny. "I kinda hoped it was--but I never had no reason to believe it."

His voice lifted until it was its shriller, more natural falsetto.

"I wouldn't 'a' believed myself today, at twelve o'clock noon," he stated flatly. "No, sir-e-e! After takin' stock of myself, as you might say, the way I done this morning, I wouldn't 'a' believed myself on oath!"

His feet dropped noisily to the floor, and he sat bolt upright again.

"But she's a-goin' to believe me! Godfrey, yes, she'll believe me when I git through tellin' her!"

His pale eyes clung to the boy's face, tinged with astonishment before so much vehemence.

"And ain't it kinda struck you--ain't it sorta come to you that she wa'n't quite fair, either, any more than the rest of us, a-thinkin'--a-thinkin' what she did, without any real proof?"

Young Denny did not have time to reply.

"No, I reckon it ain't," Old Jerry rushed on. "And I don't know's I've got much right criticizing either. Not very much! I've been a tidy hand at jedgin' other folks' matters until jest lately. Some way I ain't quite so handy at it as I was. And I kinda expect she's goin' to be sorry she even thought it, soon enough, without my tryin' to make her any more so. She's goin' to be mighty uncomfortable sorry, if she's anything like me!"

He rose and shuffled across to the door, and stopped there. Denny could not understand the new thrill there was in his cracked voice, nor the light in those pale eyes. But he knew that the old man before him had been making something close akin to an eleventh-hour confession; making it out of a profound thankfulness for the opportunity. With the same gesture with which he bade the old man wait, his big hand went inside his shirt, and came out again. And he reached out and pressed something into Old Jerry's knotty fingers.

"I--I was sure you'd do it," he told him. "I knew you would. And I want you to take this, too, and keep it. I don't want to go away like this, but I have to. If I didn't start right now I--I might not go at all. I hate to leave her alone--in this town. That's half of what the Judge let me have today on this place. It's not much, but it's something if she should need anything while I'm gone. I thought you might--see that she was all right--till I got back?"

The servant of the "Gov'mint" stood and stared down at the limp little roll of bills in his hand; he stared until something caught in his throat and made him gulp again noisily. But his face was shamelessly defiant of the mist that smarted under his eyelids when he looked up again.

"Take care of her?" he whispered. "Me take care of her for you? Why--why, Godfrey--why, man---"

He dashed one hand across his eyes.

"I'm a old gossipy fool," he exclaimed. "Nothin' but a old gossipy fool; but I reckon you don't hev to *count* them bills over before you leave 'em with me. Not unless you want to. I've been just an ordinary, common waggle-tongue. That's what I really come for in such a hurry tonight, once I'd thought of it. Jest to see if I couldn't nose around into business that wa'n't no concern of mine. But I'm gittin' over that--I'm gittin' over that fast! Learning a little dignity of bearin', too, as you might say. And I don't deny I ain't a little curious yet--more'n a little curious. But I want to tell you this: There's some folks that lies mostly for profit, and some that lies largely for their own amusement, and they both do jest about as much damage in the long run, and I ain't no better, jest because I never made nothin' outen mine. But if you could kinda drop me a line, maybe once in a while, and tell me how you're gittin' on, I'd be mighty glad to hear. An' it wouldn't do no harm, either." He nodded his head, in turn, in the direction of the drab cottage across the valley. "Because--because she's goin' to be waitin' to hear--she's goin' to be sorry, and kinda wonderin'. I know--well, jest because I know!"

Still he lingered, with his fingers on the door catch. He shoved out his free hand.

"I--I suppose we'd ought to shake hands, hedn't we," he faltered; "bein' as it's kinda considered the reg'lar and customary thing to do on such occasions?"

Denny was smiling as his hand closed over those clawlike fingers; he was smiling in a way that Old Jerry had never seen before. Because the noise in his throat was growing alarmingly louder every moment, the latter went on talking almost wildly, to cover that weakness which he could not control.

"I hope you git on," he said. "And I reckon you will. It's funny--it's more'n that--and I don't know where I got the idea. But it's kinda come to me, somehow, that maybe it was that account in the paper--that story of Jeddy Conway--that's set you to leavin'. It ain't none of my business, and I ain't askin' no questions, but I do want to say that there never was a time when you couldn't lick the everlastin' tar outen him. And you've growed some since then. Jest a trifle--jest a trifle!"

The boy's smile widened and widened. Then he laughed aloud softly and nodded his head.

"I'll send you the papers," he promised. "I'll send you all of them."

Old Jerry stood with his outstretched hand poised in midair while he realized that his chance shot had gone home. And suddenly, unaccountably, he began to chuckle; he began to cackle noisily.

"I might 'a' knowed it," he whispered. "I ought to hev knowed it all along. Now, you don't hev to worry--they ain't one mite of a thing I ain't a-goin' to see to while you're away. You don't want nothin' on your mind, because you're goin' to hev a considerable somethin' on your hands. And I got to git along now. Godfrey, but it's late for me to be up here, ain't it? I got to hustle, if I ever did; and there ain't too much time to spare. For tonight--tonight, before I git through, I aim to put a spoke in the Jedge's wheel, down to the Tavern, that'll make him think the axles of that yello'-wheeled gig of his'n needs greasin'. Jest a trifle--jest a trifle!"

He opened the door and slammed it shut behind him even before the boy could reply. Still smiling whimsically, Young Denny stood and listened to the grating of the wheels as the buggy was turned about outside--heard the old rig groan once, and then complain shrilly as it started on its way. But no one witnessed Old Jerry's wild descent to the village that night; no one knew the mad speed he made, save the old mare between the shafts; and she was kept too busy with the lash that whistled over her fat flanks to have given the matter any consistent thought.

Old Jerry drove that scant mile or two this night under the spur of his one greatest inspiration; and while he drove he talked aloud to himself.

"And I was a-goin' to fix it for him," he muttered once, "I was a-goin' to fix that old busted jug in the morning. Godfrey, I must 'a' been flustered!" He shrilled in uncontrollable glee at the recollection. And then again, later and far more gravely:

"I'm a-gittin' more religious every livin' day. I'm gittin' more religious jest from standin' around and kinda watchin' how things is made to work out right, jest when you've about decided that the Lord ain't payin' as much attention to details as he might."

He knew that there had to be a light in the windows of the Tavern office; he knew that he had to be in time. That was the finger of a Something behind the whole day's developments which was directing it all so masterfully. And because he was so certain of it all--because he was positive that he was the agent who had been selected to mete out justice at last--he found himself possessed of a greater courage than he had ever known before as he clambered down from his seat and mounted the worn steps.

A rush of chill air swept the group about the sprawling stove as he opened the door and made each member lift his head, each after a fashion that was startlingly indicative of the man himself. For Judge Maynard wheeled sharply as the cold blast struck him--wheeled with head

flung back challengingly, and a harsh rebuke in every feature--while old Dave Shepard turned and merely shivered. He just shivered and flinched a little from the draft, appealingly. The rest registered an ascending scale of emotions betwixt and between.

Just as he knew he would find them they sat. Judge Maynard had the floor; and it was an easy thing to read that he had all but reached the crisis of his recital. Any man could have read that merely from the protest in the faces of the rest. And yet Old Jerry simply stood there and swept the group with serene and dangerous geniality.

"Evenin', folks," he saluted them mildly.

His mildness was like a match to the fuse. Judge Maynard pounded his fat knee with a fatter fist, and exploded thunderously:

"Shut that door!" he roared. "Shut that door!"

Old Jerry complied with amazing alacrity. The very panels shivered with the force of the swing that slammed it close. The Judge should have known right there--he should have read the writing on the wall--and yet he failed to do that thing. Instead, he turned back once more to his audience--back to his interrupted tale, and left Old Jerry standing there before the door, ignored.

"As I was sayin'." He cleared his throat. "As I was sayin' when this unnecessary interruption occurred, I realized right from the moment when I opened the door and saw him standing there in front of me, grinning, and his chin cut wide open, that there was something wrong. I am a discerning man--and I knew! And it didn't take me long to convince him--not very long!--that there were other communities which would find him more welcome than this one. Maybe I was harsh--maybe I was--but harsh cases require harsh remedies. And because he didn't have the money, I offered to let him have enough to carry him out of town, and something to keep him about as long as he'll last now, I'm thinking, although that place of his isn't worth as much as the paper to write the mortgage on.

"I knew it had come at last--but, at that, I didn't get anything that I wanted to call real proof until after we'd drawn up the papers and signed 'em, and were about ready to start back. Then, when we were coming down the steps of the clerk's office, I got all the proof I wanted, and a little more than that. He--he stumbled just about then, and would have gone down on his face if I hadn't held him up. And he was laughing out loud to himself, chuckling, with one fist full of money fit to draw a crowd. And he pulled away from me just when I was trying to force him into the buggy--pulled away and sort of leered up at me, waving that handful of bills right under my nose.

"Oh, come now, Judge," he sort of hiccupped, "this ain't the way for two old friends to part. This ain't the way for me to treat an old friend who's given me this. I want to buy you something--I want to buy you at least one drink--before I go. Come on, now, Judge. What'll you have?" says he."

They had all forgotten Old Jerry's interruption; they had forgotten everything else but the Judge's recital, that was climbing to its climax. That room was very quiet when the speaker paused and waited for his words to sink in--very quiet until a half-smothered giggle broke the stillness.

There was an unholy glee in that mirth--a mocking, liting note of actual joy which rang almost profane at such a moment. Man for man it brought that circle erect in the chairs; man for man they sat and stared at the grotesque figure which was rocking now in a paroxysm of laughter too real for simulation. In a breathless hush they turned from the offender back to the judge, waiting, appalled, for the storm to break.

Judge Maynard's round moon-face went purple. Twice he tried to speak before he sat silent, annihilation in his eyes, until Jerry's outbreak had subsided. Then he lifted one forefinger and pointed, with all the majesty such a gesture could ever convey, to the empty chair--the chair which Old Jerry should have been occupying in becoming silence at that moment.

"Have you gone crazy?" he thundered. "Have you--or are you just naturally witless? Or was there something you wanted to say? If there isn't--if you've no questions to ask--you get over to that chair and sit down where you belong!"

It was then that the rest of the circle realized that something had gone wrong--most mightily wrong! According to all precedent, the little, white-haired man should have shrunk back and cowered beneath that verbal lash, and obeyed without a glance. They all realized that there was imminent a climax unforeseen by all--all but the Judge; and he was too blind with rage to see.

Very meekly Old Jerry bore his thundered rebuke--too meekly. But after the judge had finished he failed to move; he merely stood there, facing the town's great man. And in his attitude there was something of infantile, derisive, sparrowlike impudence as he peered back into the Judge's face--something that was very like the attitude of an outraged, ruffled old reprobate of a parrot rearing himself erect.

Old Jerry made no haste. It was a thing which required a nice deliberation. And so he waited--waited and prolonged the moment to its last, sweetest second. Once more he chuckled, to himself this time--just once, before he began to speak. That old Tavern office had never been so deathly still before.

"A question?" he echoed at last, thoughtfully. "A question? Well, Jedge, there was one thing I was a-goin' to ask you. Jest one triflin' thing I was kinda curious to know. Why, I was a-goin' to

ask you, back a spell--What did you hev? It kinda interested me, wonderin' about it. But now--now that I've heard your story in full, I reckon I'll hev to change that question a mite. I reckon they ain't nothin' left but to ask you--How many did you hev? How many, Jedge? For, Jedge, you're talkin' most mighty wild tonight!"

And that silence endured--endured even after the huge man had half-risen, purple features gone white, and then dropped heavily back into his chair before that rigid figure in its sodden garments which had turned from him toward the rest of the circle of regulars.

Old Jerry made his formal exit that night--he knew that he was resigning his chair--but the thing was very cheap at the price.



"WHAT YOU NEED, GENTLEMEN, IS A TRIFLE WIDER READIN'--JUST A TRIFLE! FOR YOU AIN'T BEIN' WELL POSTED ON FACTS!"

"An' I reckon, too," he went on deliberately, and there was a wicked flier of sarcasm tinging the words, "I reckon I'll hev to kinda apologize to you gentlemen for interruptin' your evenin's entertainment, as you might say. I'm sorry I ain't able to remain, for it's interestin'. I don't know's I've ever heard anything that was jest as excitin' an' thrillin', but I've got something more important needin' my attention this evenin'--meanin' that I ain't got nothin' in particular that's a-callin' me! But it's no more'n my plain duty for me to tell you this: You'd ought to follow the papers a mite closer from now on. It's illuminatin'--it's broadenin'! What you need, gentlemen, is a trifle wider readin'--jest a trifle--jest a trifle! For you ain't bein' well posted on facts!"

Nobody moved. Nobody was capable of stirring even. Old Jerry bowed to them from the doorway--he bowed till the water trickled in a stream from the brim of his battered hat.

And this time, as he passed out, he closed the door very gently behind him.

CHAPTER XI

It would have been hard for her to have explained just why it was so, but Dryad Anderson had been sitting there in the unlighted front room of the little once-white cottage before Judge Maynard's boxlike place on the hill, watching hour after hour for that light to blink out at her

from the dark window of Denny Bolton's house on the opposite slope. Ever since it had grown dark enough for that signal to be seen, which had called across to her so many nights, she had been waiting before the table in front of the window--waiting even while she told herself that it could not appear. It was not Saturday night; there was no real reason why she should be watching, unless--unless it was hope that held her there.

Only in the last few hours since twilight had she admitted to herself the possibility that such a hope lurked behind her vigil. Before then, when the thought had first come to her that Denny might cry out to her through the night, with that half-shuttered light, she had stifled it with a savageness that left her shaking, panting and dizzy from its bewildering intensity.

Time after time she told herself that it would go unheeded by her, no matter how long or how insistently it beckoned, if by the hundredth chance it should flare up beyond the shadows, but as minutes dragged interminably by into equally interminable hours, the strained fierceness of that whispered promise grew less and less knifelike in its hardness--less and less assured.

Somehow, ever since the first light of that gray day had discovered her sitting there in almost the same position in which she now sat, eyes straining out across the valley, pointed chin cupped in her palms, that fearful, almost insane passion which had held each nerve and fiber of her taut as tight-stretched wire through the entire sleepless night, had begun to give way to something even less easy to endure.

All the terror which had checked her that evening when she swung the door open and stood poised on the threshold, a low laugh of sheerest delight in the costume she had worn across for him to see ready to burst from parted lips--all the horror that had held her incapable of motion until Denny had swung around and found her there, and lifted his arms and attempted to speak, had given way, in the first hours that followed, to a flaming scorn, a searing contempt for him and for his weakness that had lost him his fight.

All through that night which followed her panic flight from the huge, heavy-footed figure that had groped out for her, called to her, and dropped asprawl her own small cloak in the doorway, Denny Bolton's blood-soiled face and drunkenly reckless laugh had been with her, feeding that rage which scorched her eyes beneath their lids--that burned her throat and choked her.

Little drops of blood oozed out upon her lips--strangely brilliant crimson drops against that colorless background--where her teeth sank deep in the agony of disillusionment that made each pulse-beat a sledge-hammer blow within her brain. Her small palms were etched blue under the clenched fingers where the nails bit the flesh. And yet--and yet, for all the agony of it which made her lift her blanched face from time to time throughout the night--a face so terribly strained that it was almost distorted--and set her gasping chokingly that she hated him, hated him for a man who couldn't fight and keep on fighting, even when the odds were great--when the light of that new, dreary day had come streaking in across her half-bowed head, something else began to take the place of all that bitterness and scorn.

And throughout the day she had still been struggling against it, struggling with all the tense fierceness of which her spirit was capable--her spirit that was far too big for the slim body that housed it. Yet that thought could not be shaken off. She couldn't forget it, couldn't wipe out the recollection of that great, gaping wound that had dripped blood from his chin. She tried to close her eyes and shut it out as she went from task to task that day, and it would not fade.

Somehow it wasn't that man at all whom she remembered as the afternoon dragged by to its close; it wasn't the big-shouldered body nervelessly asprawl upon the floor that filled her memory. Instead a picture of an awkward, half-grown boy flashed up before her--a big, ungainly, terribly embarrassed boy who turned from watching the mad flight of a rabbit through the brush to smile at her reassuringly, even though his face was torn raw from her own nails.

That was the point at which the tide of her chaotic thoughts began to waver and turn. Long before she realized what she was doing she had fallen to wondering, with a solicitude that made moist and misty once more her tip-tilted eyes and softened the thin line of her lips, whether or not that bruise had been washed out, cleansed and cleanly bandaged.

When she did realize what that thought meant, it had been too long with her to be routed. She was too tired to combat it, anyway, too tired with the reaction of that long, throbbing night to do more than wonder at herself. Twilight came and the gray mist that had been over the hills for hours dissolved into rain. With the first hint of darkness that the storm brought with it she began to watch--to peer out of the window whenever her busy footsteps carried her past it, at the bleak place across the hollow. Before it was fairly night she began to understand that she was not merely watching for the light, but hoping, praying wordlessly that it might shine. And when her work was finished she had taken her place there, her slim body in its scant black skirt and little white blouse hunched boyishly forward as always across the table.

Even that girl who, after the hours which had been almost cataclysmic for her, could scarcely have been expected to be able to comprehend it clearly yet--even she read the meaning of the slackened cords of her body, of her loosened lips and wet eyes. As long as she could she had fed the flame within her soul--fed it with every bitter thought and harsh judgment which her brain could evolve--and yet that flame had slackened and smoldered and finally died out entirely. Self-shame, self-scorn even, could not rekindle it.

Her lips were no longer white and straight and feverish with contempt; they were damp and full again, and curved and half-open with compassion. The ache was still there in her breast--a great gnawing pain which it seemed at that moment time could never remove, but it was no longer the wild hatred which made her pant with a desire to make him suffer, too, just as she

had suffered that night through. The pain was just as great, but it was pity now--only pity and an unaccountable yearning to draw that bruised face down against her and croon over it.

In spite of the numbness, in spite of the lassitude which that burnt-out passion had left behind in brain and body, she knew what it meant. She understood. She had hated his weakness; she still hated his lack of manhood which had made him fail her. That hatred would be a long time dying now--if it ever did perish. But she couldn't hate *him*! She looked that fact in the face, dumb at first at the awakening. She couldn't hate him--not the man he was! There was a distinction--a difference very clear to her woman-brain. She could despise his cowardice; she could despise herself for caring still--but the caring still went on. Half-vaguely she realized it, but she knew the change had come. The girliness was gone from it forever. She had to care now as a woman always cares--not for the thing he was, but in spite of it.

"I ought to hate him," she told herself once, aloud. "I know I ought to hate him, and yet--and yet I don't believe I can. Why, I--I can't even hate myself, as I did a little while back, because I still care!"

It was a habit that had grown out of her long loneliness--those half-whispered conversations with herself. And now only one conviction remained. Again and again she told herself that she could not go to meet him that night--could not go, even if he should call to her. And that, too, she put into whispered words.

"Even if he lights the window, I can't--I couldn't! Oh, not tonight! He won't--he won't think of it. But I couldn't let him touch me--until--until I've had a little time to forget!"

But she was watching still--watching with small, gold-crowned head nodding heavily, eyes half-veiled with sinking lids--when that half-shaded window in the dark house glowed suddenly yellow with the light behind it. She was still hoping, praying dumbly that it might be, when Young Denny lifted the black-chimneyed lamp from its bracket on the kitchen wall that night, after he had stood and listened with a smile on his lips to Old Jerry's hurried departure, and carried it into the front room which he scarcely ever entered except upon that errand.

At first she did not believe. She thought it was only a trick of her brain, so tired now that it was as little capable of connected thought as her worn-out body was of motion. Hardly breathing she stared until she saw the great blot of his body silhouetted against the pane for a moment as he crowded between the lamp, staring across at her, she knew.

She rose then, rose slowly and very cautiously as though she feared her slightest move might make it vanish. Young Denny's bobbing lantern, swinging in one hand as he crossed before the house and plunged into the thicket that lay between them, was all that convinced her--made her believe that she had seen aright.

"I can't go--I can't!" she breathed. And then, lifting her head, vehemently, as if he could hear:

"I want to--oh, you know I want to! But I can't come to you tonight--not until I've had a little longer--to think."

Almost before she had finished speaking another voice answered, a soft, dreamy voice that came so abruptly in the quiet house that it made her wheel like a startled wild thing. She had forgotten him for the time--that little, stooped figure at its bench in the back room workshop. For hours she had not given him a thought, and he had made not so much as a motion to make her remember his presence. She could not even remember when his sing-song, unending monologue had ceased, but she realized then that he had been more silent that night than ever before.

Earlier in the evening when she had lighted his lamp for him and set out his lump of moist clay, and helped him to his place on the high stool, she had thought to notice some difference in him.

Usually John Anderson was possessed of one or two unvarying moods. Either he plunged contentedly into his task of reproducing the multitude of small white figures around the walls, or else he merely sat and stared up at her hopelessly, vacantly, until she put the clay herself into his hands. Tonight it had been different, for when she had placed the damp mass between his limp fingers he had laid it aside again, raised astonishingly clear eyes to hers and shaken his head.

"After a little--after a little while," he had said. "I--I want to think a little first."

It had amazed her for a moment. At any other time it would have frightened her, but tonight as she stroked his bowed head, she told herself that it was nothing more than a new vagary of his anchorless mind.

But that same strangely clear, almost sane glow which had puzzled her then was still there when she turned. It was even brighter than before, and the slow words which had startled her, for all their dreamy softness, seemed very sane as well.

"You have to go," John Anderson answered her faltering, half-audible whisper. "You have to go--but you'll be back soon. Oh, so soon! And I'll be safe till you come!"

Dryad flashed forward a step, both hands half-raised to her throat as he spoke, almost believing that the miracle for which she had ceased even to hope had come that night. And then she understood--she knew that the bent figure which had already turned back to its bench had only repeated her words, parrotlike; she knew that he had only pieced together a recollection of the absence which her vigil before the window had meant on a former occasion and repeated her own words of that other night.

And yet her brain clamored that there was more behind it all than mere witless repetition. John Anderson was smiling at her, too, smiling like a benevolent wraith. She saw that his pile of clay was still untouched, but there was no hint of petulant perplexity in his face, nothing of the terrified impotence which the inactivity of his fingers had always heralded before. He was just smiling--vaguely to be sure and a little uncertainly--but smiling in utter contentment and satisfaction, for all that.

Very slowly--wonderingly, she crossed to him and put both arms about his white head and drew it against her.

"I think you knew," she said to him, unsteadily. "I think you are able to understand better than I can myself. And I know, too, now. I do have to go--I must go to him. But he need not even know, until I tell him some day--that I was with him tonight."

The old man pulled away from her clasp, gently but very insistently. And he nodded--nodded as though he had understood. She paused and looked back at him from the doorway, just as she had always hesitated. He was following her with his eyes. Again he shook his head, just as positively as he might have, had he been the man he might have been.

"Some day," he reiterated, serenely, "some day! And she'll know then--some day I'll tell her--that I was with her tonight."

She had forgotten the rain. It was coming down heavily, and it was dark, too--very, very dark. She stopped a while, as long as she dared, and waited with the rain beating cold upon her uncovered head and bare throat until her eyes saw the path a little more clearly. It took her a long time to feel her way forward that night. And even when she came within sight of Denny's lantern, even when she was near enough to see him through the thicket ahead of her, in the little patch of light, she had not decided what she meant to do.

But with that first glimpse of him squatting there in the small cleared space it came to her what her course should be. She realized that if it was an impossibility for her to go to him, she could at least let him know she had been there--let him know that he had not been entirely alone while he waited. She even smiled to herself--smiled with wistful, half-sad, elfen tenderness as she, too, huddled down without a sound, there in the wet bushes opposite him, and decided how she would tell him.

Denny Bolton never quite knew how long he waited in the rain before he was certain that there was no use waiting longer. More than half the night had dragged by when he reached finally into the pockets of his coat and searched for a scrap of paper. Watching from her place in the thicket near him, she recognized the small white card which he discovered--she even reached out one hand instinctively for her invitation from the Judge, which she had told him had never arrived and for which she had hunted in vain throughout the following days.

With an unaccountable gladness because he knew straining at her throat, she watched him draw the lantern nearer and read again the words it bore before he turned it over and wrote, laboriously, with the thick pencil that he used to check logs back in the hills, some message across its back.

It was a message to her, she knew; and she knew, too, that he was going now. Deliberately she reached out then and found a rotten branch beside her. Young Denny's head shot up as it cracked between her hands--shot swiftly erect while he stared hard at that wall of darkness which hid her. And swiftly as she fled, like some noiseless night creature of the woods, his sudden, plunging rush almost discovered her.

Back in the safety of the blackness she stood and saw him bend over the place where she had been crouching; she saw him put his hand upon the patch of dead ferns which her body had crushed flat, and knew that he found it still warm. She even held up her face, as though she were giving him her lips--she reached out her arms to him--when she saw him rise from an examination of her foot-prints in the mold, smiling his slow, infinitely grave smile as he nodded his head over what he had seen.

Back over the path she had come she followed the dancing point of his lantern, sometimes almost upon him, sometimes lagging far behind when he stopped and strained his ears for her. All recollection of the night before was gone from her mind, wiped out as utterly as though it had never existed. Nothing but a great gladness possessed her, a joy that amounted almost to mischievous glee whenever he stood still a moment and listened.

Not until she had waited many minutes after he stooped and slipped the card beneath the door did she come out from the cover of the woods. But she raced forward madly then, and flung the door open, and stooped for it where it lay white against the floor.

All the mischievous glee went from her face in that next moment. Bit by bit it faded before the advance of that same strained whiteness that had marred it, hours before. All the wistfulness that made her face so childlike, all the hunger that made the hurt in her breast come back while she read, over and over, the words which Denny had written for her across the back of her card, until she could repeat them without looking at it. And even then she only half-understood what they meant. Once she opened the door and peered out into the blackness, searching for the lantern that had disappeared.

"Why--why he's gone! He came to tell me that he was going away," she murmured, dully. And then, still more dully:

"And I didn't tell him I was sorry. I've let him go without even telling him how sorry I was--for

the hurt upon his chin!"

Perhaps it was the silence that made her turn; perhaps she simply turned with no thought or reason at all, but she faced slowly about at that moment, just in time to see John Anderson nod and smile happily at something he alone could see--just in time to hear him sigh softly once, before his arms went slack upon his work-bench and his head drooped forward above them.

The bit of a card fluttered to the floor as both her tight-clenched fists lifted toward her throat. The softest of pitying little moans came quavering from her lips. She needed no explanation of what that suddenly limp body meant! And she understood better now, too, that untouched lump of clay upon the boards beside his bowed head. John Anderson's long task was finished. He had known it was finished, and had been merely resting tonight--resting content before he started upon that long journey, before he followed that face, tumbled of hair and uplifted of lip, which seemed always to be calling to him.

The slim-bodied girl whose face was so like what that other woman's face had been went slowly across to him where he sat. After a while she slipped her arm about his wasted shoulders, just as she had done so often on other nights. A racking sob shook her when she first tried to speak--and she tried again.

"You kept faith, didn't you, dear?" she whispered to him. "Oh, but you kept faith with her--right--right up to the end. Please God--please God, I may get my chance back again--to try to keep it, too. You've gone to her--and--and I'm glad! You waited a long time, dear, and you were very patient. But, oh, you've left me--you've left me all alone!"

The tears came then. Great, searing drops that had been hopelessly dammed back the night before rolled down her thin cheeks. She stooped and touched the silvered head with her lips before she groped her way into the other room and found her chair at the table.

"He knew I was there with him," she tried to whisper. "He knew I was, I know! But I wish I could tell him I'm sorry. Oh, I wish I could!"

And Old Jerry found her so, head pillowed upon her outstretched arms, her hair in a marvelous shimmering mass across her little shoulders when he came the next morning, almost before the day was fairly begun, to tell her all the things there were for him to tell.

CHAPTER XII

Monday morning was always a busy morning in Jesse Hogarty's Fourteenth Street gymnasium; busy, that is to say, along about that hour when morning was almost ready to slip into early afternoon. The reason for this late activity was very easy to understand, too, once one realized that Hogarty's clientele--especially that of his Monday mornings--was composed quite entirely of that type of leisurely young man who rarely pointed the nose of his tub-seated raceabout below Forty-second Street, except for the benefits of a few rather desultory rounds under Hogarty's tutelage, a shocking plunge beneath an icy shower, and the all pervading sense of physical well-being resultant upon a half hour's kneading of none too firm muscles on the marble slabs.

It was like Jesse Hogarty--or Flash Hogarty, as he had been styled by the sporting reporters of the saffron dailies ten years back, when it was said that he could hit faster and harder out of a clinch than any lightweight who ever stood in canvas shoes--to refuse to transfer his place to some locality a bit nearer Fifty-seventh Street, even when it chanced, as it did with every passing year, that he drew his patrons--at an alarmingly high rate per patron--almost entirely from far uptown.

"This isn't a turkish bath," Flash Hogarty was accustomed to answer such importunities. "If you are just looking for a place to boil out the poison, hunt around a little--take a wide-eyed look or two! There are lots and lots of them. This isn't a turkish bath; it's a gymnasium--a *man's* gymnasium!"

That was his invariable formula, alike to the objections of the youthful, unlimited-of-allowance, more or less hard-living sons that it "spoils the best part of the week, you know, Flash, just running 'way down here," and the equally earnest and far more peevish complaints of the ticker tired, just-a-minute-to-spare fathers that it cost them about five thousand, just to take an hour to work off a few pounds.

But they kept on coming, in spite of their lack of time and Hogarty's calm refusal to consider their arguments--some of the younger men because they really did appreciate the sensation of flexible muscles sliding beneath a smooth skin, some of them merely because they liked to hear Hogarty's fluently picturesque profanity, always couched in the most delightfully modulated of English, when the activity of a particularly giddy week-end brought them back a little too shaky of hand, a little too brilliant of eye and a trifle jumpy as to pulse. Hogarty had a way of telling them just how little they actually amounted to, which, no matter how wickedly it cut, never failed to amuse them.

The older generation dared do nothing else, even in the face of the ex-lightweight's scathingly sarcastic admiration of their constantly increasing waist-line--or lack of one. For their lines were largely a series of curves exactly opposite to those on which Nature had originally designed them.

They continued to come; they ran down-town in closed town cars, padded heavily across the sidewalk like sad bovines going to the slaughter, to reappear an hour or two later stepping like three-year-olds, serenely, virtuously joyous at the tale of the scales which indicated a five-pound loss. And the Saturday and Sunday week-end out of town which presently followed, with the astoundingly heavy dinners that accompanied it, brought them back in a week, sadder even than before.

Monday morning was always a very busy morning in Hogarty's--but never until along about noon. And because he knew how infallible were the habits of his patrons, Hogarty did not so much as lift his eyes to the practically empty gymnasium floor when a clock at the far side of the room tinkled the hour of eleven. The two boys who were busily scrubbing with waxing-mops the floor that already glistened like the unruffled surface of some crystal pool were quite as unconcerned at the lack of activity as was their employer. They merely paused long enough to draw one shirt sleeve across the sweat-beaded foreheads--it was a very early spring in Manhattan and the first heat was hard to bear--and went at their task harder than ever.

Hogarty had one other reason that morning which accounted for his absolute serenity. From Third Avenue to the waterfront any one who was well-informed at all--and there was no one who had not at least heard whispers of his fame--knew that the thin-faced, hard-eyed, steel-sinewed ex-lightweight who dressed in almost funeral black and white and talked in the hushed, measured syllables of a professor of English, loved one thing even more than he loved to see his own man put over the winning punch in--say the tenth. It was common gossip that a set of ivory dominoes came first before all else.

No man had ever ventured to interrupt twice the breathless interest with which Hogarty was accustomed to play his game. It did not promise to be safe--a second interruption. And Hogarty was playing dominoes this particular Monday morning, at a little round, green-topped table against the wall opposite the door, peering stealthily at the upturning face of each piece of a newly dealt hand, when the clock struck off that hour. But if Hogarty was oblivious to everything but the game, his opponent was far from being in that much to be envied state. Bobby Ogden yawned--yawned from sheer ennui--although he tried to hide that indication of his boredom behind a perfectly manicured hand, while he scowled at the dial.

Ogden was one of the Monday morning regulars--one of the crowd which usually arrived in a visibly taut-nerved condition at an entirely irregular and undependable hour. An attack of malignant malaria, contracted on a prolonged 'gator hunt in the Glades, coupled with the equally malignant orders of his physician, alone accounted for his presence there at that unheard of o'clock.

There were purplish semi-circles still painfully too vivid beneath his eyes; his pallor was still tinged with an ivory-like shade of yellow. And he fidgeted constantly in the face of Hogarty's happy deliberation, stretching his heliotrope silk-clad arms and tapping flat, heel-less rubber-soled shoes on the floor beneath the table in a fashion that would have irritated any but the blandly unconscious man across the table from him to a state of violence.

Ogden's quite perfectly lined features were smooth with the smoothness of twenty years or so. His lack of stability and poise belonged also to that age and to a physique that managed to tilt the scale beam at one hundred and eighteen--that is, unless he had been forgetting rather more rashly than usual that liquids were less sustaining than solids, when one hundred and ten was about the figure.

He was playing poorly that morning--playing inattentively--with his eyes always waiting for the hands to indicate that hour which was most likely to herald the arrival of the advance guard of the crowd of regulars. Hogarty himself, after a time, began to feel, vaguely, his uneasiness and lack of application to the matter in hand, and made evident his irritation by even longer pauses before each play. He liked a semblance of opposition at least, and he lifted his head, scowling a little at Ogden's last, most flagrant blunder, to find that his antagonist had moved without so much as looking at the piece he had slipped into position.

The boy wasn't looking at the table at all. He sat twisted about in his chair, staring wide-eyed at the figure that had pushed open the street door and was now surveying the whole room with an astonishingly calm attention to detail. Ogden was staring, oblivious to everything else, and with real cause, for the figure that had hesitated on the threshold was like no other that had ever drifted into Hogarty's place before. His shoulders seemed fairly to fill the door-frame, for all that bigger men than he was had stood on that same spot and gone unnoticed because of size alone. And his waist appeared almost slender, and his hips very flat, merely from contrast with all that weight which he carried high in his chest.

But it was not the possibilities of the newcomer's body that held Ogden's fascinated attention. In point of fact, he did not notice that at all, until some time later. Denny Bolton's long, tanned face was entirely grave--even graver than usual. Just a hint of wistfulness that would never quite leave them showed in his eyes and lurked in the line of his lips--an intangible, fleeting suggestion of expectation that had waited patiently for something that had been very long in the coming. And the black felt hat and smooth black suit which he wore finished the picture and made the illusion complete. His face and figure, even there in the doorway of Hogarty's

Fourteenth Street place, could have suggested but one thing to an observant man. He might have been a composite of all the New England Pilgrim Fathers who had ever braved a rock-bound coast.

And Bobby Ogden was observing. Utterly unconscious of Hogarty's threatening storm of protest, he sat and gazed and gazed, scarcely crediting his own eyes. Domino poised in hand, Hogarty had turned in preoccupied resignation back to a perplexed contemplation of whether it would be better to play a blank-six and block the game or a double-blank and risk being caught with a handful of high counters, when Ogden reached out and clutched him by the wrist.

"Shades of Miles Standish!" that silk-shirted person gasped. "In the name of the Mayflower and John Alden, and hallowed Plymouth Rock, look, Flash, look! For the love o' Mike look, before he moves and spoils the tableau!"

Hogarty lifted his head and looked.

Denny Bolton's eyes had returned from their deliberate excursion about the gymnasium just in time to meet halfway that utterly impersonal scrutiny. For a long moment or two that mutual inspection endured; then the boy's lips moved--open with a smile that was far graver than his gravity had been--and he started slowly across the floor toward the table. Hogarty half rose, one hand outstretched as if to halt him, but for some reason which the ex-lightweight scarcely understood himself, he failed to utter the protest that was at his tongue's end. And Young Denny continued to advance--continued, and left in the rear a neatly defined trail where the heavy nails of his shoes marred the sacred sheen of that floor.

Within arm's reach of the table he stopped, his eyes flitting questioningly from Hogarty's totally inscrutable face to the tense interest and enjoyment in Bobby Ogden's features, and back again. Hogarty's hard eyes could be very hard--hard and chilling as chipped steel--and they were that now. He was only just beginning to awake to a realization of that profaned floor, but the smile upon Denny's mouth neither disappeared nor stiffened in embarrassment before that forbidding countenance. Instead he held out his hand--a big, long-fingered, hard-palmed hand--toward the ex-lightweight proprietor. And when he began to speak there was nothing but simple interrogation in the almost ponderous voice.

"I--I reckon," he said slowly, "that you must be Jesse Hogarty--Mr. Jesse Hogarty?"

Flash Hogarty looked at him, looked at that outstretched hand--looked back at his steady eyes and the smile that parted his lips. And Hogarty did a thing that made even Bobby Ogden gasp. He bowed gracefully and reached out and silently shook hands. When he spoke, instead of the perfectly enunciated, picturesquely profane rebuke which the silk-shirted boy was waiting to hear, his voice was even smoother and softer, and choicer of intonation than usual.

"Quite so," he stated. "Quite free from error or embarrassing mistake, sir. I am Mr. Jesse Hogarty. You, however, if I may be permitted that assertion, have me rather at a disadvantage, sir."

He bowed again, once more elaborately graceful. Bobby Ogden hugged his knees beneath the table, for he knew from the very suavity of that reply all that was brewing. Hogarty's silken voice went on.

"Regrettable, sir, and most awkward. You, no doubt, have no objection, however, to making the introduction complete?"

The smile still hovered upon Denny's lips. Ogden noted, though, that it had changed. And he realized, too, that it had not been a particularly mirthful smile, even in the first place. Again Young Denny's eyes met those of the other boy for one moment.

"I'm Denny Bolton," he replied just as deliberately. "Denny Bolton, from Boltonwood--or--or I reckon you've never heard of that place. I'm down from the hill country, back in the north," he supplemented.

Hogarty turned away--turned back to the green-topped table and played the double-blank with delicate precision.

"Of course," he agreed softly. "Quite right--quite right! And--er--may I inquire if it was something of importance--something directly concerning me--which has resulted in this neighborly call?"

He did not so much as lift his eyes from the dominoes beneath his fingers. If he had he would have seen, as Ogden saw, that Denny's smile faded away--disappeared entirely. But when he replied the boy's voice was unchanged.

"I don't know's it's particularly important to you," he answered. "That's what I came down for--to see. I was directed--back a day or two I was told that maybe if I looked you up you'd have some opening for me, down here. I was told you were looking for a--a good heavyweight fighter!"

Bobby Ogden threw back his head to laugh. And instead he just sat there with his mouth wide open, waiting. He felt sure that there was a better moment coming. Hogarty fiddled with the dominoes and seemed to be considering that information with due deliberation and from every angle.

"I see," he murmured at last. "Surely. Quite right--quite right! And I may, I believe, safely assure you that I have several fine openings in the establishment for young men--for just the right sort of young men, of course. May I--er--inquire if you wish employment by the--er--

week, or just in your spare time, to put it so?"

The question was icily sarcastic. Denny's answer came sharp upon its heels. His voice was just as measured, just as inflectionless as Hogarty's had been.

"If you hire them here by the week," he said, "or for their spare time, I--I reckon I've come to the wrong establishment. I was only asking you for a chance to show you whether I was any good or not. I was told you'd be just as interested to find out as I was myself. Maybe--maybe I've made a bad mistake!"

Bobby Ogden was sorry he had waited to laugh. There was a hardness in the big-shouldered figure's words that he did not like; a directly simple, unmistakable rebuke for the sneer concealed in Hogarty's question that could not be misinterpreted. And something utterly bad flared up in the lean-faced black-clad proprietor's eyes--something of enmity that seemed to Ogden all out of proportion with the provocation. All the smooth suavity disappeared from his speech just as chalk marks are wiped out by a wet sponge. And Hogarty came swiftly to his feet.

"Maybe you were--maybe you did make a bad mistake!" he rasped out in a dead, colorless monotone that scarcely moved his lips. "But no man ever came into this place yet, and went out again to say he didn't get his chance. I know a few specimens who make a profession of pleading that. They're quitters--and they assay a streak of yellow that isn't pay dirt!"

His voice dropped in register. It just missed being hoarse. With a rapidity that was almost bewildering he began to give orders to the two boys who were still phlegmatically waxing the floor. And the English-professor intonation was gone entirely.

"You, Joe!" he called, "get out the rods; set 'em up and rope her off! Legs, you chase out and find Sutton, if he's not in back. You'll run into him at Sharp's, most likely. Tell him to come a-running. Tell him a new one's drifted in from the frontier--and thinks he needs to be shown. Move, you shrimp!"

Before he had finished speaking he had started toward the locker rooms at the rear. Denny he ignored as though he did not exist. He went without a sound in his rubber-soled shoes. Bobby Ogden, waking suddenly from his trancelike condition, leaped to his feet and ran after him. Hogarty halted at the pressure of the boy's pink-nailed fingers on his arm and wheeled to show a face that was startlingly white and strained.

"Why, you great big kid!" Bobby Ogden flung at him. "You big infant! You're really sore! Don't you know he didn't mean anything. He's only a kid himself--and you egged him into it!"

"Is he?"

From that gently rising inflection alone Ogden knew that interference was absolutely hopeless.

"Is he? Well, he's old enough to seem to know what he wants. And he's going to get it--see? He's going to get it--and--get--it--good! No man ever flung it into my face that I didn't give him a chance--not and got away with it."

Hogarty glanced meaningfully down at the restraining hand upon his sleeve and Ogden removed it hastily. He stood in dismayed indecision until the ex-lightweight had disappeared before he turned toward Young Denny, who had been watching in silence his effort at intervention. Denny had not moved. Ogden's almost girlishly modeled face was more than apprehensive as he stepped up to him.

"He's mad," he stated flatly. "You've got him peeved for keeps. And I guess you've let yourself in for quite a merry little session, too, unless--unless"--he hesitated, peering curiously in Denny's grave face, "unless you want to make a nice quiet little exit before he comes back with Sutton. You can, you know, and--and it may save you quite a little--er--discomfort in the long run. Sutton--well, the least I can say of Sutton is that he's inclined to be a trifle rough!"

Ogden saw that slow smile returning; he saw it start far back in the steady eyes and spread until it touched the corners of the other boy's lips again.

"You mean--leave?" Young Denny asked.

Ogden nodded significantly.

"That's just what I do mean--only a great deal more so!"

"But I--I couldn't very well do that now--could I?"

The silk-shirted shoulders shrugged hopelessly.

"Well, since you ask me," he said, "judging from what I've already seen of your methods, I--I'd say most emphatically no. I've done all I can when I advise you that now is the one best hour to make your getaway. It wouldn't be exactly a glorious retreat from the field, but it wouldn't be so painful, either. Just remember that, will you? I'm to fit you out with some fighting togs, I suppose, if you'll just come along."

He turned to follow in the direction which Hogarty had taken, and then paused once more.

"Beg pardon for the omission, Mr. Bolton," he added, and he smiled boyishly. "My name's Ogden--Bobby Ogden. Glad to become acquainted with you, I'm sure. And now, if you will follow on, I'll do my best for you. Would you mind walking on your toes? You see, there are just two things most calculated to get Flash's goat. One of 'em's marring up his floor with heavy boots, and the other is butting in when he's playing dominoes. You couldn't have known it, of course, but he can't stand for either of them. And together I am afraid they have got you in pretty bad.

You're sure you can't swallow your pride, and just beat it quietly while the chance is nice and handy? Maybe you ought to think of your family--no?"

Denny's smile widened. He shook his head in refusal. He knew he was going to like Ogden--like him for the same reason that he had liked the fat, brown-clad newspaper man in Boltonwood--because of the charming equality of his attitude and the frankness in his eyes.

"No," he decided, "I--I'm afraid I can't. I didn't mean to stir him up so, either, only--only I thought, just for a minute or two, that he was laughing at me. I think I'd rather stay and see it out. But you mustn't worry about me--I wouldn't if I were you."

Again Ogden shrugged resignedly. On tiptoe Denny followed him to the locker-rooms in the rear, and at a word of direction began to remove his clothes. While he plunged head-foremost into a bin in search for a pair of white trunks, Ogden kept up a steady stream of advice calculated to save the other at least a small percentage of punishment.

"Sutton's big," he exclaimed jerkily, head out of sight, "but he isn't fast on his feet. That's why they call him Boots. He steps around as though he had on waders--hip-high ones. But he's lightning hitting from close in--in-fighting they call it--where most big fighters don't shine. That's because he's had Flash's coaching. You want to keep away from him--keep him at arm's length, and maybe he won't do too much harm. I--I'd let him do all the leading, if I were you, and--and kind of run ahead of him." The voice came half-smothered from the cluttered bin of equipment. "That isn't running away from him because you're afraid, you understand. It's just playing him to tire him out, you know!"

It was silent for a moment while Bobby Ogden burrowed for the necessary canvas shoes. Then a hushed laugh broke that quiet and brought the latter bolt upright. With the trunks in one hand and the rubber-soled slippers in the other, Ogden stood and stared, only half understanding that the big boy before him was laughing at him for his solicitude and trying to reassure him with that same mirth.

"Funny, is it?" he snorted aggrievedly. "So very--very--funny? Well, I only hope you'll be able to laugh that way again--say even in a month or two!"

"I wasn't laughing at you," Young Denny told him soberly. "I--I was just thinking how strange it seemed to have somebody worried over me--worried because they were afraid I might get hurt. Most little mix-ups I've gone into have worried folks--lest I wouldn't."

CHAPTER XIII

When he had first looked up from the green-topped table and seen him standing there in the entrance of the gymnasium Ogden had only sensed the bigness of Denny Bolton's body--only vaguely felt the promise which his smooth black suit concealed. It was the face that had interested him most at that moment, and yet he had not even noticed the half healed cut that ran almost to the point of the chin. Young Denny's grave explanation of his quiet mirth caused him to look closer--made him really wonder now what had been its cause. There was a frankly inquisitive question half-formed behind his lips, but when he turned to find Denny sitting stripped to the waist, waiting for the garments which he held in his hands, he merely stood and stared. Bobby Ogden had seen many men stripped for the ring. It took more than an ordinary man to make him look even once--but he could not take his eyes off this boy before him. Once he whistled softly between his teeth in unconcealed amazement; once he walked entirely around him, exclaiming softly to himself. Then he remembered.

"Here, get into these," he ordered abruptly, and thrust the things into Denny's waiting hands.

While Denny was obeying he continued to circle and to admire critically.

"Man--man!" he murmured. "But you're sure put together right!" He was silent for a moment while he punched back and shoulders with a searching thumb. "Silk and steel," he went on to himself. "And not a lump--not a single knot! Oh, if you only knew how to use it; if you only knew the moves, wouldn't we give Flash the heart-break of his life! Now wouldn't we?"

Denny finished lacing his flat shoes and stood erect, and even Ogden's chattering tongue was silent. It was very easy now to see why that big body had seemed shoulder-heavy. From the shoulder points the lines ran unbroken, almost wedgelike, to his ankles. He was flat and slim in the waist as any stripling might have been. All hint of bulkiness was gone. He seemed almost slender, until one started to analyze each dimension singly, such as the breadth of his back, or the depth of his chest. Then one realized that it was only the slimness of fine-drawn ankles, the swelling smoothness of hidden sinews which created that impression. And Ogden's quick eye caught that instantly.

"I'd have said one-ninety," he stated judicially. "At least as much as that, or a shade better, before you undressed. Now I'd put it under--what do you weigh, anyhow?"

He slid the weight over the bar after Young Denny had stepped upon the white scales.

"One sixty-five--sixty-eight--seventy, and a trifle over," he finished. "Man, but you're built for speed! You ought to be lightning fast."

At that instant the boy called Legs opened the door and thrust in his head.

"The chief says if you're coming at all," he droned apathetically, "you might just as well come now."

Ogden threw a long bathrobe over his charge's shoulders as the latter started forward. He wanted to note the effect which the sudden display of that pair of shoulders and set of back muscles would have upon Flash Hogarty's temper. As they crossed the long room Denny's grave lack of concern was made to seem almost stolid in contrast with the heliotrope silk-shirted boy's excessive nervousness.

"Now remember what I told you," he whispered hoarsely. "Keep away from him--keep away and let him do the rushing--for he's got a punch that's sudden death! You can tire him out. He's old and his wind is gone."

The brass rods had been set up in their sockets in the floor and the space which they outlined in the middle of the room roped off and carpeted with a square of hard, brown canvas. The man called Boots Sutton was already in his corner, waiting, and his attitude toward the whole affair was very patently that of sheer boredom. He barely lifted his eyes as Young Denny crawled through the ropes at the opposite corner, behind the officiously fluttering Ogden. This was merely part of his every day's work; he spent hours each week either instructing frankly confessed amateurs or discouraging too-confident, would-be professionals. It was only because of the strangely venomous harshness with which Hogarty had given him his orders while he was himself dressing that he vouchsafed Denny even that one glance.

"I want you to get him," Hogarty snarled. "I want you to get him right from the jump--and get him!--and keep on getting him! Either make him squeal--make him quit--or beat him to death!"

But if Sutton failed to note the play of those muscles that bunched and quivered and ran like live things beneath the skin of the boy's back, when Bobby Ogden threw off the enveloping wrap with an ostentatious flourish and knelt to lace on his gloves, that disclosure was not entirely lost upon Hogarty. Watching from the corners of his eyes, Bobby saw him scowl and chew his lip as his head came forward a little. And immediately he turned to speak again in a whisper to Boots, squatting nonchalantly in his corner.

"There's no need, mind, of being careless," he cautioned. "He--he might have a punch, you know, at that. Some of 'em do--a lucky one once in a while. Just watch him a trifle--and hand it to him good!"

Sutton nodded and rose to his feet. Watch in hand, Hogarty vaulted the ropes, and Ogden, with a last whispered admonition, bundled up the bathrobe and scuttled from the ring.

At that moment Young Denny's bulkily slender body was even more deceptive. Sutton, even when trained to his finest, would have outweighed him twenty pounds. Now that margin was nearer thirty, and added to that, he was inches less in height. He was shorter of neck, blocky, built close to the ground. And the span of his ankle was nearly as great as that of Denny's knee.

Comparing them with detail-hungry eyes, Bobby Ogden saw, however, that from the waist up the boy's clean, swelling body totally shadowed the other's knotted bulk; he noted that, with arm outstretched, heel of glove against Sutton's chin, Denny's reach was more than great enough to hold the other away from him. Hard on the heels of that thought came the realization that that was a fine point of the game utterly outside of the boy's knowledge.

It was quiet--oddly, peacefully quiet for a second--in that long room. Then in obedience to a nod from Hogarty the lanky boy called Legs languidly touched a bell, and all that peaceful silence was shattered to bits. Ogden shouted aloud, without knowing it, a shrill, dismayed cry of warning, as Sutton catapulted from his corner; he shouted and shut his eyes and winced as if that rushing attack had been launched at himself. But he opened them again--opened them at the sound of a sickening smash of glove against flesh--to see Denny blink both eyes as his whole body rebounded from that blow.

Ogden waited, forgetting to breathe, for the boy to go down; he waited to see his knees weaken and his shoulders slump forward. But instead of shriveling before that pile-driver swing, he realized that Denny somehow was weathering the storm of blows that followed it; that somehow he had managed to keep his feet and was backing away, trying to follow faithfully his instructions.

Just as Ogden had pictured it would be, it all happened. Foot by foot Sutton drove him around the ring. There was no opening for Denny to return a blow--nothing but a maze of battering fists to be blocked and ducked and covered. Even the speed, the natural speed of lithe muscles for which Bobby had hoped, and hopelessly expected, was entirely lacking in every motion. Heavy-footed, ponderous, Young Denny gave way before that attack. Sutton, always reputed slow, was terribly, brutally swift of movement in comparison with the boy's faltering uncertainty.

Twice and a third time in the first minute of fighting Boots feinted aside his guard with what seemed childish ease and then drove his glove against the other's unprotected face. Time after time he repeated the blow, and at each sickening smack that answered the crash of leather against flesh Bobby Ogden gasped aloud and marveled. For at each jolt Denny merely blinked his eyes as he recoiled--blinked, and retreated a little more slowly than before.

At the bell Ogden was through the ropes and dragging him to his corner. A little trickle of blood was gathering on the point of Denny's chin where the glove had opened afresh the half-healed cut on his cheek; he was shaking his head as he waved aside the wet towel in Ogden's hands.

"Man, but you're some bear for punishment!" Ogden chattered, strangely weak himself beneath his belt. "If you only had a little speed--just a little! Why, he sent over a dozen to your chin that ought to have laid you away. But you're playing him right! You're working him, and if you can manage to hang on you'll get him in the end. Just keep away--keep away and let him wear himself out. But--oh, if you did have it. Just one real punch!"

Young Denny continued to shake his head--continued to shake it doggedly.

"Do--do you mean that that is as hard as he is likely to hit?" he queried slowly. "Do you mean--he was really trying--hard?"

Ogden stopped urging the wet towel upon him and stood and gazed at him with something close akin to awe in his eyes.

"Hard!" he echoed in a small voice. "Hard! How hard do you expect a man to hit?"

"Then your plan was wrong," Young Denny told him. "Of course," he hastened to soften that abrupt statement, "of course it would work all right, only--only I'm not much good at that kind of fancy work. I--I just have to wade right in, when I want to do any damage, because I'm slow getting away from a man. I can't punch--not hard--when I'm backing off. But now I aim to show you how hard I expect a man to hit, just as soon as they ring that bell!"

Hogarty was leaning over Sutton in the opposite corner, frowning and talking rapidly.

"What's the matter, Boots?" he demanded anxiously. "Haven't lost your kick, have you?"

Sutton gazed contemplatively down at his gloved hands and up again into his employer's face.

"Who'd you say that guy was?" he countered. "Where's he blowed in from--again?"

"A rube--down from the hills he called it. Just some come-on," Hogarty repeated his former information, "who thinks because he's cleaned up main street and licked the village blacksmith that he's a world-beater. Why, Boots? You aren't worried, are you?"

The contemplative gleam in Sutton's eyes deepened.

"Because," he stated thoughtfully, "just because there's some mistake--or--or he's made of brass. I--I hit him pretty hard, Flash--and do you know what he done? Well, he blinked. He--blinked--at--me. I never hit any man harder."

Hogarty's face had lost a little of its inscrutability. He flashed one sharp glance across at Young Denny in the other corner as he stepped back out of the ring and his frown deepened a little after that brief scrutiny. For the boy's body, squatting there, crouched waiting for the bell, was taut in every sinew, quivering with eagerness.

"You just failed to place 'em right, I guess," he reassured Boots. "Take a little more time, and get him flush on the bone. You can slow up a little. He isn't even fast enough to run away from you."

Again Hogarty nodded to the boy called Legs, and again the gong rang. Five minutes earlier it would have been hard for Bobby Ogden to have explained just what it was which he had half dreamed might lurk in those rippling muscles that bunched and ran beneath Denny's white skin. For want of a better name he had named it speed. And now, at the tap of the bell, he watched and recognized.

Swift as was Sutton's savage rush across the canvas, he had hardly left his corner in the ropes before Young Denny was upon him. The boy lifted and sprang and dropped cat-footed in the middle of the ring, hunched of shoulder and bent of knee to meet the shocking impact. It was bewilderingly rapid--terrifyingly effortless--this explosive, spontaneous answer of every muscle to the call of the brain. Just as before, Sutton feinted and saw his opening and swung. Young Denny knew only one best way to fight; he knew only that he had to take a blow in order to give one, and Sutton's fist shot home against his unprotected chin. He blinked with the shock, just as he had blinked before, and swayed back a little. Sutton had swung hard--he had swung from his heels--and he was still following that blow through when Denny snapped forward again.

It wasn't a long swing, but it was wickedly quick. From the waist it started, a short, vicious jolt that carried all the boy's weight behind it, and the instant that Denny whipped it over Sutton's chin seemed to come out to meet it--seemed almost to lift to receive it. And then, as his head leaped back, even before his body had lifted from the floor, the boy's other hand drove across and set him spinning in the air as he fell. He went down sideways, a long, crashing fall that dropped him limp in the corner which he had just left.

For a moment Denny crouched waiting for him to rise. Then he realized that Sutton would not rise again--not for a time. He saw Hogarty leap over the ropes and kneel--saw the boy Legs rush across with ammonia and water--and he understood. Ogden was at his side, pounding him upon the shoulder and shrieking in his ear. His eyes lifted from the face of the fallen man to that of the heliotrope silk-shirted person beside him.

"He's not really badly hurt, is he?" he inquired slowly. "I--I didn't hit him--too hard?"

Ogden ceased for a moment thumping him on the back.

"Hurt!" he yelped. "Didn't hit him too hard! Why, man, he's stiff, right now. He's ready for the

coroner! Gad--and I was pitying you--I was---

Young Denny shook him off and crossed and knelt beside the kneeling Hogarty. And at that moment Sutton opened his eyes again and stared dully into the ex-lightweight's face. After a time recognition began to dawn in that gaze--understanding--comprehension. Once it shifted to Denny, and then came back again. He made several futile efforts before he could make his lips frame the words.

Then, "Amateur," he muttered, and he managed to rip one glove from a limp hand and hurl it from him as he struggled to sit erect. "Amateur--hell! A-a-a-h, Flash, what're you tryin' to hand me?"

CHAPTER XIV

Denny had begun to get back into his clothes, pausing now and then to dabble tentatively at the freshly broken bruise with the wet towel which Ogden had at last forced him to accept, when the door of the dressing-room opened, and Hogarty stepped briskly inside and closed the door behind him.

The ex-lightweight ignored entirely the covertly delighted grin that lit up Bobby Ogden's features at his appearance. His own too-pale, too-thin lips were curved in a ghost of a smile; his face had lost all its dangerous tautness, but the greatest change of all lay there in his eyes. Their flaring antagonism had burnt itself out. And when Hogarty spoke it was once more in his smoothly perfect, delightfully measured, best professor-of-English style, for all that his opening remark was couched in the vernacular.

"Mr. Bolton," he began to the boy sitting quiet before him, "it looks as though we would have to hand it to you--which I earnestly desire you to believe I am now doing, with both hands. It may eventually prove that I lost a most valuable assistant through this morning's little flurry. I am not quite certain yet as to that as Boots is not sufficiently himself to give the matter judicious consideration.

"He still thinks I crossed him for the entertainment's sake--which is of little immediate importance. What I did come in for was to listen to anything at all that you may have to tell me. You'll admit, of course, that while your explanation as to your errand was strictly to the point, it was scarcely comprehensive. My own unfortunate temper was, no doubt, largely the cause of your brevity."

He hesitated a moment, clearing his throat and gazing blankly at the grinning Ogden.

"As Ogden here has of course told you, I'm--well, rather touchy when interrupted at my favorite pastime, and especially so when I am trying to get a few minutes relaxation with a pin-headed person who insists upon playing without watching the board.

"But you spoke of wanting an opportunity of--er--entering the game professionally. I'm not admitting you're a world-beater, understand--or anything like that! You've just succeeded in putting away a man who was as formidable as the best of them, five years ago. And five years isn't today, by any means. I've been looking for a real possibility to appear for so long that I've grown exceedingly sensitive at each fresh failure. And yet--and yet, if you did have the stuff---

Again he stopped and Denny, watching, saw the proprietor's face glow suddenly with a savage sort of exultation. His eyes, half-veiled behind drooping lids that twitched a little, went unseeingly over the boy's head as though they were visualizing a triumph so long anticipated that it had become almost a lost hope. Again that promise of something ominous blackened the pupils--something totally dangerous that harmonized perfectly with the snarl upon his lips.

Hogarty's whole attitude was that of a man who wanted to believe and yet who, because he knew that the very measure of his eagerness made him doubly easy to convince, had resolved not to let himself accept one spurious proof. And all his skepticism was shot through and through with hate--a deadly, patient sort of hatred for someone which was as easy to see as it was hard for the big-shouldered boy to understand.

There was craft in the ex-lightweight's bearing--a gentleness almost stealthy when he leaned forward a little, as if he feared that the first abrupt move or word on his part would frighten away that timid hope.

"I believe that you said some one sent you. You--you did not mention the name?"

Denny leaned over and picked up his coat from a chair beside the bench, searching the pockets until he found the card which the plump, brown-clad newspaper man had given him. Without a word he reached out and put it in Hogarty's hands.

It bore Jesse Hogarty's Fourteenth Street address across its face. Hogarty turned it over.

"Introducing the Pilgrim," ran the caption in the cramped handwriting of Chub Morehouse's stubby fingers. And, beneath, that succinct sentence which was not so cryptic after all:

"Some of them may have science, and some of them may have speed, but after all it's the man who can take punishment who gets the final decision. Call me up, if this ever comes to hand."

Very deliberately Hogarty deciphered the words, lifted a vaguely puzzled face to Young Denny, who waited immobile--and then returned again to the card. He even nodded once in thorough appreciation of the title which Morehouse had given the boy; he smiled faintly as he remembered Denny as he had stood there in the entrance of the big room, a short while before, and realized how apt the phrase was. Then he began to whistle, a shrill, faint, monotonous measure, the calculating glitter in his eyes growing more and more brilliant.

"So!" he murmured thoughtfully. "So-o-o!"

And then, to Denny:

"Was there--did he make any comment in particular, when he gave you this?"

The boy's eyes twinkled.

"He--made several," he answered. "He said that there was a man at that address--meaning you--that would fall on my neck and weep, if I happened to have the stuff. And he warned me, too, not to think that Jed The Red fought like a school boy, just because he was a second-rater--because he didn't, nothing like that!"

Hogarty laughed aloud. That sudden, staccato chuckle was almost startling coming from his pale lips. It hushed just as quickly as it had begun.

"Jed The Red, eh?" he reiterated softly, and he began tapping the card with his fingertips. "I see, or at least I am commencing to get a glimmer of those possibilities which Mr. Morehouse may have had in mind. And now I think the one best thing to do would be to call him up, as he has here requested. As soon as you finish dressing Ogden here will show you the rest of the works, if you'd care to look around a little. It is entirely likely that we shall want to talk with you directly."

He wheeled abruptly toward Ogden who had been listening without a word, the broad grin never leaving his lips. It was the silk-shirted boy to whom Hogarty addressed the rest of that sentence.

"And you," he said, and his voice shed with astounding completeness all its syllabled nicety. "You try to make yourself useful as well as pestilential. Get him a bit of adhesive for that cut. It looks as bad as though a horse had kicked him there.

"And the rest of your mob will be swarming in here in a few minutes, too. You can tell them that Sutton is--er--indisposed this morning, and that they'll have to play by themselves."

He nodded briefly to Denny and opened the door. But he stopped again before he passed out.

"There's one other question, Mr. Bolton," he said over his shoulder. "And please believe that I am not usually so inquisitive. But I'm more than a little curious to know why you did not present this card first--and go through the little informal examination I arranged for you afterward? It would have insured you a far different reception. Was there any special reason, or did you just overlook it?"

Denny dabbed again at the red drop on his chin.

"No, I didn't exactly forget it," he stated ponderously. "But, you see, I kind of thought if I just told you first that I wanted to see if I had any chance, you wouldn't make any allowances for me because I---"

Hogarty's second nod which cut him short was the quintessence of crisp satisfaction.

"I understand," he cut in. "Perfectly! And quite right--quite right!"

The ex-lightweight proprietor was sitting with his chin clasped in both palms, still staring at the half facetious words of introduction which the plump newspaper man had penciled across that card, when the door of the small office in the front of the gymnasium was pushed open a crack, some scant fifteen minutes after his peremptory summons had gone out over the wire, and made him lift his head.

His eyes were filmed with a preoccupation too profound to be dispelled by the mock anxiety upon the chubby round countenance which Morehouse thrust through that small aperture between door and frame, or his excessively overdone caution as he swung the door wider and tiptoed over the threshold, to stand and point a rigidly stubby finger behind him at the trail of nail prints which Young Denny's shoes had left across the glistening wax an hour or so earlier.

"Jesse," he whispered hoarsely, "some one has perpetrated here upon the sacred sheen of your floor a dastardly outrage! I merely want you to note, before you start running the guilty one to earth, that I am making my entrance entirely in accordance with your oft-reiterated instructions. I am not he!"

For all the change which it brought about in Hogarty's face that greeting might have been left unspoken. He vouchsafed the fat man's elaborate pantomime not so much as the shadow of a smile, nodded once, thoughtfully, and let his eyes fall again to the card between his elbows on the table-top.

"Come in, Chub," he invited shortly. "Come in." And as a clamor of many voices in the outer entrance heralded the arrival of the rest of Ogden's crowd: "Here comes the mob now. Come in and close the door."

Morehouse, still from head to toe a symphony in many-toned browns, shed every shred of his facetiousness at Hogarty's crisply repeated invitation. He closed the door and snapped the catch that made it fast before he crossed, without a word, and drew a chair up to the opposite side of the desk.

"Your hurry call just caught me as I was leaving for lunch," he explained then. "And I made pretty fair time getting down here, too. What's the dark secret?"

The black-clad proprietor lifted his lean jaw from his hands and gazed long and steadily into the newspaper man's eyes, picked up the bit of pasteboard which bore the latter's own name across its front and flipped it silently across the table to him. Morehouse took it up gingerly and read it--reversed it and read again.

"Nice little touch, that," he averred finally. "Rather neat and tasty, if I do say it myself. 'Introducing The Pilgrim!' Hum-m-m. You can't quite appreciate it of course, but--oh, Flash, I wish you could have seen that big boy standing there in the door of that little backwoods tavern, just as I saw him, about a week ago! Why, he--he was---"

"He's come!" Hogarty cut in briefly.

Morehouse's chin dropped. He sat with mouth agape.

"Huh?" he grunted. "He's--he's come where?"

Where his facetiousness had failed him Morehouse's round-eyed astonishment, a little tinged with panic, was more than successful. Hogarty permitted himself to smile a trifle--his queer, strained smile.

"He is here," he repeated gravely, and the words were couched in his choicest accents. "He came in, perhaps, an hour ago. That is his monogramed trail across the floor which caught your eye. Oh, he's here--don't doubt that! I'll give you a little review of the manner of his coming, after you tell me how you ever happened to send him--why you gave him that card? What's the answer to it, Chub?"

That same light of savage hope and cruelly calculating enmity, all so strangely mixed with a persistent doubt, which Young Denny had seen flare up in the ex-lightweight's eyes a little while before, back in the dressing-room, began to creep once more across Hogarty's face.

"You know how long I've been waiting for one to come along, Chub," he went on, almost hoarsely. "You know how I've looked for the man who could do what none of the others have done yet, even though he is only a second-rater. Twice I thought I had a newcomer who could put The Red away--and put him away for keeps--and I just fooled myself because I was so anxious to believe. I've grown a trifle wary, Chub, just a trifle! Now, I'd like to hear you talk!"

Morehouse sat and fingered that card for a long time in absolute silence--a silence that was heavy with embarrassment on his part. He understood, without need of explanation, for whom that chill hatred glowed in the spare ex-lightweight's eyes--knew the full reason for it. And because he knew Hogarty, too, as few men had ever come to know him, he had often assured himself that he was thankful not to be the man who had earned it.

That knowledge had been very vividly present when, a few days before, on the platform of the Boltonwood station, he had requested Denny Bolton to give him back his card for a moment, after listening to the boy's grave explanation of the raw wound across his cheek, and on a quite momentary impulse written across its back that short sentence which was so meaty with meaning. Every detail of Hogarty's country-wide search for a man who could whip Jed The Red was an open secret, so far as he was concerned; he was familiar with all the bitterness of every fresh disappointment, but he had never seen Hogarty's face so alive with exultant hope as it was at that moment.

And Morehouse was embarrassed and sorry, and ashamed, too, of what seemed now must have been a weak surrender to an impulse which, after all, could have been born of nothing but a too keen sense of humor. Hogarty's face was more than eager. It was white and strained.

"Flash," he began at last, ludicrously uncomfortable, "Flash, I'm sorry I wrote this, for I always told you that if I ever did send any one to you he'd be a live one and worth your trouble. Right this minute I can't tell why I did it, either, unless I am one of those naturally dangerous idiots with a perverted sense of what is really funny. Or maybe I didn't believe he'd ever get any farther from home than he was that morning when I gave him this card. That must have been it, I suppose. Because I never saw him in action. Why, I never so much as saw him kick a dog!"

"I'm telling you because I don't want you to be disappointed again--and yet I have to tell you, too, that right at the time I wrote this stuff, Flash, just for a minute or two, I believe I did almost think he might be an answer to your riddle. Maybe that was because he had already licked Jed The Red once, and I should judge, made a very thorough job of it at that. That must have influenced me some. But let me tell you all the story and maybe you'll understand a little better--something that I can't say for myself right at this very instant."

Morehouse began at the very beginning, looking oftener at the card between his fingers than at Hogarty's too brilliant eyes, which were fairly burning his face.

"In the first place, Flash," he went on, "you know as well as I do that The Red isn't a real champion and never will be. He has the build and the punch, and he's game, too--you'll have to hand him that. But stacked up against the men who held the title ten years ago he'd last about five rounds--if he was lucky. I don't know why that is, either, unless he is so crooked at heart

that he loses confidence even in himself when he has to face a real man. But the public at this minute thinks he is as great as the greatest. The way he polished off *The Texan* had convinced them of that--and we--well, the paper always tries to give them what they want, you know.

"Now that was the reason I ran up north last week, after I'd got a tip that Conway hailed originally from a little New England village back in the hills--one of those towns that are almost as up-to-date today as they were fifty years ago. It looked like a nice catchy little story, which I will, of course, admit I could have faked just as well as not. But it was the cartoons I wanted. You can't really fake them--not after you've once known the real thing. And as it happens I have known it, for I came from a village up that way myself.

"And, then, I was curious, too. I've always had a private opinion that if chance hadn't pitchforked Conway into the prize-ring he'd have made a grand success as a blackjack artist or a second-story man. But I wanted the pictures, and it wasn't a very difficult matter either to get them. You see I knew just where I'd find what I wanted, and things panned out pretty much as I thought they would.

"It didn't take more than a half hour to spread the report that Conway was practically the only really famous man in the country today, and in a fair way to make his own home town just as celebrated. It may sound funny to you, for you don't know the back-country as I do, but just that short article in the daily, coupled with a few helpful hints from me that I was looking for all the nice, touching incidents of his boyhood days, with the opinions of the oldest inhabitants, and maybe a few of their pictures to be used in a big Sunday feature, brought them all out: the old circle of regulars which always sits around the tavern stove nights, straightening out the country's politics and attending strictly to everybody's affairs but their own.

"Eager? Man, it was a stampede! I reckon that every male inhabitant within a radius of five miles was there when I opened the meeting with a few choice words--every man but one, and he comes in just a little later in this tale. They surely did turn out. It was as perfect a mass meeting as any I've ever seen, but the crowd itself didn't get much of a chance to talk--not individually anyhow. They were simply the chorus of 'ayes' which the town's big man paused now and then for them to voice.

"He did the talking, Flash. They called him 'Judge'--they most always do in those towns. He most certainly monopolized the conversation, and while he gave his monologue, I sat and got the best of them down on paper. They thought I was taking notes. I'll show you his picture some day. He's the meanest man I ever met yet--and I've met a few! Puffy-faced and red, and too close between the eyes. Fat, too! Somehow I'm ashamed of being plump myself, since meeting him.

"He did all the talking, and from the very first time he opened his mouth I knew he was lying. You can always tell a professional liar; he lies too smoothly, somehow. Well, to judge from his story Conway was the only unspotted cherub child that had ever been born and bred in that section. Oh, yes, *he'd* seen the promise in Conway; *he* knew that Conway was to be the pride and joy of the community, right from the first. *He'd* always said so! Why, *he* was the very man who had given him his first pointers in the game, when he was cleaning up all the rest of the boys in town, just by way of recreation. If I'd never had a suspicion before I'd have known just from those slick sentences of his that Conway had never been anything in that village but a small-sized edition of the full-blown crook he is today.

"But I didn't have any reason to contradict him, did I? He was doing all that I could ask, and more. For there wasn't a man in that whole crowd who dared to sneeze until he got his cue from the Judge. But that fat man got his jolt finally, just the same, and got it good, too.

"He had just finished telling how Conway had cleaned up the village kids, irrespective of size, whenever he felt the need of exercise, and was looking around at the circle behind him to give them a chance to back him up, when it happened. I told you a minute ago that I wished you could have seen that boy, as I saw him that night, standing there in that tavern doorway. You see, he'd come in so quietly that nobody had heard him--come in just in time to hear the Judge's last words. And when the Judge turned around he looked full into that boy's eyes.

"Oh, he got his, good and plenty! I didn't watch him very closely because it was hard for me to take my eyes off the white face of that boy at the door. But I did see that he went pretty nearly purple for a minute, and I heard him gurgle, too, he was that surprised, before he caught his breath. Then he stuck out one hand and tried to bluff it out.

"'There's one of 'em, right now,' he sang out; but he should have known that a man who's sure of his ground doesn't have to shout to make his point. 'There's Young Denny Bolton,' he said, 'who went to school with him, right here in this town. Ask *him* if Jeddy Conway was pretty handy as a boy!' And he laughed, Flash--commenced to chuckle! Oh, there was no misunderstanding what he meant to insinuate. 'Ask him--but maybe he's still a little mite too sensitive to talk about it yet--eh, Denny?'

"He thought he could bluff it--bluff me, with that boy standing there in the doorway calling him a liar as if I didn't know it all, yet at that minute I couldn't help but ask that boy a question. I think it was mostly because I wanted to hear what the voice of a man with a face like his would sound like, for he hadn't opened his lips to answer that fat hypocrite's insinuation.

"So I asked him if he had known Conway well--asked him if he had had a few set-to's with him himself. I'm not going to forget how he looked when he turned toward me, either. I'm not going to forget the look on his face as he swung around. And I'm remembering his voice pretty fairly well, too, right now!

"‘Maybe,’ he answered me, and he almost drawled the words. ‘Maybe I did,’ he said.

"Why, Flash, he couldn't have said more if he had talked for a week. He'd said all there was to say, now, hadn't he? But it let the Judge out, just the same, for he just gave the circle behind him the the high sign and set the crowd to laughing for a minute or two, until the tension was relieved. I didn't laugh myself. There didn't seem to be much of a joke about it after seeing that boy's eyes. It was Bolton--Young Denny, they called him--and I got his story, their side of it at least, after he shut the door behind him.

"It's another thing I'd be more likely to understand than you would, Flash, because you've never lived in a village like that, and I have. Back a hundred years or so the first settlement had been named for his family--Boltonwood, they'd called it--but I guess the strain must have petered out. From all I could gather the Boltons had been drinking themselves to death with unflinching regularity and dispatch for several generations back, and I heard a choice detailed description, too, of the way the boy's own father had made his final exit--heard it from that moon-faced leading citizen who did all the talking--that made me want to kick him in the face. I don't know yet why I didn't. I was sitting on the tavern desk with my feet on a level with his face. I should have bashed him a good one. It's one of the lost opportunities which I'll always regret, unless maybe I take a Saturday off some day and run up and beat him up proper!

"He gave me a nice little account of how the boy's dad had gone over, screaming mad, with the town's elite standing around saying, 'I told you so,' and that big scared kid kneeling beside his bed, trying to pray--trying to make it easier for him.

"Did you ever see a flock of buzzards circling, Flash, waiting for some wounded thing beneath them to die? No? Well, I have, and it isn't a pretty sight either. That was what they made me think of that night. And I learned, too, how they'd been waiting ever since for that boy to go the way his father had traveled before him; they even told me that the same old jug still stood in the kitchen corner, and would have pointed out his tumble-down old place on the hill, where they had let him go on living alone, only it was too dark for any one to see.

"Odd, now wasn't it? But it didn't come to me at that moment. I never gave it a thought that there was a man who had licked Conway once and might do it again. But I didn't forget him; I wanted to, that night, but I couldn't. And I guess I was still thinking about him when some one touched my arm the next morning, while I was waiting for the train, and I turned around and found him standing there beside me.

"Flash, have you noticed how grave he is--kind of sober-quiet? Have you? That comes from living too much alone. And he's only a kid, after all--that's all, just a kid. He startled me for a moment, but the minute I looked at him that morning I knew he had something on his mind, and after I'd tried to make it a little easier for him I gave him a chance to talk.

"He had a big raw welt across one cheek--a wicked thing to look at! You've noticed it, I see. Well, he stood there fingering it a little, trying to think of a way to begin gracefully. Then he got out the paper with the account of Jed The Red's last go in it and jumped right into the middle of all that was bothering him. He hunted out the statement of Conway's share of the purse and asked me if it was true. I told him it was--that I'd written it myself. And then he asked me, point blank, how *he* could get a chance at Conway. He--he said Conway had never been able to whip him, Flash--said he didn't believe he ever could!

"Now, I'm sentimental--I know that. But I manage to keep my feet on the ground now and then just the same. And so I want to say right here that it wasn't his words that counted with me. Why, I'd have laughed in his face only for the way he said them! As it was, I said too much. But I thought of you then--I couldn't help it, could I? It hit me smash between the eyes! His face had been reminding me of something--something I couldn't place until that minute. Flash, do you know what he made me think of? Do you? Well, he looked like a halftone print of the Pilgrim Fathers--the kind that they hang on the walls in the district schools. And it got me--got me!--maybe you know why. I don't. But I wrote it on this card, under your address, and gave it to him.

"I would have laughed at him only he was so mighty grave and quiet. One doesn't make a practice of laughing at men who are as big as he is--not when they carry themselves like that. I kept my funny feelings to myself, if I had any, while I spent a minute or two sizing him up. And that brought me back to his chin--back to that big, oozing cut. I had been waiting for an opportunity to ask him about it, and didn't know myself how to go about it. Just from that you can realize how he had me guessing, for it takes quite some jolt to make me coy. So I followed his own lead finally and blurted the question right out, without any fancy conversational trimmings, and he told me how it had happened.

"One of his horses had kicked him. You look as though you could have guessed it yourself! He didn't tell you, did he, Flash? No-o-o? Well, that was it. He said he had gone blundering in on them the night before, to feed, without speaking to them in the darkness. It isn't hard to guess what had made him absent-minded that night. You can't know, just from seeing it now, how bad that fresh cut was, either. It looked bad enough to lay any man out, and I told him so. But he said he had managed to feed his horses just the same--he'd worked them pretty hard that week in the timber!

"It wasn't merely what he said, you see; it was the way he said it. I've made more fuss before now over pounding my finger with a tack hammer. And I did a lot of talking myself in that next minute or two. A man can say a whole lot that is almost worth while when he talks strictly to himself. It wasn't alone the fact that he had been able to get back on his feet and keep on traveling after a blow that would have caved in most men's skulls that hit me so hard. The

recollection of what his eyes had been like that night before, when he had handed the Judge the lie without even opening his lips, helped too--and the way he shut his mouth, there on the station platform, when I gave him an opening to say his little say concerning the village in general. He just smiled, Flash, a slow sort of a smile, and never said a word.

"Man, he knew how to take punishment! Oh, don't doubt that! I realized right then that he had been taking it for years, ever since they had counted his father out, with the whole house yelling for the stuff to get him, too. He'd been hanging on, hoping for a fluke to save him. He'd been hanging on, and he didn't squeal, either, while he was doing it. Not--one--yip--out--of--him!

"So I made him give me back the card and I wrote the rest of this stuff across the back of it. And again I'll tell you, Flash, right now, I'm not sure why I did it. But I'll tell you, too, just as I told myself a few mornings ago, back there on that village station platform, that if I were Jed The Red and I had my choice, I wouldn't choose to go up against a man who had been waiting five years for an opening to swing. No--I would not! For he's quite likely to do more or less damage. I never thought he'd turn up, and I don't know whether I am sorry or not. But now that he's here, what are you going to do about it?

"It's my fault, but whatever you do I want to ask you not to do one thing. I want you to promise not to try to make a fool of the boy, Flash? You're, well--a little bit merciless on some of 'em, you know. It's not his fault, and I--why, damn it, I haven't met a man in years I like as I do that big, quiet, lonesome kid! Now, there's your story. It explains the whole thing, and my apologies go with it. What are you going to do?"

CHAPTER XV

Jesse Hogarty had been listening without moving a muscle--without once taking his two brilliant eyes from Morehouse's warm face--even when Morehouse refused to look back at him as he talked.

"Introducing The Pilgrim," he murmured to himself, after a moment of silence, and the professor of English accent could not have been more perfect, "The Pilgrim! Hum-m-m, surely! And a really excellent name for publicity purposes, too. It--it fits the man."

Then he threw back his head--he came suddenly to his feet, to pace twice the length of the room and back, before he remembered. When he reseated himself he was gnawing his lip as if vexed that he had showed even that much lack of self-control. And once more he buried the point of his chin in his hands.

"Do, Chub?" he picked up the other's question silkily. "What am I going to do? Well, I believe I am going to pay my debts at last. I think I am going to settle a little score that has stood so long against me that it had nearly cost me my self-respect."

That lightning-like change swept his face again, twisting his lips nastily, stamping all his features with something totally bad. The man who had never been whipped by any man, from the day he won his first brawl in the gutter, showed through the veneer that was no thicker than the funereal black and white garb he wore, no deeper than his superficially polished utterance which he had acquired from long contact with those who had been born to it.

"I'm going to pay my debts," he slurred the words dangerously, "pay them with the same coin that Dennison slipped to me two years ago!"

Little by little Morehouse's head came forward at the mention of that name. It was of Dennison that the plump newspaper man had been subconsciously thinking ever since he had entered Hogarty's immaculate little office; it was of Dennison that he always thought whenever he saw that bad light kindling in the ex-lightweight's eyes. Dennison was the promoter who had backed Jed The Red from the day when the latter had fought his first fight.

And, "You don't mean," he faltered, "Flash, you don't mean that you think that boy can stop---" Hogarty's thin voice bit in and cut him short.

"Think?" he demanded. "Think? I don't have to think any more! I know!"

For a second he seemed to be pondering something; then he threw up his head again. And his startlingly sudden burst of laughter made Morehouse wince a little.

"Don't make a fool of him, Chub?" he croaked. "Be merciful with the boy! Man, you're half an hour late! I did my best. Oh, I'm bad--I know just how bad I can be, when I try. But he called me! Yes, that's what he did--he as much as told me that I wasn't giving him a chance to get his cards on the table. So I ran him up against Sutton. And I did more than that. I told Boots to get him--told him to beat him to death--and I meant it, too! And do you know what happened? Could you guess? Well, I'll tell you and save you time.

"He went in and took enough punishment from Boots in that first round to make any man stop and think. He put up the worst exhibition I ever saw, just because he was trying to fight the way Ogden had coached him, instead of his own style. That was the first round; but it didn't take him

very long to see where he had been wrong. There wasn't any second round--that is, not so that you could really notice it.

"He was waiting for the bell, and the gong just seemed to pick him up and drop him in the middle of the ring. And Sutton went to him--and he caught Boots coming in! Why, he just snapped his right over and straightened him up, and then stepped in and whipped across his left, and Boots went back into the ropes. He went back--and he stayed back!"

Swiftly, almost gutturally, Hogarty sketched it all out: Young Denny's calm statement of his errand, his own groundless burst of spleen, and the outcome of the try-out which had sent him hurrying back to Denny's dressing-room with many questions on his tongue's tip and a living hope in his brain which he hardly dared to nurse.

Hogarty even recalled and related the late delivery of the card of introduction which Morehouse was now nervously twisting into misshapen shreds and, word for word, repeated the boy's grave explanation of his reason for that tardiness.

"He bothered you, did he?" he asked. "Well, he had me guessing, too, right from the first word he spoke. There was something about him that left me wondering--thinking a little. But I'm understanding a whole lot better since you finished talking. You're right, too, Chub--you're all of that! Five years is a long time to wait for a chance to swing. I ought to know--I've waited half that long myself. That was the way he started for Boots, that second round. Oh, it was deadly--it was mighty, mighty wicked. And now, to top it all, it's The Red for whom he was looking, too. I wish it wasn't so easy; I sure do! It's so simple I almost don't enjoy it. Almost--but not quite!"

Once more he shot to his feet and began pacing up and down the room. Morehouse sat following him to and fro with his eyes, trying to comprehend each step of this bewildering development which was furthest of all from what he had expected. He had listened with his face fairly glowing with appreciation to the ex-lightweight's account of Denny's coming. It was all so entirely in keeping with what he had already known of him. But the glint died out of his eyes after a time; even his nervously active fingers stopped worrying the bit of cardboard on the table.

"Granted that he could turn the trick, Flash," he suggested at last, "even admitting that he might be able to stop Conway after a few months of training to help him out, do you suppose he'd be willing to hang around and fight his way up through the ranks, until he forced 'em to let him have his match? It's usually a two year's job, you know, at the very least.

"I don't know why, Flash, but somehow the more I think of it, the surer I grow that there is something more behind his wanting that fight than we know anything about. It isn't just a grudge; it isn't just because of the dirty deal which that village has been giving him, either. I've been wondering--I'm wondering right now why he asked me if that account of the purse was true or not. Because men don't fight the way you say he fought, Flash, just for money. They fight hard, I'll admit, but not that way!"

There was a living menace in Hogarty's steady tread up and down the room. He wheeled and crossed, turned and retraced his steps noiselessly, cat-footed in his low rubbed-shod shoes. And he turned a gaze that was almost pitying upon the plump man's objection.

"Two years--to get ready?" he asked softly. "Chub, do you think I'd wait two years--now? Why, two months is too long, and that is the outside limit which I'm allowing myself in this affair. You're a little slow, Chub--just a bit slow in grasping the possibilities, aren't you? Think a minute! Put your mind upon it, man! I've told you I am going to pay Dennison off--and pay him with the same coin that he handed me. Doesn't that mean anything at all?"

He stopped short, crossed to the table and stood with his fingertips bracketed upon its surface. Morehouse knew Hogarty--knew him as did few other men, unless, perhaps, it was those who, years before, had faced him in the ring. And at that moment Hogarty's eyes were mere slits in his face as he stood and peered down into the newspaper man's upturned features, his mouth like nothing so much as a livid scar above his chin. There was nothing of mirth in those eyes, nothing of merriment in that tight mouth, and yet as he sat and gazed back up at them, Morehouse's own lips began to twitch. They began to relax. That wide grin spread to the very corners of his eyelids and half hid his delighted comprehension behind a thousand tiny wrinkles.

"I wonder," he breathed, "I wonder now, Flash, if you are thinking about the same thing I am? For if you are--well, you're too sober faced. You are that! It's time to indulge in a little hysterics."

And he began to chuckle; he sat and shook with muffled spasms of absolute joy as the thing became more and more vivid with each new thought. Even Hogarty's answering smile, coming from reluctant lips, had in it something of sympathetic mirth.

"That's just what I am thinking," he said. "Just that! It's what I meant when I said I was going to pay him--with his own coin. When a man plays another man crooked, he expects that other man to come back at him some day; he is looking for him to do that. But there is one thing he doesn't expect--not usually. He isn't looking for him to work the same old game. It is something new he's looking to guard against.

"And that is where Dennison is weak--in that spot and one other. He doesn't know even yet that when I fell for his game I fell hard enough to wake me up. He thinks I haven't a suspicion but what it was just an accident that laid Sutton out, two years back--just a lucky punch of The Red's that went across and spoiled our perfect frame-up. And he hasn't a suspicion that I know he was sure The Red was going to clean up Sutton, just as surely as they went to the ring

together.

"That is where he is weak. When a man is a crook he wants to be a real crook--and a real one is suspicious of everybody, even of himself."

He lifted one hand and pounded gently upon the polished surface of the table.

"The old days are done--dead--when a man got his reputation, and a chance at the big ones simply by fighting his way up from the bottom. I can give a man a bigger reputation in a week, with five thousand dollars' worth of real advertising, than he'd be able to get in a lifetime the old way. And training?--"

He jerked his head over one shoulder toward the dressing-rooms beyond the closed door.

"Right now he is just where I want him. Why, he looks like a pitiful dub if you hold him back. Order him to wait--and it's heart-breaking to watch him suffer. In one month I can teach him all he'll ever need to know about blocking and getting away. And the rest? Well, you'll get a chance to see just what happens when he really goes into action. I tell you it makes you stop and think.

"And I don't care what *he* is fighting for; I don't care what he wants. Pleasure or profit, it's all one to me. It's you I need most right now, Chub. I know you have always been a little particular about soiling your hands. A shady deal never appealed to me so much, either, but I'm not exactly bashful about this one. That part of it will be my own private affair. You handle the publicity end--merely hail Bolton as a comer, when the time is ripe. Are you--are you in on it?"

Morehouse thoughtfully scratched his head.

"I have been a trifle fastidious, haven't I?" he murmured, and unconsciously he mimicked Hogarty's measured accents. "But I hardly believe that any sensitive scruples of mine would annoy me much in this matter. I don't know but what I'd just as soon squash a snake with a brick, even if I knew it was somebody's beloved performing pet.

"That, as you say, is your side of the question. As for me--well, every time I remember that popeyed unctuous fat party they called the 'Judge' chanting Conway's innocent childhood, with that big, lonesome kid standing there in the doorway listening and trying to understand, I begin to sizzle. It is time that Conway was licked--and licked right!

"Oh, I'm in on it--I want to be there! But," he stopped and made a painstaking effort to fit the torn card together again, "but I have an idea that Bolton may be the one to hold out. There are some honest people, you know, who are honest all the time. He might not understand the necessity of--er--a little professional fixing, so to speak."

"Will he have to be in on it?" Hogarty countered instantly. "Will he? Not to any great extent, he won't. According to my plan he fights straight. Don't you suppose I know a straight man when I see one, just as well as you do?"

"Here's the whole thing--just as I'll put it up to Dennison before it's dark tonight. It's Dennison's own plan, too, in the first place, so he hasn't any kick coming. We'll match Bolton against one of the fairly good ones--Lancing, say--in about two weeks. Lancing gets his orders to open up in the sixth round and go down with the punch--and stay down! That's plain enough, isn't it? Well, Bolton is fighting under the name of 'The Pilgrim,' and you step up the next morning and give him two columns--you hail him as a real one, at last.

"We'll match him with The Texan then. Conway whipped him back a week or two, but he had his hands full doing it. The Texan--and I ought to know--is open to reason if the figure is big enough to be persuasive. We'll see to that.

"He gets his orders, too--just as if they were really necessary! About the twelfth he lies down to sleep. Why, it's so simple it's real art! I'll just hold Bolton back until those rounds. I'll make him take it slow--and then send him in to clean up! Dennison is shy a match right this minute for The Red; they're all a little doubtful about him. The Pilgrim will be the only logical man in the world to send against him--that is, according to your sporting columns. And Dennison, of course, being on the inside, knows he is really nothing but a dub--knows it is simply a plain open and shut proposition. That is to say--he *thinks* he knows!"

Jesse Hogarty paused and the corners of his lips twitched back to show his teeth, but not in laughter.

"It's the same little frame-up that he sent against Boots and me," he finished. "He ought to be satisfied, hadn't he? And I'll have him on the street the next morning--I'll put him where he'll be glad to borrow a dollar to buy his breakfast with!"

For a long time they stared back into each other's face: Hogarty taut at the table side, Morehouse slouched deep in his chair. The latter was the first to break that pregnant silence. He was nodding his head in thoughtful finality when he lifted himself to his feet.

"You've got me," he stated. "You've got me snared! Not that I give two hoots about what happens to Dennison, mind! I don't--although I must admit that the prospect of his starving to death is a lovely one to contemplate. And I'd die happy, I think, if I could see The Red trimmed, and trimmed with conscientious thoroughness. But those aren't my reasons for going hands with you in this assassination.

"I know a hunch when I see one. I ought to, for I've spent the contents of my little yellow envelope often enough trying to make one come true. And I'm in with you, Flash, till the returns are all in from the last district, but it's because I know that there is something more than either of us dream of behind that boy's wanting to meet Conway. He has something on his mind; he

wants something, and wants it real bad. And I like him--I liked him right from the beginning--so I'll stick around and help. Maybe I'll find out what it is that's been bothering him, too, before I get through. But I wish I wasn't of such an inquiring turn of mind. It keeps one too stirred up."

He stopped to grin comically.

"Any objection, now that I've sworn allegiance, Flash, if I go out and present myself?"

Hogarty's whole tense body began to relax, his lean face softened and his eyes lost much of their hardness and glitter as he shook his head in negation.

"That's a little detail of the campaign which I had already assigned to you," he replied, and the inflection of his voice was perfect. "Not that I have any fears of his going the way of his forefathers, however, because I haven't. And if my assurance on that point perplexes you, you might ask him to have one drink and watch his eyes when he refuses you.

"But I would like to have you look out for him for a while. If you don't Ogden will--Ogden likes him, too--and he is too frivolous to be trusted."

Hogarty reached out one long arm and dropped a hand heavily upon Morehouse's shoulder. He was smiling openly now--smiling with a barefaced enjoyment which the plump newspaper man had never before known him to exhibit. And he continued to smile, while he stood there in the open door and watched Morehouse mince on tiptoe across the polished floor to the corner where Ogden was officiously presenting each member of the Monday morning squad of regulars, as they returned from the dressing-rooms, to the big-shouldered boy in black, whose face was so very grave.

Hogarty smiled as he closed his office door, after he had seen Morehouse slip his hand through the crook of Young Denny's arm, in spite of Bobby Ogden's yelp of protest, and clear a way to the outer entrance with one haughty flip of his free hand.

Hours later that same day, when the tumult in the long main room of the gymnasium had hushed and the apathetic Legs and his helper had turned again to their endless task of grooming the waxed floor, Dennison, the manager of Jed The Red, sitting in that same chair which Morehouse had occupied, cuddling one knee in his hands, fairly basked in that same smile. The purring perfection of Hogarty's discourse was enticing. The absurd simplicity of his plan, which he admitted must, after all, be credited to the astuteness of Dennison himself, was more than alluring. But that smile was the quintessence of hypnotic flattery.

It savored of a delightful intimacy which Jesse Hogarty accorded to few men.

CHAPTER XVI

In all that hill town's history no period had ever before been so filled with sensation as was that one which opened with the flight of Judge Maynard's yellow-wheeled buckboard along the main street of Boltonwood to herald the passing of the last of the line of men who had given the village its name.

One by one, in bewildering succession, climax after climax had piled itself upon those which already had left the white-haired circle of regulars about the Tavern stove breathless with fruitless argument and footless conjecture.

Old Jerry's desertion from the ranks of the old guard over which the Judge had ruled with a more than despotic tongue, bursting with bomblike suddenness in their midst that very same night which had seen Young Denny's dramatic departure, had complicated matters to an inconceivable degree. For, after all, he was the one member of the circle to whom they had all been unconsciously looking for a comprehensive answer to the question which the Judge's crafty exhibition of the boy's bruised face had created.

He enjoyed what none of the others could claim an absolutely incontestable excuse for visiting the old, weatherbeaten farmhouse on the hill above town--and in his official capacity they felt, too, that he might venture a few tentative inquiries at least, which, coming from any one else, might have savored of indelicacy.

Not but what the circle had enjoyed Judge Maynard's masterly recital, for it had held them as one man. But they were hungry also for facts--facts which could convince as well as entertain. Even the Judge himself had planned upon Old Jerry's co-operation; he had had it in mind to be patronizingly lenient that night; that is, after that first rebuke which was to leave him the undisputed master of the situation.

To reach the really great heights of which the evening's triumph was capable the old mail carrier's collaboration had been almost indispensable. They had been waiting with hungry impatience for him. And then Old Jerry had appeared--he made his entrance and his exit--and departing had left them gasping for breath.

Old Jerry had not waited to view the effect of his mad defiance of the town's great man. It is doubtful if he had given that side of the issue one passing thought, but his triumphant

withdrawal from the field had robbed the situation of not one bit of its decisiveness. Quiet followed his going, a stillness so profound that they heard him cackling to himself in insane glee as he went down the steps. And that hush had endured while they waited in a delicious state of tingling suspense for the first furious sentences which should preface his lifelong banishment from the circle itself.

For years they had whispered, "Just wait, he'll come to it--he'll go just like the rest." And so Young Denny's final weakening had not been so unexpected as it might have been. And more than once, too, when the Judge's harsh censure of him who had always been his staunchest supporter had left Old Jerry cringing in his place beside the stove, they had all felt the justice if not a premonition of final retribution to come. It was the debonaire dare-deviltry of Old Jerry's defiance rather than its unexpectedness which had proved its greatest sensation. That day's one supreme moment--the only one which had not suffered from too acute anticipation--came while they waited for the Judge's denial, that denial which was never spoken.

The town's great man had slumped back in his chair in a kind of stunned trance while the apoplectic purple of his earlier wrath faded from his face. He did open his mouth, but not in any effort to speak. It was only to lick his thick lips and gurgle noisily in his fat throat. He tried to rise, too, and failed in his first attempt--and tried again.

They had all realized what it was that made his knees wobble as he crossed to the door; they understood what had drained his face of all its color. Every man of them knew why the latch rattled under his shaking figure. The Judge had been afraid, not merely morally frightened, but abjectly, utterly terrified in the flesh--afraid of the threat in the insolent bearing of the little, shriveled man who had passed out into the night a moment before.

It could have been funny. It might have been sublimest farce-comedy, had they not lacked the perspective necessary for its appreciation. But it was enough that they realized that the demagogue had come crashing down--enough that, watching his furtive disappearance that night, they learned how pitiful a coward a blusterer really can be.

Old Jerry's own actions in those days which followed had furnished rich food for conjecture. The fact that it had been the little mail-carrier himself who had ridden in the carriage beside the slim girl with the tumbled hair, at the head of the dreary procession that toiled slowly up to the bleak cemetery behind the church, had, indeed, been worthy of some discussion. The spendthrift prodigality of the white roses which rumor whispered he had gone to place the next day over the new mound of raw earth had not gone unspoken. Even the resemblance of the girl who John Anderson had named Dryad in his hunger for the beautiful--even the likeness of her face with its straight little nose and wistfully curved lips, to the features of that small, rain-stained statue of the white and gold slip of a woman who had been his wife, came in for its share of the discussion, too.

But all those topics which were touched upon in the nights that followed were, at best, of only secondary importance. Inevitably the circle about the stove swung back to a consideration of that first day's major climax, until the very discord of opinion which hitherto had been the chief joy of those nightly sessions bade fair to prove their total disruption.

For the circle of regulars were leaderless now; there was no longer a master mind to hold in check the flood of argument and rebuttal, or preserve a unity of disagreement. Where before they had been accustomed to take up each new development and pursue it until it reached a state either too lucid for further consideration or an insolvable problem that dead-locked conversation, a half dozen different arguments sprang up each night, splitting the circle into wrangling factions which trebled the din of voices and multiplied ten-fold the new note of bitter personalities which had taken the place of former incontrovertible logic.

Judge Maynard's iron discipline was gone, and the old guard faced a quite probable dissolution in the first week or two which followed his going. More from habit than anything else they had waited that next night for him to come and clear his throat pompously and open the evening's activities. And the Judge failed to appear, failed just as signally as had Old Jerry.

And yet it was not the absence of the former which had left them leaderless. Not one of them had realized it the night before--but that second night they knew!

By his very rebellion Old Jerry had won the thing which years of faithful service had failed to bring. He had dethroned the despot, and the honors were his by right of conquest.

The circle knew that the Judge would never return; after one hour of fruitless waiting that was a certainty. But night after night they continued to gather, stubbornly, persistently hopeful that Old Jerry would come back. And in the meantime they almost forgot, at times, Young Denny who had gone the way of his fathers as they had so truly prophesied; they only touched a little uncomfortably upon the problem of the slim, yellow-haired girl alone in the battered cottage at the edge of the town, while they reviewed with startlingly fertile detail and a lingering relish that came very close to being hero-worship, his last brief remarks which had left the Judge a wreck of his former magnificence.

If Old Jerry realized all this that had come to pass he gave no outward sign of such knowledge. He even forgot to pause impressively upon the top step of the post-office those days, as he always had formerly, before he made his straight-backed descent with the pouches slung over one shoulder. There were mornings when he came perilously near to ignoring altogether the double line which, with a new deference, greeted his daily passage to the waiting buggy, and yet there was not one who dared so much as to whisper that there was anything in his air of preoccupation that savored of studiously planned forethought. But it is doubtful if he did realize

the change that had taken place, at least in that first week or two, for Old Jerry had much of a strictly private nature to occupy his mind.

He was never quite able to remember the things he had said that morning to the girl with the too-white face and tumbled hair, huddled in the half-light at the table before the window, or to recall in any sort of a connected, coherent sequence his own actions in those first few days which followed it.

It aggravated him for a day or two, this inability to piece out the details; it brought a peevish frown to his thin face and a higher, even more querulous note to his shrill falsetto voice, which, while they hardly understood it, nevertheless resulted in an even profounder hush in those respectful ranks. He couldn't even revisualize it clearly enough for his own private edification--for the joy of seeing himself as others had seen him.

Nothing remained but a picture of Dryad Anderson's face--the face that had tried so hard to smile--which she had lifted to him that first morning when he entered the front room of the little drab cottage at the edge of town. That was limned upon his brain in startlingly perfect detail still--that and one other thing. The memory of John Anderson's pitifully wasted form huddled slack upon the high stool, arms outstretched and silvered head bowed in a posture of utter weariness, remained with him, too, clinging in spite of every effort to dislodge it.

That whole week had not served to wipe it out. Day after day, as Old Jerry drove his route with the reins taut in his nervous hands, it floated up before him. And even when he wound the lines about the whipstock, letting the old mare take her own pace, and leaned back, eyes closed, against the worn cushions, the interior of that back-room shop with its simple, terribly inert occupant and countless rows of tiny white statues, all so white and strangely alike, crept in under the lids.

Old Jerry's mail route suffered that week; his original "system" of mail distribution, of which he had always been so jealously proud, went from bad to very, very bad, and from that to an impossible worse; and yet, while it became a veritable lottery for the hillsfolk who were dependent upon him whether they would receive the packet of mail which really belonged to a two-mile distant neighbor or none at all, in one respect the rural service improved immensely, and the improvement--and strangely enough, too--was as directly a result of that stubborn image of John Anderson's bowed head which persisted in haunting the mind of the servant of the Gov'mint as was the alarming growth of his lack of dependability.

Day by day Old Jerry grew less and less prone to let the leisurely white mare take her own pace. Instead, he sat stiffly erect a great portion of the time, driving with one eye cocked calculatingly upon the course of the sun, and his mind running far ahead of him, to the end of the day's route, when he would have to turn in at the cross-road that toiled up the grade to the wind-racked old Bolton place on the hill north of town.

They had always had a forbidding aspect--Young Denny's black, unpainted farmhouse and dilapidated outbuildings--even when he had been certain that just as surely as he reached the crest he would find the boy's big body silhouetted against the skyline, waiting for him, they had not been any too prepossessing. Now they never served to awake in him anything but actual dread and distrust.

Old Jerry laid it to the lonesomeness of the place--to the bleak blindness of the shaded windows and the untenanted silence--but he took good care that no loitering on his part would be to blame for his arrival at the house after dusk.

No one, not even he himself, knew how strong the temptation was that week to make tentative advances of peace to the members of the circle of Tavern regulars, for the more he dwelt upon it the finer the dramatic possibilities of the thing seemed. But he had misread in the hushed respect of his former intimates a chill and uncompromising disapproval, and he had to fall back upon a one-sided conversation with himself as the next best thing.

"I wa'n't brought up to believe in ghosts," he averred to himself more than once. "Ghosts naturally is superstition--and that ain't accordin' to religion, not any way you look at it. But allowing that there could be ghosts--just for the sake of argument allowing that there is--now what would there be to hinder him from just kinda settlin' down up there, as you might say? It's nice and quiet, ain't it? Sort of out of the way--and more or less comfortable, too?"

At that point in the mumbled monologue the white-haired driver of the buggy usually paused for a moment, tilting his head, birdlike, to one side, wrapped in thought. There were those shelves lined with countless white figures which also had to be considered.

"He must've worked mighty steady," he told himself time and again in a voice that was small with awe. "He must hev almost enjoyed workin' at 'em, to hev finished so many! And he kept at it nearly all the time, I reckon. And now, that's what I'm a-gettin' at! Now I want to ask how do we know he's a-goin' to quit now--how do we know that? We don't know it! And Godfrey 'Lisha, what better place would he want than that back kitchen up there? Ain't there a table right there by the window, all a-waitin' for him--an'--an'----"

Invariably he broke off there, to peer furtively at the sun, before he whipped up his horse.

"Git along!" he admonished her earnestly, then, "Git along--you! Nobody believes in ghosts--leastwise, I don't. But they ain't no sense nor reason in just a-killin' time on the road, neither. And I ain't one to tempt Providence--not to any great nor damagin' extent, I ain't!"

And yet in spite of all the uneasiness which the combination of the dark house and the

persistent image of the little, worn-out stone-cutter kept alive in him, in so far as Young Denny's team of horses was concerned, and the scanty rest of the stock which the boy had left in his care, Old Jerry kept strictly to the letter of his agreement. At the most it meant no more than a little readjustment of his daily schedule, which he high-handedly rearranged to suit his better convenience.

But all the rest which he had promised so fervidly to carry out--the message which he had meant to deliver the very next morning after the boy's departure and the explanation of Young Denny's bruised face, even a diplomatic tender of the damp wad of bills which Denny had pushed in his hand--had somehow been allowed to wait. For it had proved to be anything but the admirably simple thing it had seemed to the old man when he had volubly acquiesced to the plan.

He had forgotten it that first morning. With the well-planned opening sentence fairly trembling upon his tongue-tip when he opened the door, the whole thing had been swept utterly from his mind. And in the press of events that followed he never so much as thought of it again for days. When the memory of it did return, a week later, somehow he found it almost impossible to introduce the subject--at least impossible to introduce it gracefully.

That was one of the reasons for his failure to execute the mission entrusted to him. The other reason, which was far weightier, so far as Old Jerry was concerned, was even harder to define. He blamed it directly to the attitude of the girl with the tumbled yellow hair and blue eyes, which were never quite the same shade of purple. More than a small proportion of the remarks which he had prepared beforehand to deliver to her had consisted of reproof--not too harsh, but for all that a trifle severe, maybe--of her hasty and utterly unfair judgment of Young Denny. That, he had assured himself, was only just and merited, and could only prove, eventually, to have been for the best. But she never gave him a chance to deliver it. One moment of sadness on her part would have been sufficient excuse. If he could have surprised her just once gazing at him from moist, questioning eyes, he felt that that would have been enough proof of contrition and humble meekness of spirit on her part. But he never did.

Instead Old Jerry had never seen so astounding a change take place in any human being as that which came over her day by day. By the end of that first week the pallor had gone entirely from her cheeks. The deep dark circles which had rimmed the wet eyes which she had lifted to him that first morning disappeared so entirely that it was hard to remember that they had ever been there at all. Even the lithely slender body seemed fuller, rounder. To every outward appearance at least Old Jerry had to confess to himself that he had never seen a more supremely contented, thoroughly happy creature than Dryad Anderson was at that week's end.

And it irritated him; it almost angered him at times. Remembering his own travail of spirit, the self-inflicted agony of mind which he had undergone that day when he had first looked square into the eyes of his own soul and acknowledge his years of guilty unfairness to the lonely boy on the hill, he shut his lips tight upon the message he might have delivered and waited, stubbornly, for her to show some sign of repentance.

For a day or two a mental contemplation of this necessarily severe course brought him moments of comparative peace of mind. It justified in a measure, at least, his own remissness, and yet even that mind-state at times was rudely shaken. At each day's end, after he had made his reluctant ascent of the hill which led up to Young Denny's unlighted house, and a far speedier, none too dignified return, the little driver of the squealing buggy made it a point to turn off and stop for a moment or two before the gate of John Anderson's cottage. At first the girl's real need of him prompted this daily detour; then, when the actual need no longer existed, he excused the visit on the plea of her lonesomeness and his promise to Denny to look after her.

His own loneliness--for he had never been so lonely before in all his lonely life--and the other and real reason for this habit, he never allowed himself to scrutinize too closely. But each day he sat a little forward on the buggy seat as soon as he had turned the last sharp curve in the road and stared eagerly ahead through the afternoon dusk until he made out her slim figure leaning against the fence waiting for him. And every afternoon, after he had pulled the shuffling horse to a standstill, he bent down from his vantage point on the high seat to scan her upturned face minutely, almost craftily at times, for some tell-tale trace of tears on her long lashes, or a possible quiver of her lips, or a suspicious droop in her boyish shoulders. And he never discovered either the one or the other.

It was at such moments that his peace of mind suffered, for no sane man could ever have read, by any stretching of the imagination, anything akin to sorrow or sadness in the low laugh with which she invariably met his scrutiny. It fairly bubbled joy. Each day Old Jerry found her only happy--offensively happy--and where he had been secretly watching her for one betraying sign he became uneasily conscious after a time that very often she, too, seemed to be scanning his own face as if she were trying to penetrate into the inner tumult of perplexities behind his seamed forehead. Some days he was almost certain that there was a calculating light in her steady eyes--a hint of half-hidden delight in something he couldn't understand--and it worried him. It bothered him almost as much as did the unvaried formula with which she greeted him every afternoon.

"Have you any news for me today?" she always asked him. "Surely you've something new to tell me this afternoon--now, haven't you?"

The tone in which she made the query was never anything but disarming; it was quite childishly wheedling and innocently eager, he thought. But reiterated from day to day it wore on his

nerves after a while. Added to the something he sometimes thought he caught glimmering in her tip-tilted eyes, it made him more than a little uncomfortable. He fell back upon a quibble to dodge the issue.

"Was you expectin' a letter?" he always countered.

This daily veiled tilt of wits might have gone on indefinitely had not a new development presented itself which threw an entirely different aspect upon the whole affair.

A fortnight had elapsed since Denny Bolton's mysterious departure from the village when it happened. As usual, after the day's duties were completed with his hurried return from the Bolton homestead, Old Jerry turned off at the crossroads to stop for a moment before the cottage squatting in its acre of desolate garden. He didn't even straighten up in his seat that afternoon to gaze ahead of him, so certain he had grown that she would be waiting for him, a hint of laughter in her eyes and the same disturbing question on her lips, and not until the fat animal between the shafts had stopped of her own accord before the straggling fence did he realize that the girl was not there. Then her absence smote him full.

It frightened him. Right from the first he was conscious of impending disaster born quite entirely of the knowledge of his own guilt. The front door of the house was open and after fruitless minutes of panicky pondering he clambered down and advanced uncertainly toward it. His shadow across the threshold heralded his reluctant coming, and Dryad turned from the half-filled box upon the table over which she had been bending and nodded to him almost before he caught sight of her.

That little, intimately brief inclination of the head was her only greeting. With hands grasping each side of the door-frame Old Jerry stood there and gazed about the room. It had never been anything but bare and empty looking--now with the few larger pieces of furniture which it had contained all stacked in one corner and the smaller articles already stored away in a half-dozen boxes, the last of which was holding the girl's absorbed attention, it would have been barnlike had it not been so small. From where he stood Old Jerry could see through into the smaller back-room workshop. Even its shelves were empty,--entirely stripped of their rows of tiny white woman-figures.

He paled as he grasped the ominous import of it; he tried to speak unconcernedly, but his voice was none too steady.

"So you're a-house-cleanin', be you?" he asked jauntily. "Ain't you commencin' a little early?"

He was uncomfortably conscious of that interrogative gleam in Dryad's glance--that amused glimmer which he couldn't quite fathom--when she turned her head. She was smiling, too, a little--smiling with her lips as well as with her eyes.

"No-o-o," she stated with preoccupied lack of emphasis, as she bent again over the box. "No--I'm packing up."

Old Jerry had known that that would be her answer. He had been certain of it. The other interpretation--the only other possible one which could be put upon the dismantled room--had been nothing more or less than a momentary and desperate grasping at a straw.

For a while he was very, very quiet, wondering just what it was in her mind which made her so cheerfully indifferent to his presence. She filled that last box while he stood there in the doorway, stood off to survey her work critically, and then picked up a hammer that lay on the table and prepared to nail down the lid.

"I've hit my finger four times today," she apprised him between strokes as she drove the first nail home. "Four times this afternoon--and always the same finger, too!"

The very irrelevancy of the statement, coupled with her calm serenity, was appalling to the old man. She didn't so much as lift her eyes when she told him, but when the lid was fastened she whirled suddenly with that impetuosity which always startled him more than a little, her hands tightly clasped in front of her, and fairly beamed at him.

"There, that finishes everything--everything but the pots and pans," she cried. "And I'll need them a little longer, anyway, won't I? But maybe I won't take them with me, either--they're pretty old and worn out. What do you think?"

Old Jerry cleared his throat. He ignored her question.

"Ain't--ain't this a trifle sudden," he faltered--"jest a trifle?"

She shook her head again and laughed softly, as if from sheer joyous excitement.

"No," she said. "No, I've been planning it for days and days--oh, for more than a week!"

Then she seemed to catch for the first time the dreariness of his whole attitude--the dejection of his spare angular body and sparrowlike, anxious face.

"You're sorry I'm going," she accused him then, and she leaned toward him a little, eyes quizzically half closed. "I knew you'd be sorry!" And then, swiftly, "Aren't you?"

Old Jerry scraped first one foot and then the other.

"I reckon I be," he admitted faintly. "Kinda surprised, too. I--I wa'n't exactly calculating on anything like this. It--it's kinda thrown me off my reckonin'! Are you--are you figurin' on goin' right away?"

Dryad spun about and threw her head far on one side to scan the whole bare room.

"Tomorrow, maybe," she decided, when she turned back to him. "Or the next day at the very latest. You see, everything is about ready now, and there isn't any reason for me to stay, on and on, here--is there?"

A little tired note crept into the last words, edging the question with a suggestion of wistfulness. It was something not so very different from that for which Old Jerry had been stubbornly waiting throughout those entire two weeks, but he failed to catch it at that moment. He had heard nothing but her statement that she meant to remain at least another day. It made it possible for him to breathe deeply once again.

Much could happen in twenty-four hours. She might even change her mind, he desperately assured himself--women were always doing something like that, weren't they? But even if she did go it was a reprieve; it gave him one last opportunity. Now, for the present, all he wanted was to get away--to get away by himself and think! On heavily dragging feet he turned to go back down the rotting boardwalk.

"I--I'll drop in on you tomorrow," he suggested, pausing at the steps. "I'll stop in on my way 'round--to--to say good-by."

The girl stood in the doorway smiling down at him. He couldn't meet her eyes. As it was he felt that their gaze went through and through him. And so he did not see her half lift her arms to him in a sudden quite wonderful gesture of contrite and remorseful reassurance. He did not hear the first of the impulsive torrent of words which she barely smothered behind lips that trembled a little. His head was bowed so that he did not see her eyes, and if he could but have seen them and nothing else, he would have understood, without the words or the gesture.

Instead he stood there, plucking undecidedly at his sleeve.

"Because I--I wouldn't like to hev you go--without seein' you again," he went on slowly--"without a chance to tell you something--er--to tell you good-by."

He didn't wait for her answer. At the far bend in the road, when he looked back, she was still there in the doorway watching him.

He was not quite certain, but he thought she threw up one thin white arm to him as he passed out of sight.

CHAPTER XVII

It rained that next day--a dull, steady downpour that slanted in upon a warm, south wind. Old Jerry was glad of the storm. The leaden grayness of the low-hanging clouds matched perfectly his own frame of mind, and the cold touch of the rain soothed his hot head, too, as it swept in under the buggy hood, and helped him to think a little better. There was much that needed readjusting.

Throughout the early hours of that morning he drove with a newspaper spread flat upon his knees--the afternoon edition of the previous day, which, in the face of other matters, he had had neither the necessary time nor enthusiasm to examine until it was an entire twelve hours old. At any other time the contents of that red-headlined sheet would have set his pulses throbbing in a veritable ecstasy of excitement.

For two whole weeks he had been watching for it, scanning every inch of type for the news it brought, but now that account of Young Denny's first match, with a little, square picture of him inset at the column head, fell woefully flat so far as he was concerned.

Not that the plump newspaperman who had written the account of that first victorious bout had achieved anything but a masterpiece of sensationalism. Every line was alive with action, every phrase seemed to thud with the actual shock of contest. And there was that last paragraph, too, which hailed Denny--"The Pilgrim," they called him in the paper, but that couldn't deceive Old Jerry--as the newcomer for whom the public had been waiting so long, and, toward the end, so hopelessly.

It was really a perfect thing of its kind--but Old Jerry could not enjoy it that morning, even though it was Denny Bolton's first triumph, to be shared by him alone in equal proportion. Instead of sending creepy thrills chasing up and down his spine it merely intensified his doleful bitterness of spirit. Long before noon he breathed a leaden heavy sigh, refolded the sodden sheet and put it away in the box beneath the seat.

The old mare took her own pace that day. In a brain that was already burdened until it fairly ached there was no room for the image of the silver-haired stone-cutter which had made for speed on other occasions. He had plenty to occupy his mind which was of a strictly immediate nature.

A dozen times that morning Old Jerry asked himself what he would tell Dryad Anderson that night, when he stopped at the little drab cottage at the route's end, ostensibly to bid her good-by. He asked himself, in desperate reiteration, *how* he would tell, for he knew that the long

delay in the delivery of Denny's message was going to need more than a little explanation. And when he had wrestled with the question until his eyes stung and his temples throbbed, and still could find no solution for it, he turned helplessly to the consideration of another phase of the problem.

He fell to tormenting himself with the possibility of her having gone already. Everything in those bare rooms had been packed--there was no real reason for the girl to remain another hour. Perhaps she had reconsidered, changed her mind, and departed even earlier than she had planned, and if she had--if she had---

Whenever he reached that point, dumbly he bowed his head.

It was dark when he turned off the main road and started up the long hill toward the Bolton place--not just dark, but a blackness so profound that the mare between the shafts was only a half formless splotch of gray as she plodded along ahead. Even his dread of the place, which formerly had been so acute, did not penetrate the mental misery that wrapped him; he did not vouchsafe so much as one uneasy glance ahead until a glimmer of light which seemed to flash out from the rear of the house fairly shocked him into conscious recollection of it all.

He sprang erect then, spilling a cataract of water from his hat brim in a chill trickle down the back of his neck, and barked a shrilly staccato command at the placid horse. The creaking buggy came to a standstill.

He tried to persuade himself it was a reflection of the village lights upon the window panes which had startled him, but it was only a half-hearted effort. No one could mistake the glow that filtered out of the black bulk of the rear of the house for anything save the thing it was. Half way up the hill he sat there, hunched forward in a hopeless huddle, his eyes protected by cupped palms, and stared and stared.

Once before, the evening of that day when the Judge's exhibition of Young Denny's bruised face had been more than his curiosity could endure, he had approached that bleak farmhouse in fear and trembling, but the trepidation of that night, half real, half a child of his own erratic imagination, bulked small beside the throat-tightening terror of this moment.

And yet he did not turn back. The thought that he had only to wheel his buggy and beat as silent a retreat as his ungreased axles would permit never occurred to him. It was much as if his harrowed spirit, driven hither and yon without mercy throughout the whole day long, had at last backed into a corner, in a mood of last-ditch, crazy desperation, and bared its teeth.

"If he is up there," he stated doggedly, "if he is up there, a-putterin' with his everlasting lump o' clay, he ain't got no more right up there than I hev! He's just a-trepassin', that's what he's a-doin'. I'm the legal custodian of the place--it was put into my hands--and I'll tell him so. I'll give him a chance to git out--or--or I'll hev the law on him!"

The plump mare went forward again. There was something terribly uncanny, even in her relentless advance, but the old man clung to the reins and let her go without a word. When she reached the top she slumped lazily to a standstill and fell contentedly to nibbling grass.

The light in the window was much brighter, viewed from that lessened distance--thin, yellow streaks of brightness that quivered a little from the edges of a drawn shade. An uneven wick might easily have accounted for the unsteadiness, but in that flickering pallor Old Jerry found something ominously unhealthy--almost uncanny.

But he went on. He clambered down from his high seat and went doggedly across--steadily--until his hand found the door-latch. And he gave himself no time for reconsideration or retreat. The metal catch yielded all too readily under the pressure of his fingers, and when the door swung in he followed it over the threshold.

The light blinded him for a moment--dazzled him--yet not so completely but that he saw, too clearly for any mistake, the figure that had turned from the stove to greet him. Dryad Anderson's face was pink-tinted from forehead to chin by the heat of the glowing lids--her lips parted a little until the small teeth showed white beyond their red fullness.

In her too-tight, boyish blouse, gaping at the throat, she stood there in the middle of the room, hands bracketed on delicate hips, and smiled at him. And behind her the lamp in its socket on the wall smoked a trifle from a too-high wick.

Old Jerry stood and gazed at her, one hand still clutching the door latch. In one great illuminating flash he saw it all--understood just what it meant--and with that understanding a hot wave of rage began to well up within him--a fierce and righteous wrath, borne of all that day's unnecessary agony and those last few minutes of fear.

It was a hoax on her part. She had been trifling with him the day before, just as she had been playing fast and loose with his peace of mind for days. An ejaculation bordering close upon actual profanity trembled upon his lips, but a draft of cold air sweeping in at the open doorway set the lamp flickering wildly and brought him back a little to himself. His eyes went again to the girl in the middle of the floor. She was rocking to and fro upon the balls of her feet, every inch of her fairly pulsing with mocking, malicious delight.

She waited for him to speak, and he, stiff of back and grim of face, stood stonily silent. She seemed all innocently unaware of his unconcealed disgust. The quizzical smile only widened before the chilly threat of his beady eyes and ruffled forehead. And then, all in one breath, her little pouted chin went up and she burst into a low gurgle of utter enjoyment of the tableau.

"Well," she demanded, "aren't you ever going to say anything? Here I am! I--I decided to move today--there really wasn't any use of waiting. Aren't you surprised--just a little?"

The meekness of her voice, so wholly belied by her eyes and lips and swaying boy-like body, only tightened the old man's mouth. He was still reviewing all that long day's mental torment, counting the wasted hours which might have been applied to a soul-satisfying feast upon Morehouse's red-headlined account in the paper. No veteran had ever marched more hopelessly into a cannon's mouth than he had approached the door of that kitchen.

And yet a flood of thankfulness, the direct reflex of his first impotent rage, threatened to sweep up and drown the fires of his wrath. Already he wanted to slump down into a chair and rest weary body and wearier, relieved brain; he wanted a minute or two in which to realize that she was there--that his unfulfilled promise was still far from being actual catastrophe--and he would not let himself. Not yet!

She had been playing with him--playing with him cat-and-mouse fashion. The birdlike features which had begun to relax hardened once more.

"Maybe I be," he answered her question with noncommittal grimness. "Maybe I be--and maybe I ain't!" And then, almost belligerently: "Your lamp's a-smokin'!"

She turned and strained on tiptoe and lowered it.

"I thought you would be," she agreed, too gravely for his complete comfort, when she had accomplished the readjustment of the wick to her entire satisfaction. "For, you know, you seemed a little worried and--well, not just happy, yesterday, when I told you I was going to move I--I felt sure you would be glad to find that I hadn't gone far!"

Old Jerry remembered at that moment and he removed his soaked hat. He turned, too, and drew up a chair. It gave him an opportunity to avoid those moistly mirthful eyes for a moment. Seated and comfortably tilted back against the wall he felt less ill at ease--felt better able to deal with the situation as it should be dealt with.

For a moment her presence there had only confounded him--that was when the wave of righteous wrath had swept him--but at the worst he had counted it nothing more than a too far-fetched bit of fantastic mischief conceived to tantalize him.

Her last statement awakened in him a preposterously impossible suspicion which, now that he had a chance to glance about the room, was confirmed instantly--absolutely. It was astounding--utterly unbelievable--and yet on all the walls, in every corner, there were the indisputable evidences of her intention to remain indefinitely--permanently.

At least it gave him an opening.

"You don't mean to say," he began challengingly, "you don't mean to tell me that you're a-figurin' on stayin' here--for good?"

She pursed her lips and nodded vigorously at him until the loosened wisps of hair half hid her eyes. It was quite as though she were pleased beyond belief that he had got at the gist of it all so speedily.

"Yes, for good," she explained ecstatically, "or," more slowly, "or at least for quite a while. You see I like it here! It's just like home already--just like I always imagined home would be when I really had one, anyway. There's so much room--and it's warm, too. And then, the floors don't squeak, either. I don't think I care for squeaky floors--do you?"

A quick widening of those almost purple eyes accompanied the last question.

The little white-haired figure in the back-tilted chair snorted. He tried to disguise it behind a belated cough, but it was quite palpably a snort of outraged patience and dignity. She couldn't fool him any longer--not even with that wide-eyed appealingly infantile stare. He knew, without looking closer, that there was a flare of mirth hidden within its velvet duskiness. And there was only one way to deal with such shallowness--that was with firm and unmistakable severity. He leaned forward and pounded one meager knee for emphasis as Judge Maynard had often done.

"You can't do it!" he emphasized flatly, his thin voice almost gloatingly triumphant. "Whatever put it into your head I don't know--but don't you realize what you're a-doin', comin' up here like this and movin' in, high-handed, without speaking to nobody? Well, you've made yourself liable to trespass--that's what you've done! Trespass and house-breaking, too, I guess, without interviewin' me first!"

The violet eyes flew wider. Old Jerry was certain that he caught a gleam of apprehension in them. She took one faltering step toward him and then stopped, irresolute, apparently. Somehow the mute appeal in that whole poise was too much, even for his outraged dignity. Maybe he had gone a little too far. He attempted to temper the harshness of it.

"Not a-course," he added deprecatingly, "meanin' that anything like that would be likely to happen to you. Seein' as you didn't exactly understand, I wouldn't take no steps against you." And, even more encouragingly, "I doubt if I'd hev any legal right to proceed against anybody without seeing Den--without seeing the rightful owner first."

He bit his tongue painfully in covering that slip, but Dryad had not seemed to notice it. She crossed back to the stove and in an absolute silence fell to prodding with a fork beneath steaming lids.

"I really should have thought of that myself," she murmured pensively. "After seeing you return

from here every afternoon, I should have known he--the place had been left in your care."

It rather startled him--that half absent-minded statement of hers--it disturbed his confidence in his command of the situation. Sitting there he told himself that he should have realized long ago that she could easily watch the hill road from the door of the little drab cottage huddled at the end of Judge Maynard's acres.

He began to feel guilty again--began to wonder just how much his daily visits to Denny's place had led her to suspect. But Dryad did not wait for any reply. She had turned once more until she was facing him, her lips beginning to curl again, petal-like, at the corners.

"But you would have to interview the real owner first?" she inquired insistently. "You do think that would be necessary before you could make me leave, don't you?"

He nodded--nodded warily. Something in her bearing put him on his guard. And then, before he knew how it had happened, a little rush had carried her across the room and she was kneeling at his feet, her face upflung to him.

"Then you'll have to interview me,"--the words trembled madly, breathlessly, from her lips. "You'll have to interview me--because--because I own it all--all--every bit of it!"

And she laughed up at him--laughed with a queer, choking, strained note catching in her throat up into his blankly incredulous face. He felt her thin young arms tighten about him; he even half caught her next hysterical words in spite of his amazement, and for all that they were quite meaningless to him.

"You dear," she rushed on. "O, you dear, dear stubborn old fraud! I punished you, didn't I? You were frightened--afraid I'd go! You know you were! As if I'd ever leave until--until--" She failed to finish that sentence. "But I'll never, never tease you so again!"

Then there came that lightning-like change of mood which always left him breathless in his inability to follow it. The mirth went out of her eyes--her lips drooped and began to work strangely as she knelt and gazed up at him.

"I bought his mortgage," she told him slowly. "I bought it from Judge Maynard a week ago with part of the money he gave me for our place there below his. He was very generous. Somehow I feel that he paid me--much more than it was worth. He's always wanted it and--and I--there wasn't any need for me to stay there any more, was there?"

Old Jerry had never seen a face so terribly earnest before--so hungrily wistful--but it was the light that glowed in that kneeling girl's eyes that held him dumb. It left him completely incapable of coherent thought, yet mechanically his mind leaped back to that night, two weeks before, when Young Denny had stumbled and gone floundering to his knees before her, there on that very threshold. The boy's own words had painted that picture for him too vividly for him to forget. And he knew, without reasoning it out, just from the world of pain there in her eyes, that she, too, at that moment was thinking of that limp figure--of the great red gash across its chin.

"I didn't help him," she went on, and now her voice was little more than a whisper. "I went and left him here alone--and hurt--when I should have stayed, that night when he went away. And so I bought it--I bought it because I thought some day he might come back--and need me even more. I thought if he did come--he'd feel as though he had just--come back home! And--and just to be here waiting, I thought, too, might somehow help me to have faith that he would come, some day--safe!"

The old man felt the fiercely tense little arms go slack then. Her head went forward and lay heavy, pillowed in her hands upon his knees. But he sat there for a full minute, staring down at the thick, shimmering mass of her hair, swallowing an unaccountable lump that bothered his breathing preparatory to telling her all that he had kept waiting for just that opportunity, before he realized that she was crying. And for an equally long period he cast desperately about for the right thing to say. It came to him finally--a veritable inspiration.

"Why, you don't want to cry," he told her slowly. "They--they ain't nothing to worry about now! For if that's the case--if you've gone to work and bought it, why, I ain't got no more jurisdiction over it--none whatever!"

Immediately she lifted her head and gazed long and questioningly at him, but Old Jerry's face was only guilelessly grave. It was more than that--benevolent reassurance lit up every feature, and little by little her brimming eyes began to clear; they began to glisten with that baffling delight that had irritated him so before. She slipped slowly to her feet and stood and gazed down at him. Old Jerry knew then that he would never again see so radiant a face as hers was at that moment.

"I wasn't crying because I was worried," she said, and she managed not to laugh. "I've been doing that every night, all night long, for two weeks. That was before I understood--things! But today--this afternoon I found something--read something--that made me understand better. I--I'm just crying a little tonight because I am so glad."

Old Jerry couldn't quite fathom the whole meaning of those last words of hers. They surprised him so that all the things he had meant to tell her right then of Young Denny's departure once more went totally out of mind. He wondered if it was the red-headlined account of his first battle that she had seen. No matter how doubtful it was he felt it was very, very possible, for at each day's end he had been leaving Denny's roll of papers there just as he had when the boy was at home.

But the rest of it he understood in spite of the wonder of it all. Whenever he remembered Young Denny asprawl upon the floor it seemed to him a thing too marvelous for belief, and yet, recalling the light that had glowed radiant in that girl's eyes, he knew it was the only thing left to believe.

He talked it over with himself that night on the way home.

"She bought it so's if he ever did want to come back, he'd feel as if he had come back home," he repeated her words, and he pondered long upon them. There was only one possible deduction.

"She thought he wouldn't have nothing left to buy it back when he did come--that he'd be started on the road all the rest of 'em traveled and pretty well--shot--to--pieces! That's what she thought," he decided.

He shook his head over it.

"And she didn't know," he marveled. "She didn't know how that old jug really got broke--because I ain't told her yet! But she's waitin' for him just the same--just a-waitin' for him, no matter how he comes. Figurin' on takin' care of him, too--that's what she was doin'--her that ain't no bigger'n his little finger!"

The storm had blown over long before his buggy went rattling down that long hill, and he sat with the reins dangling neglected between his knees and squinted up at the stars.

"I always did consider I'd been pretty lucky," he confided after a time to the plump mare's lazily flopping ears, "never gettin' mixed up in any matrimonial tangle, so to speak. But now--now I ain't quite so sure." A lonesome note crept into the querulous voice. "Maybe I'd hev kept my eyes open a little mite wider'n I did if I'd ever a-dreamed anybody could care like that.... Don't happen very often though, I reckon. Just about once in a lifetime, maybe. Maybe, if he ain't too blind to see it when it does come ... maybe once to every man!"

That next week marked the beginning of an intimacy unlike anything which Old Jerry had ever before known in all his life, for in spite of the girl's absolute proprietorship he continued his daily trips up the long hill, not only for the purpose of leaving Young Denny's bundle of papers and seed catalogues, but to attend to the stock which the boy had left in his care as well. It never occurred to him that that duty was only optional with him now.

He never again attempted either, after that night, to explain his delinquency and deliver Young Denny's message to her. There seemed to him absolutely no need now to open a subject which was bound to be embarrassing to him. And then, too, a sort of tacit understanding appeared to have sprung up between them that needed no further explanation.

Only once was the temptation to confess to her the real reason for Denny's sudden going almost stronger than he could resist. That was quite a month later, when the news of the boy's second battle was flaunted broadcast by the same red-headlined sheet. Then for days he considered the advisability of such a move.

It was not some one to share his hot pride that he wanted; he had lived his whole life almost entirely within himself, and so his elation was no less keen because he had no second person with whom to discuss the victory. He wanted her opinion on a quite different question--a question which he felt utterly incapable of deciding for himself. It was no less a plan than that he should be present at the match which was already hinted at between "The Pilgrim" and Jed The Red--Jeddy Conway, from that very village.

There were days when he almost felt that she knew of this new perplexity of his, felt that she really had seen that account of Young Denny's first fight and had been watching for the second, and at such times only a mumbled excuse and a hasty retreat saved him from baring his secret desire.

"She'd think I'd gone stark crazy," he excused his lack of courage. "She'd say I was a-goin' into my second childhood!"

Yet in the end it was the girl with the tip-tilted eyes who decided it for him.

Spring had slipped into early summer when the day came which made the gossip of "The Pilgrim's" possible bid for the championship a certainty. It was harder than ever for Old Jerry after that. Each fresh day's issue brought forth a long and exhaustive comparison of the two men's chances--of their strength and weaknesses. The technical discussion the old man skipped; it was undecipherable to him and enough that Young Denny was hailed as a certain winner.

And then as the day set for the match crept nearer and nearer, he began to notice a new and alarming change in the tone of that daily column. At first it was only fleeting--too intangible for one to place one's finger upon it. But by the end of another week it was openly inquiring whether "The Pilgrim" had as much as an even chance of winning after all.

It bewildered Old Jerry; it was beyond his comprehension, and had he not been so depressed himself he would have noted the change that came over the girl, too, these days. He never entered the big back kitchen now to hear her humming softly to herself, and sometimes he had to speak several times before she even heard him.

That continued for almost a week, and then there came a day, a scant three days before the date which he had hungrily underlined in red upon a mental calendar, which brought the whole vexing indecision to a precipitate head.

Old Jerry read that day's column in the sporting extra with weazened face going red with anger--read it with fists knotted. Those others had been merely skeptical--doubtful of "The Pilgrim's" willingness to meet the champion--and now it openly scoffed at him; it laughed at his ability, lashed him with ridicule. And, to cap it all, it accused him openly of having already "sold out" to his opponent.

When the little white-haired driver of the buggy reached the house on the hill that night he was as pale as he had been red, hours before, and he pleaded fatigue to excuse his too hasty departure. He did not see that she was almost as openly eager to have him go or that she almost ran across to the table under the light with the packet of papers as he turned away.

Had he noticed he would have been better prepared the next night for the scene that met him when he opened her door at dusk. One step was all he took, and then he stopped, wide-eyed, aghast. Dryad was standing in the middle of the room, her hair loose about her shoulders, lips drawn dangerously back from tight little teeth, fists clenched at her throat, and her eyes flaming.

Old Jerry had never before seen her in a rage; he had never before seen anybody so terribly, pallidly violent. As he entered her eyes shot up to his. He heard her breath come and go, come and go, between dry lips. And suddenly she lifted her feet and stamped upon the newspaper strewn about her on the floor--infinitesimal shreds which she had torn and flung from her.

"It's a lie!" she gasped. "It's a lie--a lie! They said he couldn't win anyway; they said he had sold--sold his chance to win--and they lie! He's never been whipped. He's never--been--whipped--yet!"

It frightened him. The very straining of her throat and the mad rise and fall of her breast made him afraid for her. In his effort to quiet her he hardly reckoned what he was saying.

"Why, it--it don't mean nothin'," he stated mildly. "That newspaper trash ain't no account, anyway you look at it."

"Then why do they print it?" she stormed. "How do they dare to print it? They've been doing it for days--weeks!"

He felt more equal to that question. The answer fairly popped into his brain.

"They hev to, I reckon," he said with a fine semblance of cheerfulness. "If they didn't maybe everybody'd be so sure he'd win that they wouldn't even bother to go to see it." And then, very carelessly, as though it was of little importance: "Don't know's I would hev thought of goin' myself if it hadn't been for that. It's advertisin' I reckon--just advertisin'!"

Her fists came down from her chin; her whole body relaxed. It was that bewildering change of mood which he could never hope to follow. She even started toward him.

"Wouldn't have thought of it!" she repeated. "Why--why, you don't mean that you *aren't* going?"

It was quite as though she had never considered the possibility of such a contingency. Old Jerry's mouth dropped open while he stared at her.

"Go," he stammered, "me go! Why, it's goin' to happen tomorrow night!"

She nodded her head in apparent unconsciousness of his astonishment.

"You'll have to leave on the early train," she agreed, "and--and so I won't see you again."

She turned her back upon him for a moment. He realized that she was fumbling inside the throat of the little, too-tight blouse. When she faced him again there was something in the palm of her outstretched hand.

"I've been waiting for you to come tonight," she went on, "and it was hard waiting. That's why I tore the paper up, I think. And now, will you--will you give him this for me--give it to him when he has won? You won't have to say anything." She hesitated. "I--I think he'll understand!"

Old Jerry reached out and took it from her--a bit of a red silk bow, dotted with silver spangles. He gazed at it a moment before he tucked it away in an inside pocket, and in that moment of respite his brain raced madly.

"Of course I figured on goin'," he said, when his breath returned, "but I been a little undecided--jest a trifle! But I ought to be there; he might be a mite anxious if they wasn't somebody from home. And I'll give it to him then--I'll give it to him when he's won!"

He went a bit unsteadily back to his waiting buggy.

"She had that all ready to give me," he said to himself as he climbed up to the high seat. Tentatively his fingers touched the little lump that the spangly bow of red made inside his coat. "She's had it all ready for me--mebby for days! But how'd she know I was a-goin'?" he asked himself. "How'd *she* know, when I didn't know myself?"

He gave it up as a feminine whimsicality too deep for mere male wisdom. Once on the way back he thought of the route that would go mailless the next day.

"'Twon't hurt 'em none to wait a day or so," he stated, and his voice was just a little tinged with importance. "Maybe it'll do 'em good. And there ain't no way out of it, anyhow--for I surely got to be there!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Morehouse did not hear the door in the opaque glass partition that walled his desk off from the outer editorial offices open and close, for all that it was very quiet. Ever since the hour which followed the going to press of the afternoon edition of the paper the huge room, with its littered floor and flat-topped tables, had been deserted, so still that the buzzing of a blue-bottle fly against the window pane at Morehouse's side seemed irritatingly loud by contrast.

The plump newspaperman in brown was too deeply preoccupied to hear anything so timidly unobtrusive as was that interruption, and only after the intruder had plucked nervously at the elbow that supported his chin did he realize that he was not alone. His head came up then, slowly, until he was gazing back into the eyes of the little, attenuated old man who, head tilted birdlike to one side, was standing beside him in uncomfortable, apologetic silence.

It surprised Morehouse more than a little. For the life of him he couldn't have told just whom he had expected to see when he looked up, but nothing could have startled him more than the presence of that white-haired wisp of a man with the beady eyes who fitted almost uncannily into the perplexing puzzle which had held him there at his desk until dusk. He forgot to greet the newcomer. Instead he sat gazing at him, wide-mouthed, and after Old Jerry had borne the scrutiny as long as he could he took the initiative himself.

"Well, I got here," he quavered. "I been a-tryin' to get upstairs to see you ever since about three o'clock, and they wouldn't let me in. Said you was too busy to be bothered, even when I told 'em I belonged to the Gov'mint service. But I managed to slip by 'em at last!"

He paused and waited for some word of commendation. Morehouse merely nodded. He was thinking--thinking hard! The voice was almost as familiar to him as was his own, and yet it persisted in tantalizing his memory. He couldn't quite place it. Old Jerry sensed something of his difficulty.

"I'm from Boltonwood," he introduced himself, not quite so uncertainly. "I'm Old Jerry. Maybe you remember me--I sat just next the stove that night you was in town a-huntin' news."

Then Morehouse remembered. Old Jerry had not had much to say that night, but his face and his shrill eagerness to snatch a little of the spotlight was unforgettable. And it was of that very night Morehouse had been thinking--that and the face of the big boy silent there on the threshold--when the interruption came. But still he uttered no welcome; instead there was something close akin to distinct aversion in his manner as he drew up a chair for the old man.

Old Jerry felt the chill lack of cordiality, but he sat down. And after a long period of silence, in which Morehouse made no move to put him more at ease, he swallowed hard and went on with his explanation.

"I come down to--to see Denny fight," he stated. "It kinda seemed to us--to me--that he'd think it strange if somebody from his home town wa'n't there. So I come along. And I wouldn't a bothered you at all today--it's gettin' late and I ain't got my ticket to get in yet--only--only I was worried a mite--jest a trifle--and I thought I'd better see you if I could."

Morehouse tilted his head again.

Old Jerry gave up any attempt of further excusing his intrusion and went straight to the heart of the matter. He unfolded a paper that bulged from the side pocket of his coat and spread it out on the desk.

"It's this," he said, indicating the column that had scoffed so openly at Young Denny's chances. "You--you wrote it, I suppose, didn't you?"

Again that impersonal nod.

"Well, I just wanted to ask you if--if you really thought it was--if you think he ain't got no chance at all?"

The eagerness of that trembling old voice was not to be ignored any longer. But Morehouse couldn't help but recollect the eager circle of "Ayes" which had flanked the Judge that other night.

"What of it?" he inquired coolly. "What if he hasn't? I though Jed Conway was the particular pride of your locality!"

Old Jerry's beady eyes widened. There was no mistaking the positive dislike in that round face, any more than one could misunderstand the antagonism of that round-faced man's words.

For weeks Morehouse had been puzzling over a question which he could not answer--something which, for all the intimacy that had sprung up between himself and Denny Bolton, he had never felt able to ask of the boy with the grave eyes and graver lips. Even since the conference in Hogarty's little office, when he had agreed to the ex-lightweight's plan, it had been vexing him, no nearer solution than it had been that day when he assured Hogarty that there was more behind young Denny's eagerness to meet Jed Conway than the prize-money could account for.

Now, that afternoon, on the very eve of that battle, he sat there in the thickening dusk, unconscious of the passage of time, and listened to the explanation that came pouring from Old

Jerry's lips, haltingly at first, and then in a steady falsetto stream, and learned the answer to it.

The old mail carrier didn't know what he was doing. His one desire was to vindicate himself in the cold eyes of the man before him. But he told it well and he did not spare himself.

Once he thought he caught a glimpse of thawing mirth in that face when he had finished relating how Denny had led him, reluctant and fearful, from the kitchen of the farmhouse to the spot of blood on the stable wall, and from there to the jug in a heap of fragments against the tree-butt. And that fleeting mirth became a warm, all-enveloping grin when he had detailed the climax of the Judge's prearranged sensation that same night.

He knew then that he had set himself right, and he did not mean to go into it any more fully. It was the changed attitude of Morehouse that led him on and on. So he told, too, of Dryad Anderson's purchase of the bleak old place on the hill and her reason. But when it came to her wild fury against the paper that had dared to scoff at the boy he paused. For a second he calculated the wisdom of exhibiting the bit of a red bow that had been entrusted him. It, without a doubt, would be the only passport he could hope for to a share of the glory, when it was all over. For the time being he jealously decided to let it wait, and he turned back to the crumpled sheet upon the desk.

"She--she'd be mighty disappointed," he finished a little lamely. "She's so sure, somehow, it kinda worries me. You--you do think he's got a little chance, don't you--jest a trifle?"

It took a long time--Old Jerry's confession. It was dark before he finished, but Morehouse did not interrupt him by so much as the lifting of a finger. And he sat silent, gazing straight ahead of him, after the old man had finished. Old Jerry, watching him, wondered vaguely what made his eyes so bright now.

"So that's it, is it?" the plump man murmured at last. "So that's it. And I never dreamed of it once. I must be going stale."

He wheeled in his chair until he faced Old Jerry full.

"I don't know," he said. "A half-hour before you came in I didn't like even to think of it. But now--chance? Well, this deadly waiting is over anyhow, and we'll soon know. And I wonder--now--I wonder!"

With his watch flat in the palm of his hand Morehouse sat and whistled softly. And then he shot hastily to his feet. Old Jerry understood that whistle, but he hung back.

"I--I ain't got my ticket yet," he protested.

Morehouse merely reached in and hustled him over the threshold.

"Your unabridged edition, while it has no doubt saved my sanity, has robbed us both of food and drink," he stated. "There's no time left, even for friendly argument, if you want to be there when it happens. You won't need any ticket this time--you'll be with me."

Even at that they were late, for when they paused a moment in the entrance of the huge, bowl-shaped amphitheater, a sharp gust of hand-clapping, broken by shrill whistling and shriller cat-calls, met them. Far out across that room Old Jerry saw two figures, glistening damp under the lights, crawl through the ropes that penned in a high-raised platform in the very center of the building, and disappear up an aisle.

He turned a dismayed face to Morehouse who, with one hand clutching his arm, was deeply engrossed in a whispered conversation with a man at the entrance--too engrossed to see. But when the newspaperman turned at last to lead the way down into the body of the house he explained in one brief word:

"Preliminary," he said.

Old Jerry did not understand. But half dragged, half led, he followed blindly after his guide, until he found himself wedged into a seat at the very edge of that roped-off, canvas-padded area. It was a single long bench with a narrow board desk, set elbow high, running the entire length in front of it. Peering half fearfully from the corner of his eye Old Jerry realized that there were at least a full dozen men beside themselves wedged in before it, and that, like Morehouse, there was a block of paper before each man.

The awe with which the immensity of the place had stunned him began to lessen a little and allowed him to look around. Wherever he turned a sea of faces met him--faces strangely set and strained. Even under the joviality of those closest to him he saw the tightened sinews of their jaws. Those further away were blurred by the smoke that rose in a never-thinning cloud, blurred until there was nothing but indistinct blotches of white in the outer circles of seats.

And when he lifted his head and looked above him, he gasped. They were there, too, tiny, featureless dots of white, like nothing so much as holes in a black wall, in the smoke-drift that alternately hid and revealed them.

Faces of men--faces of men, wherever he turned his head! Faces strained and tense as they waited. That terrible tenseness got under his skin after a while; it crept in upon him until his spine crawled a little, as if from cold. It was quiet, too; oddly quiet in spite of the dull mumble that rose from thousands of throats.

Twice that hush was broken--twice when men laden with pails of water, and bottles and sponges, and thick white towels crowded through the ropes in front of him. Then the whole house was swept by a premature storm of hand-clapping for the men who, stripped save for the

flat shoes upon their feet and the trunks about their hips, followed them into the ring.

"Preliminary!" Morehouse had said, and there had been something of disinterested contempt in his voice. Old Jerry felt, too, the entire great crowd's disinterested, good-natured tolerance. They were waiting for something else.

Twice Morehouse left his place at the long board desk and wended his way off through the maze of aisles. The second time he returned, after the third match had been finished, Old Jerry caught sight of his face while he was a long way off--and Old Jerry's breath caught in his throat. His plump cheeks were pale when he crowded back into his place. The old man leaned nearer and tried to ask a question and his dry tongue refused. The plump reporter nodded his head.

Again the men came with their bottles of water--their pails--their towels and sponges. There was a third man who slipped agilely into the nearest corner. Old Jerry saw him turn once and nod reassuringly, he thought, at Morehouse. The little mail carrier did not know him; everybody else within a radius of yards had apparently recognized him, but he could not take his eyes off that lean, hard face. There was a kind of satanic, methodical deadliness in Hogarty's directions to the other two men inside the ropes.

Even while he was staring at him, fascinated, that hand-clapping stormed up again, and then swelled to a hoarse roar that went hammering to the roof. A figure passed Old Jerry, so close that the long robe which wrapped him brushed his knee. When Hogarty had stripped the robe away and the figure went on--on up through the ropes--he recognized him.

As Young Denny seated himself in the corner just above them Morehouse threw out his arm and forced Old Jerry back into his seat. Then the little man remembered and shrank back, but his eyes glowed. He forgot to watch for the coming of the other in dumb amaze at the wide expanse of the boy's shoulders that rose white as the narrow cloth that encircled his hips. Dazed, he listened to them shouting the name by which they knew him--"The Pilgrim"--and he did not turn away until Jed Conway was in the ring.

He heard first the cheers that greeted the newcomer--broken reiterations of "Oh, you Red!" But the same heartiness was not there, nor the volume. When Old Jerry's eyes crept furtively across the ring he understood the reason.

It was the same face that he had known before, older and heavier, but the same. And there was no appeal in that face. It was scant of brow, brutish, supercunning, and the swarthy body that rose above the black hip-cloth matched the face. Old Jerry's eyes clung to the thick neck that ran from his ears straight down into his shoulders until a nameless dread took him by the throat and made him turn away.

Back in Denny's corner Hogarty was lacing on the gloves, talking softly in the meantime to the big boy before him.

"From the tap of the gong," he was droning. "From the tap of the gong--from the tap of the gong."

Young Denny nodded, smiled faintly as he rose to his feet to meet the announcer, who crossed and placed one hand on his shoulder and introduced him. Again the applause went throbbing to the roof; and again the echo of it after Jed The Red had in turn stood up in his corner.

The referee called them to the middle of the ring. It was quiet in an instant--so quiet that Old Jerry's throat ached with it. The announcer lifted his hand.

"Jed The Red fights at one hundred and ninety-six," he said, "'The Pilgrim' at one hundred and seventy-two."

Immediately he turned and dropped through the ropes. His going was accompanied by a flurry in each corner as the seconds scuttled after him with stools and buckets.

They faced each other, alone in the ring save for the referee--The Pilgrim and Jed The Red. Then a gong struck. They reached out and each touched the glove of the other.

Old Jerry could not follow it--it came too terribly swift for that--but he heard the thudding impact of gloves as Denny hurtled forward in that first savage rush.

"From the gong," Hogarty had ordered, "from the gong!" The Red, covering and ducking, blocking and swaying beneath the whirlwind of that attack, broke and staggered and set himself, only to break again, and retreat, foot by foot, around the ring. The whole house had come to its feet with the first rush, screaming to a man. Old Jerry, too, was standing up, giddy, dizzy, as he watched Conway weather that first minute.

He had no chance to swing; with both hands covering he fought wildly to stay on his feet; to live through it; to block that right hand that lashed out again and again and found his face.

Each time that blow went across it shook him to the soles of his feet; it lifted the cheering of the crowd to a higher, madder key; but even Old Jerry, eyes a little quicker already, saw that none of those blows landed flush upon the side of the jaw.

Conway called to his aid all the ring-generalship of which he was capable in that opening round. Once that lightening-like fist reached out and found his mouth. A trickle of blood oozed red from the lips that puffed up, almost before the glove came away; once when he had seen an opening and led for The Pilgrim's own face, that wicked jolt caught him wide open. He ducked his head between his shoulders then. The shock sent him to his knees, but that upraised shoulder saved him. The force of that glancing smash had spent itself before it reached his unprotected neck.

There was no let-up--no lull in the relentless advance. He was on his feet again, grim, grasping, reeling, hanging on! And again that avalanche of destruction enveloped him.

He fought to drop into a clinch, for one breath's respite, his huge hairy arms slipping hungrily out about Denny's white body, but even as he snuggled his body close in, that fist lashed up between them and found his chin again. It straightened him, flung him back. And once more, before the certain annihilation of that blow, he ducked his head in between his shoulders.

Old Jerry heard the crash of the glove against the top of his head; he saw Conway hurled back into the ropes. But not until seconds later, when he realized that the roar of the crowd had hushed, did he see that a change had come over the fight.

Conway was no longer giving ground; he was himself driving in more and more viciously, for that deadly right hand no longer leaped out to check him. Twice just as Denny had rocked him he now jolted his own right over to The Pilgrim's face. At each blow the boy lashed out with his left hand. Both blows he missed, and the second time the force of his swing whirled him against the barrier. Right and left Conway sent his gloves crashing into his unprotected stomach--right and left!

And then the tap of the gong!

Hogarty was through the ropes with the bell. As Denny dropped upon the stool he stripped the glove from the boy's right hand and examined it with anxious fingers. The other two were sponging his chest with water--pumping fresh air into his lungs; but Old Jerry's eyes clung to the calamity written upon Hogarty's gray features.

Everybody else seemed to understand what had happened--everybody but himself. He turned again to the man next him on the bench. Morehouse, too, had been watching the lightweight's deft fingers.

"Broken," he groaned. "His right hand is gone." And after what seemed hours Old Jerry realized that Morehouse was cursing hoarsely.

In Conway's corner the activity was doubly feverish. The Red lay sprawled back against the ropes while they kneaded knotty legs, and shoulders. There was blood on his chin, his lips were cut and misshapen, but he had weathered that round without serious damage. Watching him Old Jerry saw that he was smiling--snarling confidently.

Back in Denny's corner they were still working over him, but the whole house had sensed the dismay in that little knot of men. Hogarty, gnawing his lip, stopped and whispered once to the boy on the stool, but Young Denny shook his head and held out his hand. He laced the gloves back on them, over the purple, puffy knuckles.

And then again that cataclysmic bell.

Just as the first round had started, that second one opened with a rush, but this time it was Conway who forced the fighting. Like some gigantic projectile he drove in and caught Denny in his own corner, and beat him back against the standard. Again that thudding right and left, right and left, into the stomach. And again Old Jerry saw that left hand flash out--and miss.

Just as The Pilgrim had driven him Conway forced Denny around the ring, except that the boy was heart-breaking slow in getting away. The Red stayed with him, beat him back and back, smothered him! With that deadly right no longer hunting for his jaw, he fought with nothing to fear, for Young Denny could not find his face even once with that flashing left swing.

Before the round was half over The Pilgrim had gone down twice--body blows that did little harm; but they were shouting for The Red--shouting as if from a great distance, from the balconies.

Again Conway drove him into a corner of the ropes, fainted for the stomach. Then there came that first blow that found his chin. Old Jerry saw Denny's body go limp as he crashed his length upon the padded canvas; he saw him try to rise and heard the house screaming for him to take the count.

He rested there for a precious instant, swaying on one knee. But his eyes were still glazed when he rose, and again Conway, rushing, beat down that guarding right, and, swinging with all his shoulder weight behind it, found that same spot and dropped him again.

Pandemonium broke loose in the upper reaches of the seats, but the silence of the body of the house was deathlike as he lay without stirring. Old Jerry gulped and waited--choked back a sobbing breath as he saw him start to lift himself once more. Upon his hands and knees first, then upon his knees alone. And then, with eyes shut, he struggled up, at the count of ten, and shaped up again.

And Conway beat him down.

Even the gallery was quiet now. The thud of that stiff-armed jolt went to every corner of that vast room. And the referee was droning out the count again.

"--Five--six--seven--"

Head sagging between his arms, eyes staring and sightless, The Pilgrim groped out and found the ropes. Once more at the end of the toll he lifted himself--lifted himself by the strength of his shoulders to his legs that tottered beneath him, and then stepped free of the ropes.

That time, before Conway could swing, the gong saved him.

Again it was Hogarty who was first through the ropes. Effortlessly he stooped and lifted that limp body and carried it across to the stool. They tried to stretch him back against the ropes behind him, and each time his head slumped forward over his knees.

Old Jerry turned toward Morehouse and choked--licked his lips and choked again. And Morehouse nodded his head dumbly.

"He--he's gone!" he said.

Old Jerry sat and stared back at him as though he couldn't understand. He remembered the bit of a red bow in his pocket then; he fumbled inside and found it. He remembered the eyes of the girl who had given it to him, too, that night when she had knelt at his knees. His old fingers closed, viselike, upon the fat man's arm.

"But she told me to give him this," he mumbled dully. "Why, she--she said for me to give him this, when he had *Won*."

Morehouse stared at the bit of tinsel silk--stared up at Old Jerry's face and back again. And then he leaned over suddenly and picked it up. The next moment he was crowding out from behind the desk--was climbing into the ring.

Old Jerry saw him fling fiercely tense words into Hogarty's face, and Hogarty stood back. He knelt before the slack body on the stool and tried to raise the head; he held the bit of bright web before him, but there was no recognition in Denny's eyes. And the old man heard the plump reporter's words, sob-like with excitement:

"She sent it," he hammered at those deaf ears. "She sent it--she sent it--silk--a little bow of red silk!"

Then the whole vast house saw the change that came over that limp form. They saw the slack shoulders begin to go back; saw the dead-white face come up; they saw those sick eyes beginning to clear. And The Pilgrim smiled a little--smiled into Morehouse's face.

"Silk," he repeated softly. "Silk!" and then, as if it had all come back at once: "Silk--next to her skin!"

And they called it a miracle--that recovery. They called it a miracle of the mind over a body already beaten beyond endurance. For in the scant thirty seconds which were left, while the boy lay back with them working desperately above him, it was almost possible to see the strength ebbing back into his veins. They dashed water upon his head, inverted bottles of it into his face, and emptied it from his eyes, but during that long half minute the vague smile never left his lips--nor his eyes the face of Conway across from him.

And he went to meet The Red when the gong called to them again. He went to meet him--smiling!

The bell seemed to pick him up and drop him in the middle of the ring. Set for the shock he stopped Conway's hurtling attack. And when The Red swung he tightened, took the blow flush on the side of the face, and only rocked a little.

Conway's chin seemed to lift to receive the blow which he started then from the waist. That right hand, flashing up, found it and straightened The Red back--lifted him to his toes. And while he was still in the air The Pilgrim measured and swung. The left glove caught him flush below the ear; it picked him up and drove him crashing back into the corner from which he had just come.

Old Jerry saw them bend over him--saw them pick him up at last and slip him through the ropes. Then he realized that the referee was holding Young Denny's right hand aloft; that Hogarty, with arms about him, was holding the boy erect.

The little mail-carrier heard the ex-lightweight's words, as he edged in beside Morehouse, against the ropes.

"A world-beater," he was screaming above the tumult. "I'll make a world-beater of you in a year!"

And The Pilgrim, still smiling vaguely, shook his head a little.

"Maybe," he answered faintly. "Maybe I'll come back. I don't know--yet. But now--now I reckon I'd better be going along home!"

CHAPTER XIX

It was a white night--a night so brilliant that the village lights far below in the hollow all but lost their own identity in the radiance of that huge, pale moon; so white that the yellow flare of the single lamp in its bracket, in the back kitchen of the old Bolton place on the hill seemed shabbily dull by contrast.

Standing at the window in the dark front room of the house, peering out from under cupped

palms that hid her eyes, Dryad could almost pick out each separate picket of the straggling old fence that bounded the garden of the little drab cottage across from her. In that searching light she could even make out great patches where the rotting sheathing of the house had been torn away, leaving the framework beneath naked and gaunt and bare.

It was scarcely two months since the day when she had gone herself to Judge Maynard with her offer to sell that unkempt acre or so which he had fought so long and bitterly to force into the market. And it had been a strange one, too--that interview. His acceptance had been quick--instantaneously eager--but the girl was still marvelling a little over his attitude throughout that transaction, whenever her mind turned back to it.

When she mentioned the mortgage which Young Denny had secured only a few days before, he had seemed to understand almost immediately why she had spoken of it, without the explanation which she meant to give.

Once again she found him a different Judge Maynard from all the others she had known, and he had in the years since she could remember, been many different men to her imagination. It puzzled her almost as much as did his opinion upon the value of the old place, which, somehow, she could not bring herself to believe was worth all that he insisted upon paying. But then, too, she did not know either that the town's great man had been riding a-tilt at his own soul, for several days on end, and just as Old Jerry had done, was seizing upon the first opportunity to salve the wounds resultant.

And yet this was the first day that the girl had seen him so much as inspect his long-coveted property; the first time she had known him to set foot within the sagging gate since he had placed in her hands that sum of money which was greater than any she had ever seen before. Under his directions men had commenced clearing away the rank shrubbery that afternoon--commenced to tear down the house itself.

Time after time since morning she had entered the front room to stand and peer out across the valley at this new activity which the Judge himself was directing with an oddly suppressed lack of his usual violent gestures. There was something akin to apology in his every move.

It brought a little homesick ache into the girl's throat; it set her lips to curving--made her eyes go damp with pity and tenderness for the little white-haired figure bending over his bench. He had clung so bravely, so stubbornly, to that battered bit of a house; to his garden which he had never realized had long since ceased to be anything but a plot of waist-high bushes and weeds. Once when she recollected those countless rows of poignantly wistful faces on the shelves of that back-room workshop she wondered if she had not been disloyal, after all. And she had argued it out with herself aloud as she went from task to task in that afternoon's gathering twilight.

"But it was because of her that he stayed," she reassured herself. "It was because of her that he kept it, all these years. And--and so he couldn't mind--not very much, I think, now that they don't need it any longer, if I sold it so that I could keep this place--for him!"

They had been long, those hours of waiting. Not a minute of those entire two days since Old Jerry's departure but had dragged by on laggard feet. And yet now, with nightfall of that third day she became jealous of every passing minute. She hated to have them pass; dreaded to watch the creeping hands of the clock on the kitchen wall as they drew up, little by little, upon that hour which meant the arrival of the night train in the village.

One moment she wondered if he would come--wondered and touched dry lips with the tip of her tongue. And the very next, when somehow she was so very, very sure that there was no room for doubt, she even wondered whether or not he would be glad--glad to find her there. The gaunt skeleton of a framework showing through the torn sides of John Anderson's cottage almost unnerved her whenever that thought came, and sent her out again into the lighted back room.

"What if he isn't?" she whispered, over and over again. "Why, I--I never thought of that before, did I? I just thought I had to be here when he came. But what if he--isn't glad?"

An hour earlier, when the thought had first come to her, she had carried a big, square package out to the table before the kitchen window and untied with fluttering fingers the string that bound it. The little scarlet blouse and shimmering skirt, alive with tinsel that glinted under the light, still lay there beside the thin-heeled slippers and filmy silk stockings. She bent over them, patting them lovingly with a slim hand, her eyes velvety dark while she considered.

"Oh, you're pretty--pretty--pretty!" she said in a childish hushed voice, "the prettiest things in the world!"

The next instant she straightened to scan soberly the old shiny black skirt she was wearing, and the darned stockings and cracked shoes.

"And--and you would help, I think," she went on musing. "I know you would, but then--then it wouldn't be *me*. It would be easy for any one to care for you--almost too easy. I--I think I'll wear them for him--some other time, maybe--if he wants me to."

But she turned the very next moment and crossed to the mirror on the wall--that square bit of glass before which Young Denny had stood and stared back into his own eyes and laughed. Oblivious to everything else she was critically scanning her own small reflection--great, tip-tilted eyes, violet in the shadow, and then cheeks and pointed chin--until, even in spite of her preoccupation, she became aware of the hungry tremulousness of the mouth of that reflected image--until the hoarse shriek of an engine's whistle leaped across the valley and brought her

up sharp, her breath going in one long, quavering gasp between wide lips.

It was that moment toward which she had been straining every hour of those two days; the one from which she had been shrinking every minute of those last two hours since dark. She hesitated a second, head thrown to one side, listening; she darted into that dark front room and pressed her face to the cold pane, and again that warning note came shrilling across the quiet from the far side of town.

There in the darkness, a hand on either side of the frame holding her leaning weight, she stood and waited. Below her the house roofs lay like patches of jet against the moon-brightness. She stood and watched its whole length, and no darker figure crept into relief against its lighter streak of background. Minutes after she knew that he had had time to come, and more, she still clung there, staring wide-eyed, villageward.

It wasn't a recollection of that half dismantled wreck of a house under the opposite ridge that finally drew her dry-lipped gaze from the road; she did not even think of it that moment. It was simply because she couldn't watch any longer--not even for a minute or two--that her eyes finally fluttered that way. But when she did turn there was a bigger, darker blot there against the leaning picket fence--a big-shouldered figure that had moved slowly forward until it stood full in front of the sagging gate.

And even as she watched Denny Bolton swung around from a long contemplation of that half-torn-down building to peer up at his own dark place on the hill--to peer straight back into the eyes of the girl whom he could not even see.

She saw the bewilderment in that big body's poise; even at that distance she sensed his dumb, numbed incomprehension. From bare white throat to the mass of tumbled hair that clustered across her forehead the blood came storming up into her face; and with the coming of that which set the pulses pounding in her temples and brought an unaccountable ache to her throat, all the doubt which had squired her that day slipped away.

Before he had had time to turn back again she had flown on mad feet into the kitchen, swept the lamp from its bracket on the wall with heedless haste and raced back to that front window. And she placed it there behind a half-drawn shade--that old signal which they had agreed upon without one spoken word, years back.

Crouching in the semi-gloom behind the lamp she watched.

He stepped forward a pace and stopped; lifted one hand slowly, as though he did not believe what he saw. Bareheaded he waited an instant after that arm went back to his side. When he swung around and disappeared into the head of the path that led from the gate into the black shadow of the thicket in the valley's pit she lifted both arms, too, and stood poised there a moment, slender and straight and vividly unwavering as the lamp-flame itself, before she wheeled and ran.

It was dark in the thick of the underbrush; dark and velvety quiet, save for the little moon-lit patch of a clearing where he waited. He stood there in the middle of that spot of light and heard her coming long before she reached him--long before he could see her he heard her scurrying feet and the whip of bushes against her skirt.

But when she burst through the fringe of brush he had no time to move or speak, or more than lift his arms before her swift rush carried her to him. When her hands flashed up about his neck and her damp mouth went searching softly across his face and he strained her nearer and even nearer to him, he felt her slim body quivering just as it had trembled that other night when she had raced across the valley to him--the night when Judge Maynard's invitation had failed to come. After a time he made out the words that were tumbling from her lips, all incoherent with half hysterical bits of sobs, and he realized, too, that her words were like that of that other night.

"Denny--Denny," she murmured, her small, gold-crowned head buried in his shoulder. "I'm here--I've come--just as soon as I could; Oh, I've been afraid! I knew you'd come, too--I knew you would tonight! I was sure of it--even when I was sure that you wouldn't."

For a long time he was silent, because dry lips refused to frame the words he would have spoken. Minutes he stood and held her against him until the rise and fall of her narrow shoulders grew quieter, before he lifted one hand and held her damp face away, that he might look into it. And gazing back at him, in spite of all the wordless wonder of her which she saw glowing in his eyes, she read, too, the grave perplexity of him.

"Why--you--you must have known I'd come," he said, his voice ponderously grave. "I--I told you so. I left word for you that I would be back--as soon as I could come."

He felt her slim body slacken--saw the lightning change flash over her face which always heralded that bewildering swift change of mood. It wiped out all the tenseness of lip and line.

There in the white light in spite of the shadows of her lashes which turned violet eyes to great pools of satin shadow, he caught the flare of mischief behind half-closed lids, before she tilted her head back and laughed softly, with utter joyous abandon straight up into his face.

"He--he didn't deliver it," she stated naively. "It wasn't his fault entirely, though, Denny--although I did give him lots of chances, at first anyway. I almost made him tell--but he--he's stubborn."

She stopped and laughed again--giggled shamelessly as she remembered. But her eyes grew

grave once more.

"I think he didn't quite approve of my attitude," she explained to him as he bent over her. "He thought I wasn't--sorry enough--to deserve it at first. And then--and then I never gave him any opportunity to speak. I would have stopped him if he had tried. You--you see, I just wanted to--wait."

Head bowed she paused a moment before she continued.

"But--but I sent him to you--two days ago, Denny. I sent something that I asked him to give you--when--when it was over. Didn't you--get it?"

He fumbled in the pocket of his smooth black suit after she had disengaged herself and dropped to the ground at his feet. With her ankles curled up under her she sat in a boyish heap watching him, until he drew out the bit of a spangled crimson bow and held it out before him in the palm of one big hand. Then he swung down to the ground beside her.

"I thought it must have been Old Jerry who brought it. I didn't see him, and no one could remember his name or knew where he had gone when they thought to look for him. They--they just described him to me."

He turned the bow of silk over, touching it almost reverently.

"Some one gave it to me," he continued slowly. "I don't know exactly how or when. It--it was just put into my hand--when I needed it most. I wasn't sure Old Jerry had brought it, but I knew it came from you, knew it when I didn't--know--much--else!"

She was very, very quiet, content merely in his nearness. Even then she didn't understand it--the reason for his going that night, weeks before--for the papers which had told her a little had told her nothing of his brain's own reason. The question was on her lips when her narrow fingers, searching the shadow for his, found that bandaged wrist and knuckles. Almost fiercely she drew that hand up into the light. From the white cloth her gaze went to the discolored, bruised patches on face and chin--the same place where that long, ugly cut had been which dripped blood on the floor the night she had run from him in the dark--went to his face, and back again, limpid with pity. And she lifted it impulsively and tucked it under her chin, and held it there with small hands that trembled a little.

"Then--then if you haven't seen Old Jerry--why--why you--he couldn't have told you anything at all yet, about me."

The words trailed off softly and left the statement hanging interrogatively in midair.

Denny nodded his head in the direction of John Anderson's house that had been.

"About that?" he asked.

She nodded her head. And then she told him; she began at the very beginning and told him everything from that night when she had watched him there under cover of the thicket. Once she tried to laugh when she related Old Jerry's panic, a week or two later, when he had come to find her packing in preparation to leave. But her mirth was waveringly unsteady. And when she tried to explain, too, how she had chanced to buy up the mortgage on his own bleak house on the hill, her voice again became suddenly, diffidently small.

There was a new, sweet confusion in her refusal to meet his eyes and Denny, reaching out with his bandaged hand, half lifted her and swung her around until she needs must face him.

"You--you mean you--bought it, yourself?" he marvelled.

Then, face uplifted, brave-eyed, she went on a little breathlessly.

"I bought it, myself," she said, "the week you went away." And, in a muffled whisper: "Denny, I didn't have faith--not much, at first. But I meant to be here when you did come, just--just because I thought you might need me--mighty badly. And waiting is hard, too, when one hasn't faith. And I did wait! That was something, wasn't it, Denny? Only--only now, today, I--I think I realized that my own need of you is greater than yours could ever be for me!"

She sat, lips apart, quiet for his answer.

An odd smile edged the boy's lips at her wistful earnestness. It was a twisted little smile which might have been born of the pain of stinging lids and dryer, aching throat. He could not have spoken at that moment had he tried. Instead he lifted her bodily and drew her huddled little figure into his arms. It was his first face to face glimpse of the wonder of woman.

But he knew now something which she had only sensed; he knew that the big, lonesome, bewildered boy whom she had tried to comfort in his bitterness that other night when she had hidden her own hurt disappointment with the white square card within her breast, had come back all man.

He looked down at her--marvelled at her very littleness as though it were a thing he had never known before.

"And--and you still--would stay?" he managed to ask, at last. "You'd stay--even if it did mean being like them," he inclined his head toward the distant village, "like them, old and wrinkled and worn-out, before they have half lived their lives?"

She nodded her head vehemently against his coat. He felt her thin arms tighten and tighten about him.

"I'll stay," she repeated after him in a childishly small voice. "You--you see, I *know* what it is now to be alone, even just for a week or two. I think I'll stay, please!"

There had been a bit of a teasing lilt in her half smothered words. It disappeared now.

"I--I'd be pretty lonesome, all the rest of my life--man--if I didn't!"

And long afterward she lifted her head from his arm and blinked at him from sleepy, heavy-lidded eyes.

"Why, Denny?" she asked in drowsy curiosity. "Why did you go--why, really? Don't you realize that you haven't told me even yet?"

He rose and lifted her to her feet, but that did not cover the slow flush that stained his face--the old, vaguely embarrassed flush that she knew so well. He groped awkwardly for words while he stared again at the bit of silk in his hand, before his searching fingers found the thick, crisp packet that had lain with it in his pocket.

"The Pilgrim's share of the receipts amounted to \$12,000," had been the tale of Morehouse's succinct last paragraph.

Then, "It--took me almost two months to save fifteen dollars," Young Denny explained in painful self-consciousness.

She understood. She remembered the scarlet blouse and shimmering skirt with its dots of tinsel, and the stockings and slim-heeled slippers. Her fingers touched his chin--the barest ghost of a caressing contact.

"Denny--Denny," she murmured, "I told you that night that you didn't understand. And yet--and yet I'm glad that you couldn't. It was for me--you went. Don't you--didn't you know it was--just because of you--that I wanted them--at--all?"

The circle in the Boltonwood tavern convened early that night, and long after hope had all but died a death of stagnation the regulars stuck stubbornly to their places about the cheerlessly cold, fat-bellied stove.

It was a session extraordinary, for even Dave Shepard, the patriarch of the circle itself, could not recall an occasion when they had foregathered there in such fashion so long after the last spring snow had surrendered to summer. Yet it was largely mild-voiced Dave's doing--this silent, sober gathering.

For he alone of all of them had heeded Old Jerry's parting admonition that night, weeks before, when the servant of the Gov'mint had turned from his shrill defiance of the Judge to whip their whole ranks with scorn. Since then Dave had been following the papers with faithful and painstaking care--not merely the political news of the day which invariably furnished the key for each night's debate--but searching every inch of type, down to the last inconsequential advertisement. And he had been rewarded; he had penetrated, with the aid of that small picture inset at the column-head, the disguise of the colorful sobriquet which Morehouse had fastened upon Young Denny Bolton. More than that, he had been reading for weeks each step in that campaign of publicity which had so harrowed Old Jerry's peace of mind--and somehow he had kept it religiously to himself.

Not until two days before, when Old Jerry's desertion from duty had become a town-wide sensation had he opened his mouth. The route back in the hills went mailless that day, and for that reason there were more than enough papers to go around when he finally gave the old guard which was waiting in vain for Old Jerry's appearance upon the top step of the post-office, the benefits of his wider reading.

There had been a fierce factional debate raging when he came up late to take his unobtrusive place upon the sidewalk, but even before he added his voice to the din those who argued that the old mail-carrier's disappearance could be in no way connected with that of Young Denny Bolton, who had gone the way of all the others of his line, were in a hopeless minority.

Their timidest member's announcement stunned them all to silence--left them hushed and speechless--not for an hour or two, but for the days that followed as well. Even the red-headlined account which had come with that morning's batch of news of Young Denny's victory and the fall of Jed The Red, whom they had championed under the Judge's able leadership, failed to stir up any really bitter wrangle.

They sat in an apathetic circle, waiting for Old Jerry to come.

But no one, not even Morehouse, knew when Old Jerry disappeared that night after Jed Conway had come hurtling from his corner, only to lift and whirl and go crashing back before the impact of The Pilgrim's leaping gloves. At first the plump newspaper man believed that the surging, shouting wave of humanity which had broken comber-like over the ropes to hail a newer favorite had separated the little, bird-faced man from him. Only a recollection of those vice-like fingers clinging to his arm a moment before made that probability seem unbelievable.

It was a long time before The Pilgrim's brain had again become clear enough to grasp the meaning of the questions which Morehouse put to him, but Denny did not know even as much as did the round-faced reporter himself. He only recognized the description of the shrill voiced, beady-eyed mail carrier.

To Old Jerry belonged the only comprehensive explanation for his sudden withdrawal from the scene, just at that moment when his own share in it might have been not inconsequential. And

more than that, his resolution to keep it strictly and privately his own grew firmer and firmer, the more thought he gave to it.

In those hours which intervened between the impulse which had resulted in his modest retreat from Morehouse's side, under cover of the crowd's wild demonstration, and the next morning when he boarded the train which was to carry him back to the hills, after a cautious reconnaissance that finally located Denny in the coach ahead of him, he once or twice sought to analyze his actions for an explanation less derogatory to his own self-respect.

"They wan't no real sense ner reason in my hangin' around, jest gittin' under foot," he stated thoughtfully. "I done about all I was called on to do, didn't I? Why, I reckon when all's said and done, I jest about won that fight myself! For if I hadn't a-come he wouldn't never a-got that ribbon. And Godfrey, but didn't that wake him!"

There was more than a little satisfaction to be gained in viewing himself in that light. With less to occupy his mind and unlimited leisure for elaboration it could have served as the entire day's theme for thought. But so far as explaining his almost panic haste to get away the reasoning was palpably unsatisfactory--so unsatisfactory that he cringed guiltily behind the back of the seat in front of him whenever anyone entered the front door of the car.

He gave quite the entire day to the problem and long before night hid the flying fences outside his window he decided that eventually there could be only one way out of it. Sooner or later he had to face the issue: he had to tell Young Denny that he had betrayed his trust. Even that damp wad of bills which the boy had pressed into his hand, that night before he left, still burned within his coat.

Once or twice he rose, during the return journey and advanced with forced jauntiness as far as the door of the car ahead. But he always stopped there, after a moment's uneasy contemplation of Denny's back, turned a little sadly to the water-cooler, and returned slowly and unenthusiastically to his seat. Twice when it was necessary to change trains he made the transfer with a lightning precision that would have done honor to any prestidigitator. And when, hours after nightfall, the train came to a groaning standstill before Boltonwood's deserted station shed he waited his opportunity and dropped off in the dark--on the wrong side of the track!

Denny had already become a dark blur ahead of him when he, too, turned in and took the long road toward town.

Old Jerry followed the big-shouldered figure that night with heavily lagging feet--he followed heavy in spirit and bereft of hope. He was still behind him when Denny finally paused before the sagging gate of John Anderson's half-stripped house. Then, watching the boy's dumb lack of understanding, the enormity of the whole horrible complication dawned upon him for the first time. He had forgotten Dryad Anderson's going--forgotten that the house upon the ridge was no longer the property of the man who had entrusted it to him.

When the light behind that half-drawn shade flared up, far across on the crest of the opposite hill, and Young Denny wheeled to plunge into the black mouth of the path that led deeper into the valley, he too started swiftly forward. He swept off in desperate haste up the long hill road that led to the Bolton homestead.

The light was still there in that front room when he poked a tentatively inquiring head in at the open door; he paused in a dull-eyed examination of the silken garments draped over the table top in the kitchen after he had roamed vaguely through the silent house. But he was too tired in mind to give them much attention just then.

Outside, buried in the shadow of Young Denny's squat, unpainted barn, he still waited doggedly--he waited ages and ages, a lifetime of apprehension. And then he saw them coming toward him, up out of the shadow of the valley into the moonlight that bathed the hill in silver.

They paused and stood there--stood and stared out across the valley at Judge Maynard's great box of a house on the hill and that bit of a wedge-shaped acre of ruin that clung like an unsightly burr to the hem of his immaculate pastures.

Slender and boy-like in her little blouse and tight, short skirt the girl was half-hidden in the hollow of his shoulder. Once, watching with his head cocked pertly, sparrowlike, on one side, the old man's eyes went to the white-bandaged knuckles of Denny's right hand; once while he waited Old Jerry saw her lift her face--saw the big, shoulder-heavy figure fold her in his arms and bend and touch the glory of her hair with his lips while she clung to him, before she turned and went slowly toward the open kitchen door.

Then he started. He shrank farther back into the shadow and edged a noiseless way around the building. But with the tavern lights beckoning to him he waited an introspective moment or two.

"Godfrey 'Lisha," he sighed thunderously, "but that takes a load offen my mind!"

And he ruminated.

"But what's the use of my tryin' to explain now? What's the use--when they ain't nothing to explain! It's all come out all right, ain't it? Well, then, hedn't I jest as well save my breath?"

He straightened his thin shoulders and stretched his arms.

"It couldn't a-been handled much neater, either," that one-sided conversation went on, "not anyway you look at it. I always did think that the best thing to do in them matters was to kinda let 'em take their own course. And now--now I guess I'll be gittin' along down!"

Before he opened the door of the Tavern office a scant half hour later, Denny Bolton stopped there on the steps a moment and, his hand on the latch, listened to the thin, falsetto voice that came from within. A slow smile crept up and wrinkled the corners of the boy's eyes after a while when he had caught the drift of those strident words.

They had been waiting for him--the regulars. They had been waiting for him longer than Old Jerry knew. In the chair that had been the throne-seat of the town's great man the servant of the Gov'mint sat and faced his loyal circle.

He had reached his climax--had hammered it home. Now he was rounding out his conclusion for those who hung, hungry-eyed, upon his eloquence.

"I ain't begun to do it jestice yet," he apologized. "I ain't more'n jest teched on a good many things that needs to be gone into a trifle. Jest a trifle! It'll take weeks and weeks to do that. But as I was a-sayin'--I got there! I got there just when I was needed almighty bad. I ain't done that part of it jestice--but you'll see it all in the papers in a day or two--Sunday supplement, maybe--and pictures--and colors, too, I reckon!"

THE END

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