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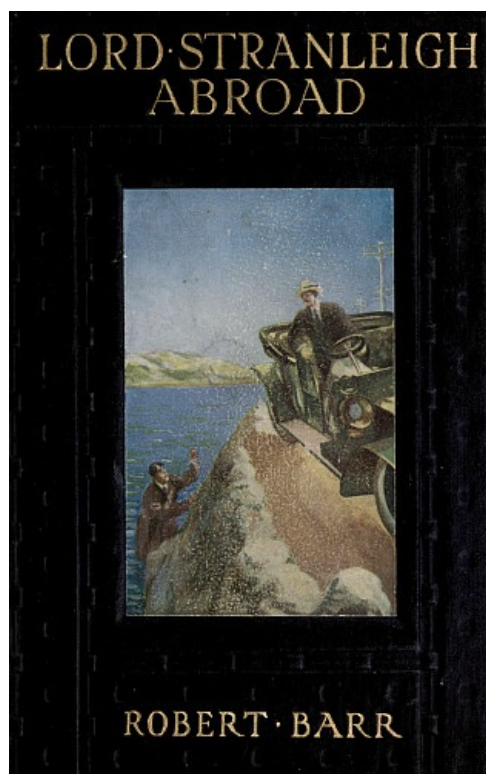
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LORD STRANLEIGH ABROAD ***

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LORD STRANLEIGH

ABROAD

BY

ROBERT BARR

*Author of "Young Lord Stranleigh," "Lord Stranleigh,"
"Philanthropist," "The Mutable Many," etc.*

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**"Why did you wish to murder
me?" (Page [189.](#))**

Lord Stranleigh [Frontispiece.
Abroad]

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LORD STRANLEIGH ABROAD.

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I.—LORD STRANLEIGH ALL AT SEA.

A few minutes before noon on a hot summer day, Edmund Trevelyan walked up the gang-plank of the steamship, at that moment the largest Atlantic liner afloat. Exactly at the stroke of twelve she would leave Southampton for Cherbourg, then proceed across to Queenstown, and finally would make a bee-line west for New York. Trevelyan was costumed in rough tweed of subdued hue, set off by a cut so well-fitting and distinguished that it seemed likely the young man would be looked upon by connoisseurs of tailoring as the best-dressed passenger aboard. He was followed by Ponderby, his valet, whose usually expressionless face bore a look of dissatisfaction with his lot, as though he had been accustomed to wait upon the nobility, and was now doomed to service with a mere commoner. His lack of content, however, was caused by a dislike to ocean travel in the first place, and his general disapproval of America in the second. A country where all men are free and equal possessed no charms for Ponderby, who knew he had no equal, and was not going to demean himself by acknowledging the possibility of such.

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Once on deck, his master turned to him and said—

“You will go, Ponderby, to my suite of rooms, and see that my luggage is placed where it should be, and also kindly satisfy yourself that none of it is missing.”

Ponderby bowed in a dignified manner, and obeyed without a word, while Trevelyan mounted the grand staircase, moving with an easy nonchalance suited to a day so inordinately hot. The prospect of an ocean voyage in such weather was in itself refreshing, and so prone is mankind to live in the present, and take no thought of the morrow, that Trevelyan had quite forgotten the cablegrams he read in the papers on his way down from London, to the effect that New York was on the grill, its inhabitants sweltering—sleeping on the house-tops, in the parks, on the beach at Coney Island, or wherever a breath of air could be had. On the upper deck his slow steps were arrested by an exclamation—

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“Isn’t this Mr. Trevelyan?”

The man who made the enquiry wore the uniform of the ship’s company.

“Ah, doctor, I was thinking of you at this moment. I read in the papers that you had been promoted, and I said to myself: ‘After all, this is not an ungrateful world, when the most skilful and most popular medical officer on the Atlantic is thus appreciated.’”

“Ah, you put it delightfully, Trevelyan, but I confess I hesitated about adding, at my time of life, to the burden I carry.”

“Your time of life, doctor! Why you always make me feel an old man by comparison with yourself; yet you’ll find me skipping about the decks like a boy.”

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“If you’ll take the right-hand seat at my table, I’ll keep an eye on you, and prevent you from skipping overboard,” laughed the doctor.

“Indeed, that was the boon I intended to crave.”

“Then the seat is yours, Trevelyan. By the way, I read in the newspapers that Evelyn Trevelyan is none other than Lord Stranleigh; but then, of course, you can never believe what you see in the press, can you?”

“Personally, I make no effort to do so. I get my news of the day from Ponderby, who is an inveterate reader of the principal journals favoured by what he calls the ‘upper classes.’ But I assure you that Evelyn Trevelyan is a name that belongs to me, and I wear it occasionally like an old, comfortable-fitting coat.”

“Ah, well, I’ll not give you away. I’ll see you at lunch between here and Cherbourg.” And the doctor hurried away to his duties.

The young man continued his stroll, smiling as he remembered some of the doctor’s excellent stories. He regarded his meeting with that friendly officer as a good omen, but hoped he would encounter no one else who knew him.

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The next interruption of his walk proved to be not so pleasant. There came up the deck with nervous tread a shabbily-dressed man, who appeared from ten to fifteen years older than Stranleigh, although in reality there was no great disparity in their ages. His face was haggard and lined with anxiety, and his eyes had that furtive, penetrating glance which distinguishes the

inveterate gambler. Stranleigh watched his oncoming with amazement.

The Hon. John Hazel had been a member of some of the most exclusive clubs in London; but whether or not Nature had endowed him with a useful talent, he had become notorious as a reckless cardsharp, quite unscrupulous when it came to obtaining money. No one knew this better than Lord Stranleigh, who had been so often his victim, yet had regarded his losses lightly, and forgiven the Hon. John time and again. But recently this younger son of an ancient and honourable house had committed the unpardonable sin—he had been found out, and had been permitted to resign from all his clubs but one, and from which he was expelled by a committee not so lenient. After that he disappeared. He was done for, so far as England was concerned, and he knew it.

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“John, is this possible?” cried Lord Stranleigh, as the other approached.

Hazel stopped, his eyes veiling over, as though he held a hand at poker that was unbeatable.

“I haven’t the pleasure of knowing you, sir,” he said haughtily.

“I’m glad of that, because I’m Edmund Trevelyan at the moment, and was just hoping I should meet no one on board who would recognise me.”

“I don’t know Edmund Trevelyan, and have no wish to make his acquaintance,” returned the other coldly.

“That’s quite all right, and your wish does you credit. Trevelyan has no desire to force his friendship on any man. Nevertheless, Jack, time was when I helped you out of a hole, and, if occasion arose, I should be glad to do it again.”

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“You could have prevented my expulsion from the Camperdown Club, had you but cared to raise a finger,” said the other hotly.

“Hazel, you are mistaken. I did all I could for you, as in other crises of the same nature. The committee proved to be adamant, and rather prided themselves on their independence, as if they were a group of blooming Radicals. The House of Lords isn’t what it was, Jack, as, alas, you may learn, should you ever come into the title of your family, although many people stand between you and it at the present moment. Indeed, Jack, it has been on my conscience that my urgent advocacy prejudiced your case instead of helping it.”

“Ah, well, that’s all past; it doesn’t matter now,” said the other, with a sigh. “I have shaken the dust of England for ever from my feet.”

“The mud, you mean.”

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“Oh, I admit I wallowed in the mud, but it was dust when I left London this morning. Ah, we’re off! I must be going.” And he moved away from the rail of the ship, where he had been gazing over the side.

“Going? Where?”

“Where I belong. I’m travelling third-class. The moment the steamer gets under way, I have no right on the cabin deck. Before she left, I took the liberty of a sightseer to wander over the steamship.”

“My dear Jack,” said his former friend, in a grave voice, “this will never do; you cannot cross the Atlantic in the steerage.”

“I have visited my quarters, and find them very comfortable. I have been in much worse places recently. Steerage is like everything else maritime—like this bewilderingly immense steamer, for example—vastly improved since Robert Louis Stevenson took his trip third-class to New York.”

“Well, it is a change for a luxury-loving person like my friend the Hon. John Hazel.”

“It is very condescending of you to call me your friend. Nobody else would do it,” replied the Hon. John bitterly.

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“Condescension be hanged! I’m rather bewildered, that’s all, and wish for further particulars. Are you turning over a new leaf, then?”

“A new leaf? A thousand of them! I have thrown away the old book, with its blotches and ink-stains. I’m starting a blank volume that I hope will bear inspection and not shock even the rectitude of the Camperdown Committee.”

“What’s the programme?”

“I don’t quite know yet; it will depend on circumstances. I think it’s the West for me—sort of back-to-the-land business. I yearn to become a kind of moral cowboy. It seems the only thing I’m at all equipped for. I can ride well and shoot reasonably straight.”

“I thought,” said Stranleigh, “that phase of life had disappeared with Bret Harte. Is there any money in your inside pocket?”

“How could there be?”

“Then why not let me grub-stake you, which I believe is the correct Western term.”

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"As how, for instance?"

"I'll secure for you a comfortable cabin, and you will pay the damage when you strike oil out West, so, you see, there's no humiliating condescension about the offer."

"I'm sure there isn't, and it's very good of you, Stranleigh, but I can't dress the part."

"That's easily arranged. Ponderby always over-dresses me. His idea of this world is that there is London, and the rest of the planet is a wilderness. You could no more persuade him that a decent suit might be made in New York than that I am the worst-dressed man in London. You and I are about the same height and build. Ponderby will have in my mountainous luggage anywhere from twenty-five to forty suits never yet worn by me. I don't know on what principle he goes, but as the last time we went to America he took twenty-five new suits, and we crossed in a twenty-five thousand ton boat, he is likely to have at least forty-five suits for this forty-five thousand ton steamship, and he will feel as much pleasure in rigging you out as he took in the crowning of the new King."

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"Very good of you, Stranleigh, but I cannot accept."

"I am pleading for Ponderby's sake. Besides, there's one practical point you have overlooked. If you attempt to land from the steerage—travelling under an assumed name, I suppose—"

"Like yourself, Stranleigh."

"No, I own the name 'Trevelyan.' But, as I was saying, if you attempt to land rather shabbily dressed and almost penniless, you will find yourself turned back as an undesirable alien, whereas you can go ashore from the first cabin unquestioned, save for those amazing queries the U.S.A. Government puts to one, the answers to which Ponderby will be charmed to write out for you."

Hazel without reply walked back to the rail, leaned his arms on it, and fell into deep thought. Stranleigh followed him.

"Give me your ticket," he said.

Hazel took it from his pocket and handed it over.

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"Have you any luggage?"

"Only a portmanteau, which I placed in my bunk. It contains a certain amount of necessary linen."

"Wait here until I find out what there is to be had in the first cabin."

Stranleigh went down to the purser, and that overworked official threw him a friendly glance, which nevertheless indicated that his time was valuable.

"My name is Trevelyan," said the young man.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Trevelyan. You have our premier suite. How do you like your accommodation?"

"I haven't seen it yet. I have just discovered a friend, a rather eccentric man, who had made up his mind to cross the Atlantic in the steerage. One of those silly bets, you know, which silly young men make in our silly London clubs, and I have persuaded him out of it."

"Our steerage is supposed to be rather comfortable, Mr. Trevelyan."

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"So he says, but I want his company on deck, and not on the steerage deck at that. Have you got anything vacant along my avenue?"

The purser consulted his written list.

"Nobody with him?"

"He's quite alone."

"All the larger cabins are taken, but I can give him No. 4390."

"I suppose, like your steerage, it is comfortable?" said Stranleigh, with a smile.

"It is, yet it's not a private hotel like your quarters."

"Oh, he'll not grumble. Will you send a steward to carry his portmanteau from the number indicated on this steerage ticket to his new room? Meanwhile, I'll have transferred to him his luggage that I brought from London."

The purser rapidly wrote out a new ticket, and took the difference in five-pound notes.

"Are you going to your quarters now?" the purser asked.

"Yes, I must give some instructions to my man."

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"Then it will give me great pleasure to show you the way there," said the purser, rising and locking the door; and in spite of Stranleigh's protest against his taking the trouble, he led him to a series of rooms that would have satisfied a much more exacting person than his young lordship. When the purser had returned to his duties, Stranleigh said to Ponderby—

"The Hon. John Hazel is aboard, and his cabin is No. 4390. He had to leave London in a great hurry and without the necessary luggage."

Ponderby's eyes lit up with an expression which said—"I knew that would happen sooner or later." But he uttered no word, and cast down his eyes when he saw his master had noticed the glance. Stranleigh spoke coldly and clearly.

"How many new suits have you provided for me?"

"Thirty-seven, my lord."

"Very well. Clear out one or two boxes, and pack a dress-suit and two or three ordinary suits; in fact, costume the Hon. John Hazel just as you would costume me. Call a steward, and order the box to be taken to his room. Lay out for him an everyday garb, and get all this done as quickly as possible."

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His lordship proceeded leisurely to the upper deck once more, and found Hazel just as he had left him, except that he was now gazing at the fleeting shore, green and village-studded, of the Isle of Wight.

"Here you are," said Stranleigh breezily, handing the Hon. John the cabin ticket.

There was a weak strain in Hazel's character, otherwise he would never had come to the position in which he found himself, and he now exhibited the stubbornness which has in it the infallible signs of giving way.

"I really cannot accept it," he said, his lower lip trembling perceptibly.

"Tut, tut! It's all settled and done with. Your room is No. 4390. You will find your bag there, and also a box from my habitation. Come along—I'll be your valet. Luncheon will be on shortly, and I want your company."

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Stranleigh turned away, and Hazel followed him.

Cabin 4390 could not be compared with the luxurious suite that Stranleigh was to occupy, yet, despite the purser's hesitation to overpraise it, the cabin was of a size and promise of comfort that would have been found in few liners a decade ago. Ponderby was on hand, and saved his master the fag of valeting, and when finally the Hon. John emerged, he was quite his old jaunty self again—a well-dressed man who would not have done discredit even to the Camperdown Club.

"I have secured a place for you," said Stranleigh, "next to myself at the doctor's table. I flatter myself on having made this transfer with more tact than I usually display, for I am somewhat stupid in the main, trusting others to carry out my ideas rather than endeavouring to shine as a diplomatist myself. The purser—the only official aware of the change—thinks you made a bet to go over steerage, and will probably forget all about the matter. The question is, under what name shall I introduce you to the doctor?"

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"What would you advise?" asked Hazel. "The name on my steerage ticket is William Jones."

"Oh, that's no good as a *nom de guerre*—too palpably a name chosen by an unimaginative man. I should sail under your own colours if I were you."

"Good! Then John Hazel I am, and so will remain. As a guarantee of good faith, I promise you not to touch a card all the way across."

"A good resolution; see that you keep it." And thus they enjoyed an appetising lunch together, and were regaled with one of the doctor's best salads.

They got away from Cherbourg before the dinner hour, and after that meal Stranleigh and Hazel walked together on the main deck, until the latter, admitting he was rather fagged after the exciting events of the day, went off to his cabin, and Stranleigh was left alone to smoke a final cigar. He leaned on the rail and gazed meditatively at the smooth sea.

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It was an ideal evening, and Stranleigh felt at peace with all the world. There exists a popular belief that the rich are overburdened with care. This may be true while they are in the money-making struggle, but it is not a usual fault when the cash is in the bank or safely invested. Stranleigh occasionally lost money, but an immense amount had been bequeathed him, and he made many millions more than he had parted with, although he claimed this was merely because of a series of flukes, maintaining that, whenever he set to work that part of him known as his brains, he invariably came a cropper.

"You are Mr. Trevelyan, are you not?" said a very musical feminine voice at his elbow. Stranleigh turned in surprise, and seeing there a most charming young woman, he flung his partially consumed cigar into the sea.

"Yes," he replied, "my name is Trevelyan. How did you know?"

That rare smile came to his lips—a smile, people said, which made you feel instinctively you could trust him; and many ladies who were quite willing to bestow their trust, called it fascinating.

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"I am afraid," said the girl, whose beautiful face was very serious, and whose large dark eyes seemed troubled—"I am afraid that I enacted the part of unintentional eavesdropper. I had some business with the purser—business that I rather shrank from executing. You came to his window

just before I did, for I was hesitating."

"I am sorry," said Stranleigh, "if I obtruded myself between you and that official. Being rather limited in intelligence, my mind can attend to only one thing at a time, and I must confess I did not see you."

"I know you did not," retorted the girl. "There was no obtrusion. You were first comer, and therefore should have been first served, as was the case."

"I would willingly have given up my place and whatever rights I possessed in the matter, had I known a lady was waiting."

"I am sure of it. However, your conversation with the purser gave me a welcome respite, and, thinking over the crisis, I determined to consult you before I spoke to him; thus I have taken the unusual step of bringing myself to your notice."

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"In what way can I assist you, madam?" asked Stranleigh, a return of his usual caution showing itself in the instant stiffening of manner and coldness of words.

"I learned you were exchanging, on behalf of a friend, a third-class ticket for a place in the cabin. I judged from this that you are a good-hearted man, and my attention was attracted when you introduced yourself to the purser as Trevelyan, because Trevelyan is my own name."

"Really?" ejaculated his lordship. "Have you relatives near Wychwood? You are English, are you not?"

"I am English, and a distant connection with the family of Trevelyan, near Wychwood, none of whom, however, I have yet met, unless you happen to belong to that branch."

"I do," said Stranleigh. "And now tell me, if you please, what is your difficulty?"

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"I wish to ask you if the steerage ticket you gave the purser was taken in part payment for the cabin ticket, or did you forfeit it altogether?"

"That I can't tell you," said Stranleigh, with a laugh. "I am not accustomed to the transaction of business, and this little arrangement had to be made quickly."

Although his lordship spoke lightly and pleasantly the girl appeared to have some difficulty in proceeding with her story. The large eyes were quite evidently filling with tears, and of all things in the world Stranleigh loathed an emotional scene. The girl was obviously deeply depressed, whatever the cause.

"Well," he said jauntily and indeed encouragingly, "we were talking of first and third-class tickets. What have you to say about them?"

"I speak of the steerage ticket only. If you haven't forfeited it, you have the right to demand its return."

"I suppose so. Still, it is of no particular use to me."

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"No, but it would be vital to me. Coming down in the train from London, my purse was stolen, or perhaps I lost it when giving up my railway ticket. So I am now without either money or transportation voucher."

"Was it for cabin passage?"

"Yes."

"In that case you will have no difficulty; your name will be on the purser's list. Do you know the number of your state-room?"

"No, I do not, and, so far as my name goes, I can expect no help from that quarter, because the name I travel under is not Miss Trevelyan."

"Good gracious," cried Stranleigh, "there are three of us! This ship should be called *Incognita*. Was your money also in that purse?"

"Yes, all my gold and bank-notes, and I am left with merely some silver and coppers."

"Then the third-class ticket would not be of the slightest use to you. As I had to point out to another person on a similar occasion, you would not be allowed to land, so we will let that third-class ticket drop into oblivion. If you are even distantly related to the Trevelyan family, I could not think of allowing you to travel steerage. Are you alone?"

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"Yes," she murmured almost inaudibly.

"Well, then, it is better that you should make all arrangements with the purser yourself. As I told you, I am not particularly good at business affairs. You give to him the name under which you purchased your ticket. You bought it in London, I suppose?"

"Yes," she murmured again.

"Mention to him the name you used then. He will look up his list, and allot you the state-room you paid for. It is probable he may have the power to do this without exacting any excess fare; but if such is not the case, settle with him for your passage, and take his receipt. The money will

doubtless be refunded at New York. Here is a fifty-pound note, and you can carry out the transaction much better than I. But stop a moment. Do you remember how much you paid for the room?"

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"Twenty-five pounds."

"That will leave you only the remaining twenty-five for New York, which is an expensive place, so we must make the loan a hundred pounds. Leave me your address, and if you do not hear from your people before that loan is expended, you may have whatever more you need. You will, of course, repay me at your convenience. I will give you the name of my New York agents."

The eyes had by this time brimmed over, and the girl could not speak. Stranleigh took from his pocket-book several Bank of England notes. Selecting two for fifty pounds each, he handed them to her.

"Good-night!" he said hurriedly.

"Good-night!" she whispered.

After dinner on the day the liner left Queenstown, Lord Stranleigh sat in a comfortable chair in the daintily furnished drawing-room of his suite. A shaded electric light stood on the table at his elbow, and he was absorbed in a book he had bought before leaving London. Stranleigh was at peace with all the world, and his reading soothed a mind which he never allowed to become perturbed if he could help it. He now thanked his stars that he was sure of a week undisturbed by callers and free from written requests. Just at this moment he was amazed to see the door open, and a man enter without knock or other announcement. His first thought was to wonder what had become of Ponderby—how had the stranger eluded him? It was a ruddy-faced, burly individual who came in, and, as he turned round to shut the door softly, Stranleigh saw that his thick neck showed rolls of flesh beneath the hair. His lordship placed the open book face downwards on the table, but otherwise made no motion.

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"Lord Stranleigh, I presume?" said the stranger.

Stranleigh made no reply, but continued gazing at the intruder.

"I wish to have a few words with you, and considered it better to come to your rooms than to accost you on deck. What I have to say is serious, and outside we might have got into an altercation, which you would regret."

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"You need have no fear of any altercation with me," said Stranleigh.

"Well, at least you desire to avoid publicity, otherwise you would not be travelling under an assumed name."

"I am not travelling under an assumed name."

The stout man waved his hand in deprecation of unnecessary talk.

"I will come to the point at once," he said, seating himself without any invitation.

"I shall be obliged if you do so."

The new-comer's eyes narrowed, and a threatening expression overspread his rather vicious face.

"I want to know, Lord Stranleigh, and I have a right to ask, why you gave a hundred pounds to my wife."

"To your wife?" echoed Stranleigh in amazement.

"Yes. I have made a memorandum of the numbers, and here they are—two fifty-pound notes. Bank of England. Do you deny having given them to her?"

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"I gave two fifty-pound notes to a young lady, whose name, I understood, was Trevelyan—a name which I also bear. She informed me, and somehow I believed her, that her purse containing steamship ticket and money, had been lost or stolen."

A wry smile twisted the lips of the alleged husband.

"Oh, that's the story is it? Would you be surprised if the young lady in question denied that *in toto*?"

"I should not be astonished at anything," replied his lordship, "if you are in possession of the actual bank-notes I gave to her."

"She describes your having taken these flimsies from a number of others you carry in your pocket. Would you mind reading me the number of others you carry in your pocket. Would you mind reading me the number of the next note in your collection?"

"Would you mind reading me the numbers on the notes you hold?" asked Stranleigh, in cool, even tones, making no sign of producing his own assets.

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"Not at all," replied the other; whereupon he read them. The notes were evidently two of a series, and the numbers differed only by a single unit. Stranleigh nonchalantly took out his pocket-book, and the intruder's eyes glistened as he observed its bulk. Stranleigh glanced at the number on

the top bank-note, and replaced his pocket-book, leaning back in his easy chair.

"You are quite right," he said. "Those are the notes I gave to Miss Trevelyan."

"I asked why."

"I told you why."

"That cock-and-bull story won't go down," said the other. "Even the richest men do not fling money about in such reckless fashion. They do it only for a favour given or a favour expected."

"I dare say you are right. But come to the point, as you said you would."

"Is that necessary?"

"I don't know that it is. You want money—as large an amount as can be squeezed from a man supposedly wealthy. You use your good-looking wife as a decoy——" [Pg 35]

"You are casting aspersion on a lady quite unknown to you!" cried his visitor, with well-assumed indignation.

"Pardon me, you seem to be casting aspersion on her whom you say is your wife. I don't know how these notes got into your hands, but I'd be willing to stake double the amount that the lady is quite innocent in the matter. She certainly is so far as I am concerned. If the lady is your wife, what is her name? She told me she was travelling under a different title from that written on the lost ticket."

"I am not ashamed of my name, if you are of yours. My name is Branksome Poole."

"Ah, then she is Mrs. Branksome Poole?"

"Naturally."

Stranleigh reached out and drew towards him a passenger list. Running his eye down the column of cabin passengers, he saw there the names: "Mr. and Mrs. Branksome Poole."

"Well, Mr. Poole, we come to what is the final question—how much?" [Pg 36]

"If you give me the roll of Bank of England notes which you exhibited a moment ago, I shall say nothing further about the matter, and, understand me, there is no coercion about my request. You may accept or decline, just as you like. I admit that my wife and I do not get along well together, and although I consider I have a grievance against you, I am not assuming the injured husband *rôle* at all. If you decline, I shall make no scandal aboard ship, but will wait and take action against you the moment we arrive in New York."

"Very considerate of you, Mr. Poole. I understand that in New York the fountains of justice are perfectly pure, and that the wronged are absolutely certain of obtaining redress. I congratulate you on your choice of a battle-ground. Of course, you haven't the slightest thought of levying blackmail, but I prefer to spend my money on the best legal talent in America rather than trust any of it to you. It's a mere case of obstinacy on my part. And now, if you will kindly take your departure, I will get on with my book; I am at a most interesting point." [Pg 37]

"I shall not take my departure," said Poole doggedly, "until we have settled this matter."

"The matter is settled." Stranleigh touched an electric button. An inside door opened, and Ponderby entered, looking in amazement at his master's visitor.

"Ponderby," said Lord Stranleigh, "in future I desire you to keep this outer door locked, so that whoever wishes to see me may come through your room. Take a good look at this gentleman, and remember he is not to be allowed within my suite again on any pretext. Meanwhile, show him into the corridor. Take him through your room, and afterwards return and lock this other door."

Then occurred an extraordinary thing. Ponderby, for the first time in his life, disobeyed his master's instructions. Approaching the seated Poole, he said—

"Will you go quietly?"

"I'll not go, quietly or otherwise," answered the man stubbornly. [Pg 38]

Ponderby opened the door by which Poole had entered, then, seizing him by the collar, lifted him, led him to the door, and pitched him out of the room across the corridor. Returning, he closed, locked, and bolted the door.

"I beg your pardon, my lord," said the panting Ponderby to his amazed master, "but I dare not take him through my room. His wife is there. She appears to have followed him. Anyhow, she recognised his voice, and told me hurriedly why she came. I locked the door to the passage, for, as I heard her story, I felt it might be serious, and at least you ought to hear what she has to say before you acted. I hope you will excuse the liberty I have taken, my lord."

"Ponderby, as I have often told you, you are a gem! I will go into your room, but you must remain there while I talk to this lady. No more *tête-à-tête* conversations with the unprotected for me."

"I think she is honest, my lord, but in deep trouble."



“Reeling off what she had to say as if it were a task learned by rote.”

Lord Stranleigh Abroad [Page 39.]

“I am glad to have my opinion corroborated by so good a judge of character as yourself, Ponderby.” [Pg 39]

They went together to the valet’s sitting-room, and there sat the woman, with her dark head bowed upon arms outstretched along the table, her shoulders shaking. She was plainly on the verge of hysterics, if, indeed, she had not already crossed the boundary line.

“Here is Mr. Trevelyan, madam,” said Ponderby. “You wanted to speak with him.”

She raised her head, dabbed her wet eyes nervously with her handkerchief, and made an effort to pull herself together. When she spoke, it was with rapid utterance, reeling off what she had to say as if it were a task learned by rote.

“I have at last come to the end of my tether, and to-night, if there is no prospect of freedom, I shall destroy myself. Before this I have often thought of suicide, but I am a cowardly person, and cling to life. Five years ago my father went out to America bent on a motor tour; he took me with him. Among other servants he engaged Charles Branksome, who had proved himself an expert chauffeur. He was English, and came to us well recommended. He intimated that he was of good family, but had his living to earn. He was handsome then, and had a most ingratiating manner. The person who called on you to-night bears little resemblance to the Branksome of five years ago. I had often gone motoring with him while in America, and I was young, and rather flighty: a foolish person altogether. Perhaps you read about it in the papers. I cannot dwell on the appalling mistake I made.” [Pg 40]

“We became very well acquainted, and at last he professed to have fallen in love with me, and I believed him. We were secretly married before a justice of the peace in America, and I was not long left in doubt as to the disaster that had befallen me. His sole desire was money. My father being wealthy, he hoped to get all he cared to demand. My father, however, is a very stubborn man, and, after his first shock on finding the episode made much of by the American papers, he refused to pay Branksome a penny, and returned forthwith to England. I never saw him again, nor could I get into communication with him. Two years after my mad act he died, and never even mentioned me in his will.” [Pg 41]

“My husband is a liar, a thief, a forger, a gambler, and a brute. He has maltreated me so that I have been left once or twice for dead, but finally he broke me to his will. He is known as a cheat in every gambling resort in Europe, and on the Atlantic liners. Lately I have been used as a decoy in the way of which you have had experience. Somehow he learned—indeed, that is his business—who were the rich travellers on this boat. He thought, as this was the newest and largest steamship on the ocean, its staff would not at first be thoroughly organised, and that he might escape detection. He pointed you out to me as you came on board, and said you were Lord Stranleigh, travelling as Mr. Trevelyan. The rest you know. He forced me to hand to him the money you had given, and told me it might be necessary for me to go on the witness-stand when we reached New York, but, as you were very wealthy, it is not likely you would allow it to go so far as that. His plan was to demand a very moderate sum at first, which was to be a mere beginning, and each exaction would be but a prelude for the next. He is old at the game, and is [Pg 42]

wanted now by the authorities in New York for blackmailing a very well-known millionaire.”

“Do you know the name of the millionaire?”

She gave him the information.

“Very well, madam. In the first place, you must do nothing reckless or foolish. I shall see that this man is detained at New York on some pretext or other—in fact, I shall arrange for this by wireless. You should journey to one of the states where divorces are easily obtained. If you will permit me, I shall be your banker. Even if Branksome got free in New York, it will cost him dear, and his supplies are precarious. You should experience no difficulty in evading him with money in your possession. Do you agree?”

“Oh, yes!”

“That’s settled, then. Ponderby, look into the corridor, and see that the way of escape is clear.”

“I am sorry, my lord,” she said, rising, “to cause you such trouble and inconvenience.”

“No inconvenience at all,” said Stranleigh, with his usual nonchalance, “and I never allow myself to be troubled.” [Pg 43]

Ponderby reported the way open, and the lady disappeared silently along the passage. Stranleigh betook himself to Room 4390, and had a long talk with the Hon. John Hazel, who, for the first time during the voyage, seemed to be enjoying himself.

Next morning the Hon. John paced up and down one deck after another, as if in search of someone. On an almost deserted lower deck he met the person whom he sought.

“I beg your pardon,” said Hazel in his suavest manner, “but I am trying to find three men as tired of this journey as I am. I have never been on a voyage before, and I confess I miss London and the convenience of its clubs. A quiet little game of poker in the smoking-room might help to while away the time.”

The keen eyes of Mr. Branksome Poole narrowed, as was a custom of theirs, and he took in the points of the man who addressed him.

“I am not much of a hand at poker,” he said hesitatingly and untruthfully.

The Hon. John laughed.

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“Don’t mind that in the least,” he said. “The requirement for this game is cash. I have approached several men, and they object to playing for money; but I confess I don’t give a rap for sitting at a card-table unless there’s something substantial on.”

“I’m with you there,” agreed the stout man, his eyes glistening at the thought of handling a pack of cards once more. His momentary hesitation had been because he feared someone might recognise him, for he felt himself quite able to cope with anyone when it came to the shuffle and the deal. They were a strangely contrasted pair as they stood there, the pleb and the patrician—the pleb grim and serious, the patrician carrying off the situation with a light laugh—yet it was hard to say which was the more expert scoundrel when it came to cards.

A little later four men sat down to a table. Hazel ordered a new pack of cards from the smoke-room steward, broke the seal, and pulled off the wrapper.

It is not worth while to describe the series of games: only the one matters. At first Poole played very cautiously, watching out of the tail of his eye for any officer who might spot him as one who had been ordered off the green, and so expose him for what he was. The consequence of this divided attention was soon apparent. He lost heavily, and finally he drew a couple of fifty-pound notes from his pocket-book. He fingered them for a moment as if loath to part with paper so valuable. [Pg 45]

“Where’s that steward?” he asked.

“What do you want?” demanded Hazel, as though impatient for the game to go on.

“Change for a fifty.”

“I’ll change it for you.” And the Hon. John drew from his pocket a handful of gold and five-pound bank-notes, counted out fifty pounds, and shoved them across the table to Poole, who, still hesitating, was forced reluctantly to give up the big bank-note. Now Poole began to play in earnest, but still luck was against him, and soon the second fifty-pound note was changed, for they were playing reasonably high. Hazel, after glancing at the number on the note, thrust it carelessly into his waistcoat pocket alongside its brother, as if it were of no more account than a cigarette paper. Little did the pleb dream that he was up against a man of brains. Hazel now possessed the two bank-notes that could have been used in evidence against Lord Stranleigh, and he drew a sigh of satisfaction. Poole only saw that here was a man, evidently careless of money, possessing plenty of it, and extremely good-natured. He had already recognised him as an aristocrat, and expected that, whatever happened, he would treat it with a laugh, and perhaps leave the table, so the pleb now began some fine work. Two games were played in silence, and in the third it was the deal of Branksome Poole. Hazel watched him like a beast of prey, conscious of every crooked move, yet he did not seem in the least to be looking. He gazed at the cards dealt [Pg 46]

him, rose to his feet, and spread the hand face upward on the table.

"Sir, you are cheating," he said crisply.

"You lie!" roared Branksome Poole, turning, nevertheless, a greenish yellow, and moistening his parched lips. At the sound of the loud voice, a steward came hurrying in.

"Show your hand, if you dare!" challenged Hazel. "You have dealt yourself——" And here he named the concealed cards one after another. Poole made an effort to fling his hand into the rest of the pack, but Hazel stopped him. [Pg 47]

"Show your hand! Show your hand!" he demanded. "These two gentlemen will witness whether I have named the cards correctly or not. Steward, ask the chief officer to come here, or, if he is not on duty, speak to the captain."

The steward disappeared, and shortly returned with the chief officer, to whom Hazel briefly and graphically related what had happened.

"Will you come with me to the captain's room?" requested the chief officer.

Branksome Poole had been through the mill before, and he offered no resistance.

When the wireless came in touch with the American shore, a dispatch reached police headquarters in New York, informing them that Charles Branksome, wanted for blackmailing Erasmus Blank, the millionaire, was detained by the ship's authority for cheating at cards.

When the great vessel arrived at her berth, Mrs. Branksome Poole was quite unmolested as she took her ticket for the West. She was amply supplied with money, and among her newly-acquired funds were two fifty-pound notes which had been previously in her possession. [Pg 48]

II.—AN AUTOMOBILE RIDE.

When Lord Stranleigh of Wychwood came to New York under his family name of Trevelyan, he had intended to spend several weeks in that interesting metropolis, but newspaper men speedily scattered his incognito to the winds, and, what with interviewers, photographers, funny paragraphists and the like, the young lord's life was made a burden to him. Despite his innate desire to be polite to everyone, he soon found it impossible to receive even a tenth part of those who desired speech with him. This caused no diminution of interviews or special articles regarding his plans, and his object in revisiting America. The sensational papers alleged that he had untold millions to invest; that he had placed cash on all the available projects in Europe, and now proposed to exploit the United States in his insatiable desire to accumulate more wealth. [Pg 49]

Stranleigh changed his quarters three times, and with each move adopted a new name. He endured it all with imperturbable good-nature, despite the intense heat, but Ponderby was disgusted with the state of affairs, and wished himself and his master back once more in that quiet village known as London.

"By Jove! Ponderby," said Stranleigh, "they say three moves are as bad as a fire, and the temperature to-day seems to corroborate this, for we are making our third move. Have you anything to suggest?" [Pg 50]

"I should suggest, my lord," said Ponderby, with as much dignity as the sweltering day would allow, "that we return to London."

"A brilliant and original idea, Ponderby. Many thanks. Go down at once to the steamship office, and book the best accommodation you can get on the first big liner leaving New York."

Ponderby departed instantly, with a deep sigh of relief. [Pg 51]

Stranleigh's life had been made more of a burden to him than was necessary through the indefatigable exertions of a fellow countryman, whose name was Wentworth Parkes. This individual brought with him a letter of introduction from the Duke of Rattleborough. Rattleborough was an acquaintance, but not a particular friend of Stranleigh's; nevertheless, a Duke overtops a mere Earl in social eminence, much as the Singer building overtops the structure next to it.

Wentworth Parkes told Stranleigh he had been in America for something more than a year. He had been very successful, making plenty of money, but expending it with equal celerity. Now he determined to get hold of something that contained princely possibilities for the future. This he had secured by means of an option on the Sterling Motor Company at Detroit, and the plant alone, he alleged, was worth more than the capital needed to bring the factory up to its full output. J. E. Sterling, he went on to explain, knew more about automobile designing than anyone else in the world, notwithstanding the fact that he was still a young man. He would undoubtedly prove to be the true successor of Edison, and everyone knew what fortunes had come to those who interested themselves in the products of the great Thomas Alva, who up to date had proved to be the most successful money-making inventor the world had ever seen, to which Lord Stranleigh calmly agreed. Well, J. E. Sterling was just such another, and all a man required to enter the combination, was the small sum of one hundred thousand dollars. This would purchase [Pg 52]

a share in the business which might be sold within a year or two for millions. Detroit was the centre of automobile manufacturing in America; a delightful city to live in; the finest river in the world running past its doors, with a greater tonnage of shipping than passed through the Suez Canal.

Mr. Parkes was a glib and efficient talker, who might have convinced anyone with money to spare, but he felt vaguely that his fluency was not producing the intended effect on Lord Stranleigh. His difficulty heretofore had been to obtain access to men of means, and now that he had got alongside the most important of them all, he was nonplussed to notice that his eloquence somehow missed its mark. Stranleigh remained scrupulously courteous, but was quite evidently not in the least interested. So shrewd a man as Parkes might have known that it is not easy to arouse enthusiasm in a London clubman under the most favourable auspices, and this difficulty is enormously increased when the person attacked is already so rich that any further access of wealth offers no temptation to him.

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Parkes had come to believe that the accumulation of gold was the only thing the average man really cared about, so he failed, by moving against the dead wall of Stranleigh's indifference towards money, whereas he might have succeeded had he approached the sentimental side of the young man. Indeed, Mr. Wentworth Parkes seemed to catch a glimmering of this idea as his fairy visions of the future fell flat, so he reversed his automobile talk, and backed slowly out.

Conversation lagging, his lordship asked a few casual questions about the Duke of Rattleborough and other persons he knew in London, but if any of these queries were intended to embarrass his visitor, Stranleigh's failure was equal to that of Parkes himself. The latter answered all enquiries so promptly and correctly that Stranleigh inwardly chided himself for his latent distrust of the man who now, quick to see how the land lay, got his motor car in position once more, but took another direction. He mopped his forehead with his handkerchief, and drew a slight sigh.

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"You see," he said, in a discouraged tone, "a person brought up as I have been, to do nothing in particular that is of any use to the world, finds himself at a great disadvantage in a hustling land like the United States, where the fellows are all so clever, and have been trained from their very boyhood to be alert business men. I have a good thing in this option, and if once I got upon my feet, I could soon build up a great and profitable business. My chief trouble is to convince any capitalist of this, and if he asks me whether or not the scheme will produce a fortune within six months or a year, I am forced to admit there is little chance of it. An American wishes to turn over his money quickly; a long look into futurity is not for him. He wishes to buy one railway on Monday, another on Tuesday, amalgamate them on Wednesday, and sell out the stock to the public at several millions profit on Thursday, then rake in the boodle on Friday, which proves an unlucky day for the investors. When I truthfully confess it will be a year before I get fairly under way, I am immediately at a discount. Capitalists won't listen any further."

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Parkes saw that for the first time during the interview Lord Stranleigh began to show interest, reserved though it was.

"Do you know anything about cars?" asked his lordship.

"I can take apart any motor in the market, and put it together again, always leaving it a little better than when I found it."

"And this machine—invented by the Detroit man—does it fill the bill?"

"It's the best motor in the world to-day," asserted Parkes, with a return of his old confidence.

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Stranleigh smiled slightly.

"I think," he said, "you have been very successful in catching the enthusiasm of America. You deal glibly with superlatives. Mr. Sterling is the most remarkable man on earth, Detroit the most beautiful city on the globe, and your motor-car beats the universe."

"Well, my lord, I don't disclaim the superlatives, but I insist on their truth. As I said, I deal in truth, and have suffered somewhat in pocket by doing so."

A slight shade of perplexity came into the young earl's face. There was something deferential in the tone used by Parkes when he enunciated the phrase "my lord," which Stranleigh did not like. Neither phrase nor tone would have been used by any person in his own circle of acquaintance addressing another in the same set. His former distrust was again aroused. As he remained silent, Parkes went on—

"You need not take my word for the automobile, which after all is the crux of the situation. I have one of them here in New York. I tested it very fully on the way from Detroit to this city, travelling in it the whole distance. Let me take you for a drive. You doubtless know all about a motor-car, for I was told in London that you owned at least a dozen of them."

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"I daresay it's true. I'm not sure. Nevertheless, I am so unfortunate as to have only a slight knowledge of their mechanics. I have driven a good deal, but not being so energetic as Prince Henry of Prussia, I leave details to my chauffeurs."

"Very good. You are doubtless well acquainted with the merits of a car from the owner's point of view. Come out with me in this Detroit motor, and I will be your chauffeur, or you may drive the machine yourself, if you remember that in this country you keep to the right side of the road."

Thus the appointment was made, and was kept by Lord Stranleigh. At the end of his run, he said to Parkes—

“The car seems to be a satisfactory piece of construction, but I own two or three American cars in London, any one of which, I think, is equally good; in fact, as Mark Twain said about his Jumping Frog—‘I see no points about this frog different from any other frog.’ However, I will consider your proposal, and will let you know the result. Meanwhile, many thanks for a most interesting ride.”

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Stranleigh sauntered down town, and entered a cable office.

“Can I send a message to London, and leave a deposit here for the reply, that it may not cost my London friend anything?”

“Certainly, sir.”

Stranleigh wrote—

“Duke of Rattleborough, Camperdown Club, London.

“A man calling himself Wentworth Parkes presented a letter of introduction from you to me. Please cable whether or not he is reliable.”

Two days later, Stranleigh received a reply—

“Letter a forgery. Parkes was my valet for three years, then bolted, leaving a lot of little things behind him, but not if they were portable and valuable. Believe he is now abroad, though the London police are yearning for him. RATTLEBOROUGH.”

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Now began the persistent pursuit of Stranleigh, which culminated in his sending Ponderby down to the steamship office to buy tickets for England. The young man said nothing to anyone of the cablegram he had received, nor did he inform the police of London the whereabouts of their quarry. He rather pitied the poor wretch, as he called him, but he had no use for a thief and a liar, so he refused to hold further communication with him, or to make any explanation. Parkes, finding he could not gain admission to Stranleigh, took to sending letters by special messenger, first adopting an aggrieved tone, a reproachful suggestion of injured innocence running through his correspondence like a minor note in a piece of music; then he became the victim of an unscrupulous millionaire, asserting that Stranleigh had promised to finance the proposed company, and breathing threats of legal proceedings. Indeed, as the recipient read these later communications, he realised they were evidently written with a view to publicity in law courts, for there emanated from them sentiments of great patriotism. The United States, Stranleigh learned, would not put up with his villainy, as would have been the case with legal proceedings in decadent England, where judges were under the thumb of a debased aristocracy.

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Stranleigh had no ambition to appear in the courts of either country, so he removed from one hotel to another, but apparently he was watched, for Parkes ran him down wherever he betook himself. Thus we come to the moment when the sedate but overjoyed Ponderby returned with the steamship tickets, which Stranleigh thrust into his pocket.

“Shall I pack up now, my lord?”

“I wish you would. The valet of the hotel will assist you. Prepare three boxes; one for yourself and two for me, filling mine with such clothing as I should take were I going to visit a friend in the country for a week or two. Place the other luggage in charge of the manager of the hotel, and say I will telegraph when I make up my mind where it is to be sent.”

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And then, to Ponderby’s amazement, the young man left for Boston, and took passage in the steamer for St. John, New Brunswick.

“You see, Ponderby,” said his lordship, when they got out into the ocean, “the estimable Parkes, if he is watching us, is already aware that you have booked for Southampton. He may possibly set the law in motion, and appear with some emissaries thereof aboard the liner before she sails, so we might be compelled to remain in this country which he so ardently loves.”

“But the steamship tickets, my lord? They cost a lot of money.”

“Quite so, my economical Ponderby, but remember for your consolation that when you step ashore from this boat, you will be under the British flag. You may telegraph to the company and tell them to sell the tickets, meanwhile sending them by post to New York. Here they are. Whatever money the company returns, is to be retained by you further to mitigate your disappointment. I have no doubt that in thus bolting for Canada you feel like a culprit escaping from justice, but we are only escaping from Parkes. Having pestered me as much about Detroit as he has done, that city will be the last place in which he is likely to look for me. We are making for Detroit, Ponderby, by the most roundabout route I could choose, seeing that the Panama Canal is not yet open, and thus I am unable to reach the autometropolis by way of San Francisco.”

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After passing through Canada, Lord Stranleigh settled himself very comfortably in a luxurious suite of rooms situated near the top storey of a luxurious hotel in the city of the Straits, under the assumed commonplace name of Henry Johnson. The windows of his apartment afforded wide and interesting views of skyscrapers and noble public edifices, with a wilderness of roofs extending towards the misty horizon to the west, north, and east, while to the south flowed the majestic

river, its blue surface enlivened by stately steamers and picturesque sailing craft.

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The gloomy valet did not share his master's admiration of the scene. Ponderby was heart and soul a Londoner, and although forced to admit that the Thames was grey and muddy, and its shipping for the most part sombre and uncouth, that tidal water remained for him the model of all other streams. He was only partially consoled by the fact that five cents brought him across to the Canadian shore, where he might inhale deep breaths of air that fluttered the Union Jack.

Stranleigh, confident that he had shaken off pursuit, enjoyed himself in a thoroughly democratic manner, sailing up stream and down, on one of the pearl white passenger boats, that carried bands which played the immortal airs of Sousa.

He began his second week in Detroit by engaging a motor to make a tour of the motor manufacturing district. He was amazed at the size and extent of the buildings, and recognised, among the names painted thereon, the designation of cars that were familiar to him. He had come to believe Parkes such an untruthful person, that he had taken a big discount from everything he said, and so was unprepared to find the reality far in advance of the description. However, he saw no sign bearing the name of the Sterling Motor Company, so asked his chauffeur to convey him thither. The chauffeur, pondering a moment, was forced to admit that he had never heard of the firm.

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"Then be so good," requested Stranleigh, "as to drop into one of these offices and enquire. It is likely that someone will know the names of all other companies in the same line of manufacture."

"I don't doubt," said the chauffeur, "that they know all about it, but it wouldn't be business to direct a possible customer to a rival firm."

Stranleigh smiled.

"I have not been in this country so long as you have," he said, "but I think you will find an American business man ignores rivalry when he has an opportunity of doing an act of courtesy."

The chauffeur drew up at a huge factory and went inside. Returning very promptly, he informed his fare that they knew of no Sterling Motor Company, but there was in Woodbridge Street a young engineer named J. E. Sterling, who, they believed, made motor-cars.

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"J. E. Sterling! That's the man I want. Where is Woodbridge Street?"

"Right away down town; next door, as you might say, to the river front."

"Very good; we'll go there. Just drive past Mr. Sterling's place, for if I do not like the look of it I shall not go in."

By and by they turned into Woodward Avenue, and raced down town at a speed which Stranleigh thought must surely exceed the legal limit, if there was one. Woodbridge Street proved to be crowded with great lumbering trucks, loaded with vegetables for the most part, and among these vehicles the chauffeur threaded his way cautiously. They passed a small, rather insignificant shop, above whose window was painted—

"J. E. STERLING. Motor Engineer. Repairs
promptly executed. Satisfaction guaranteed."

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When the chauffeur came to a halt a little further on, Stranleigh said—

"The place doesn't look very inviting, but as Mr. Sterling guarantees satisfaction, I think it but right to call upon him. I sha'n't need you any more to-day."

The door being open, Stranleigh walked in unannounced. A two-seated runabout, evidently brand new, stood by the window, where it could be viewed by passers-by. Further down the room rested a chassis, over which two men, one middle-aged and the other probably twenty-five, were bending, with tools in their hands. They were dressed in grease-stained blue overalls, and they looked up as Stranleigh entered.

"I wish to see Mr. J. E. Sterling," he said.

"My name is Sterling," replied the younger man, putting down his tools, and coming forward.

"I understood," went on Stranleigh, "that there was a Sterling Motor Car Company."

"There will be," answered the young man confidently, "but that's in the sweet by and by. It hasn't materialised so far. What can I do for you?"

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"Well, you can give me some information regarding J. E. Sterling. I want to learn if it tallies with what I have heard."

The young man laughed.

"It depends on who has been talking about me. I daresay you have been told things that might require explanation."

"I heard nothing but praise," his lordship assured him. "It was said you were the true successor of Thomas Alva Edison."

Sterling laughed even more heartily than before.

"I'm afraid they were getting at you. A man may be a creditable inventor, and a good, all-round engineer without being able to hold a candle to Edison. Are you looking for an automobile?"

"No; as I told you at first, I am looking for J. E. Sterling."

"I was going to say that I am not yet prepared to supply cars. I do repairing and that sort of thing, merely to keep the wolf from the door, and leave me a little surplus to expend in my business. My real work, however, is experimenting, and when I am able to turn out a machine that satisfies me, my next business will be to form a company, for one can't do anything in this trade without capital." [Pg 68]

"The competition must be intense."

"It is, but there's always room for a first-rate article, and the production of a first-rate article is my ambition."

"Is that your work in the window?"

"Yes."

"Does it come up to your expectations?"

The young man's face grew serious; his brow wrinkled almost into a frown, and he remained silent for a few moments.

"Well, I can't exactly say that it does," he answered at last, "still, I think the faults I have found can be remedied with a little patience. On the other hand, I fear the improvement I have put in this car may not be as great as I thought when I was working at it." [Pg 69]

Lord Stranleigh looked at the young man with evident approval; his frankness and honesty commended themselves to him.

"Do you mind showing me your improvement and explaining its function?"

"Not at all. You will remember, however, that this exhibition is confidential, for I have not yet patented the mechanism."

"I shall not mention to anyone what you show me. You asked me a moment ago if I wished to buy an automobile, and I said I did not. I have made a little money in my time, but mostly, it seems to me, by flukes. I do not pretend to be a business man, yet such is the conceit of humanity that I wish to invest some of my money to back my own judgment. If I lose the cash, it won't cripple me to any appreciable extent. On the other hand, should the investment prove satisfactory, I shall have more faith in my judgment than has hitherto been the case. In any event, I promise to assist you in the formation of your company."

"That's all right!" cried the young engineer, with enthusiasm. "My own judgment of men is frequently at fault, but somehow I'd stake my bottom dollar on you. Come over to the window, and I'll show you how the wheels go round." [Pg 70]

The two men approached the car in the window, and as they did so a third person on the pavement outside stopped suddenly, and regarded them with evident astonishment. Neither of those inside saw him, but if one or the other had looked through the glass, he would have recognised the sinister face of Wentworth Parkes who, having satisfied himself as to the visitor's identity, turned away and retraced his steps.

Sterling lifted up a leather curtain which hung down in front from the passenger's seat and disclosed a line of three upright pegs, rising two or three inches from the floor of the car. They were concealed when the curtain was lowered.

"If you give the matter any thought," said Sterling, "you will discover that the passenger in an automobile is in rather a helpless position. His chauffeur may faint, or even die at his wheel from heart failure, as has been the case in several instances I know of, or he may be drunk, and therefore unreasonable or obstinate, driving the car with danger to all concerned, yet if his master attempt to displace him while the car is going at high speed, disaster is certain. Now, the centre peg here will stop the engine and put on the brakes. A pressure by the foot on the right-hand peg turns the car to the right; and on the left-hand to the left. In the ordinary car the passenger can do nothing to save himself, but here he may stop the car dead, or, if he prefers it, may disconnect the steering wheel, and guide the car at his will." [Pg 71]

"Why, I think that's an excellent device!" cried Stranleigh.

"I thought so, too, but there are disadvantages. The crises in which it could be brought to play are rare. As a general rule, a chauffeur is much more to be trusted than the owner, and if the owner happens to be a nervous man, he might interfere, with deplorable results." [Pg 72]

"Yes," said Stranleigh, "it's like the pistol in Texas. You may not need it, but when you do you want it very badly. Has anyone else seen this contrivance?"

"No one except my assistant."

"Could you lend me this car to-morrow?"

"Certainly."

"Then place the car in charge of a competent chauffeur, who knows nothing of your safety device, and send it up to my hotel at eleven o'clock. Tell him to ask for Henry Johnson. I'll take a little trip into the country, where I can test the car on some unfrequented road."

"Better cross the river to Canada," said Sterling, with a smile. "Things are quiet over there."

"Very well," agreed Stranleigh. "You are a busy man, and I have taken up a considerable amount of your time. You must allow me to pay you for it."

The young man's face grew red underneath its spots of grease, and he drew back a step.

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"You have spent your own time to an equal amount, so we'll allow one expenditure to balance the other."

"My time is of no account. I'm a loafer."

"I could not accept any money, sir."

The two looked at one another for a moment, and gentlemen understand each other even though one wears the greasy clothes of a mechanic.

"I beg your pardon," said Stranleigh, softly. "Now, let me ask you one question. Have you given an option on this business to anyone?"

Sterling glanced up in surprise.

"Why, yes, I did give an option to an Englishman. By the way, you're English, are you not?"

"I was born over there."

"This Englishman wasn't your sort. He was a most plausible talker, and as I told you, my judgment of men is sometimes at fault. I gave him an option for two months, but I think all he wanted was to get an automobile for nothing. He said he represented a syndicate of English capitalists, some of whom were in New York, and he borrowed the only car I had completed at that time. That was four months ago. Like the preacher after the futile collection, I wanted to get back my hat at least, but although I wrote letter after letter, I never received any answer. It wasn't worth my while to set the police on his track, so I tried to forget him, and succeeded until you spoke of an option just now."

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"That agreement lapsed two months ago?"

"Yes."

"Then write out an option for me, good for a week. I'll pay you five hundred dollars down, to be forfeited if I fail to do what I promise."

"I'll give you the document with pleasure, but it is unnecessary to make a deposit."

"This is business, you know, Mr. Sterling. You are pretending you are as bad a business man as I am. I don't know much about the law of America, but I think you will find that unless a deposit is made, your instrument would be invalid in a court of law. There must be value received, I believe, when a bargain is made."

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"All right," said Sterling, "but I'll give you back your money if you regret the deal."

He went to a desk in the corner, and wrote out the agreement, in which he acknowledged the receipt of five hundred dollars. Stranleigh selected from his wallet five bills for a hundred dollars each, and handed them over, then bidding farewell to the engineer, walked to his hotel, followed at a discreet distance by Mr. Wentworth Parkes.

Having located his quarry, Parkes retraced his steps to Woodbridge Street, deep in thought. His first resolution was to try bluster, but he abandoned that idea for two reasons, each conclusive in its way. His slight acquaintance with the engineer had convinced him that while much could be done with Sterling by persuasion, he would not yield to force, and secondly, the motor builder had no money. Whatever gold he was to acquire in his deal must come from Lord Stranleigh. It was, therefore, a mild and innocent lamb of a man who entered the machine shop of Woodbridge Street.

"Hello!" cried Sterling, who seemed taken aback by the encounter. "What have you done with my automobile, and why did you not answer my letters?"

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"Your automobile is here in Detroit; a little the worse for wear, perhaps, but there is nothing wrong with it that you cannot put right in short order. As for letters, I never received any. I thought I had notified you of my changed address."

"As a matter of fact, you didn't."

"In that case, I apologise most humbly. The truth is, Mr. Sterling, I have been working practically night and day, often under very discouraging circumstances. Until quite recently there was nothing hopeful to tell, and the moment I struck a bit of good luck, I came on here in the car to let you know. You see, it was very difficult to interest capital in a proposition that apparently has no substantiality behind it. If you had possessed a big factory in going order, that I could have shown a man over, the company would have been formed long ago. It therefore surprised me

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exceedingly, when I passed your shop less than a hour ago, to see standing in this window, while you were explaining the car to him, the man on whom I chiefly depended. You must put it down to my credit that instead of coming in as I had intended, thus embarrassing him, and perhaps spoiling a deal by my interference, I passed on, waited until he came out, and followed him to his hotel."

Sterling was plainly nonplussed.

"I wish you had come in an hour earlier," he said. "You couldn't have interfered with a deal, because your option ran out two months ago."

"I know that," said Parkes regretfully, "but I thought the good work on my part would have made up for a legal lapse. Indeed, Mr. Sterling, if you will allow me to say so, I had such supreme faith in your own honesty, that I believed you would not hesitate to renew our arrangement."

"That's just the point," said Sterling. "Had you come in an hour sooner, you would have been in time. As it is, I have granted a new option to the man you saw here with me."

"What name did he give you? Trevelyan?"

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"No; the name he mentioned was Henry Johnson."

Parkes laughed a little, then checked himself.

"He went under the name of Trevelyan in New York, but I know neither that nor Johnson is his true title. Well, is he going in with you, then?"

"He has asked for a week to decide."

Now Parkes laughed more heartily.

"I took him out in your motor in New York, and there also he asked for a week in which to decide. He seems to have taken the opportunity to come West, and try to forestall me."

"Oh, I don't believe he's that sort of man," cried Sterling, impatiently.

"Perhaps I do him an injustice. I sincerely hope so. Of course you're not compelled to show your hand, but I think, in the circumstances, you might let me know just how far you've got."

"Yes, I think you are entitled to that. I remember I was rather astonished when I learned he knew I had given a former option, but I shall be very much disappointed if he doesn't run straight. Still, I have been mistaken in men before. He took an option for a week, and paid me five hundred dollars down in cash, to be forfeited if he does not exercise it."

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"Well, if the money is not counterfeit, that certainly looks like running straight. And meanwhile, what are you to do?"

"I am to do nothing, except send this car up to his hotel with a suitable chauffeur, at eleven o'clock to-morrow. He is going to test it along the Canadian roads."

"Was anything said about the amount of capital he was to put up?"

"Not a word; we didn't get that far."

Parkes took a few turns up and down the room then he said suddenly:

"Have you any particular chauffeur in mind?"

"No; I was just going out to make arrangements."

"You don't need to make any arrangements. I'll be your chauffeur, and can show off this car better than a stranger, who perhaps might be interested in some other automobile, and try to get your customer away. It's to my interest, having spent so much time on it, to see the deal put through. Besides, I know your man, and now that I have encountered him here in Detroit, he cannot deny that I sent him to your shop. I think he owes me at least a commission for bringing you together. I realise, of course, that I have no legal claim on either of you, yet I am sure, if the facts were proved, any court would allow me an agent's commission."

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"I'll pay your commission," said Sterling.

"You haven't got the money, and he has."

"Very well; I will let you go as chauffeur, but I must inform him who you are."

Parkes shook his head.

"My dear Sterling, you are the most honest and impractical man I ever met. If you give him warning, he'll merely leave you in the lurch as he did me."

"Do you intend to disguise yourself?"

"Certainly not."

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"Then he will recognise you at once."

"I understand that class of Englishman much better than you do. He will never see me, and I

don't know that I shall call myself to his attention at all. My own idea is to let the deal go through, claiming only the privilege of being your adviser, and keeping altogether in the background. I can give you valuable hints about dealing with this sort of man. He will regard me as a servant, and unless I said to him: 'Lord Stranleigh of Wychwood, why did you bolt so suddenly from New York?' he would never have the least idea who was sitting beside him, and even then he would exhibit no surprise."

"Lord Stranleigh?" echoed Sterling in amazement.

"Yes; that's the man you're dealing with, and he's worth untold millions. I'll go up to this hotel now, and see him, if you prefer that I should do so."

"No; you may take him out to-morrow, but I advise you to say nothing to him about me or my business. Whatever arrangement we come to finally, you shall be recompensed for your share in the negotiations."

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Parkes' prediction regarding Stranleigh's non-recognition of him proved accurate. The young man simply said—

"We will cross the ferry, and run up along the Canadian shore as far as Lake St. Clair."

The road continued along the river bank, with no fences on the left side. Although residences were fairly numerous, there was little traffic on the highway. The car was running at a moderate pace when the chauffeur suddenly diverted it towards the river, and with an exceedingly narrow margin escaped tumbling down the bank.

"I say," murmured Stranleigh, "I don't like that you know."

"There's worse to come," said the chauffeur menacingly. "You will promise to pay me a hundred thousand dollars, or I will dash you and the car over the edge into the river. If you consider your life worth that sum, speak quickly."

"Ah, it is you, Parkes? I hope you realise that you will dash yourself over at the same time?"

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"I know that, but I'm a desperate man. Just get that through your head."

"You are aware that a promise given under duress is not binding?"

"Stow talk!" roared Parkes. "Say 'yes' or 'no.'"

"I say 'No!'" replied Stranleigh, so quietly that the other was unprepared for the prompt action which followed. Stranleigh flung his arms around the man, and jerked him backward from his wheel. His lordship was in good athletic condition; the ex-valet had looked too much on the wine when it was red, and on the highball when it sparkled in the glass. He felt helpless as a child.

"Now," said Stranleigh, "we will see who is the coward. I'll lay a wager with you that this car tumbles off the bank before five minutes are past."

Stranleigh with his heels was working the two outside pegs, and the car acted as if it were drunker than a lord, and almost as drunk as the valet.

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"In God's name," cried the latter, "let me go. We shall be wrecked in a moment."

"No, we won't."

"I implore you, Lord Stranleigh!"

"I'll save your life, but will give you a lesson against attempted blackmail."

He steered to the edge of the bank, then pressed the middle peg, and stopped the car. Rising and carrying Parkes with him, he hurled him headlong over the slight earthy precipice into the water, which was shallow at that point. Parkes arose spluttering, and found Stranleigh had turned the car round, and with a smile on his face, was looking down at his dripping victim.

"You'll suffer for this!" cried Parkes, shaking his fist at him. "We're in a country, thank God, where we think very little of lords."

"Oh, I don't think much of lords myself, in any country," replied Stranleigh suavely, "and even less of their valets, notwithstanding I've a very good one myself. Now listen to my advice. I shall be in the United States before you can reach a telephone, and I don't see how you can get me back unless I wish to return. I advise you not to stir up the police. The Duke of Rattleborough cabled to me that a certain section of that useful body is anxious to hear of you. Call on Mr. Sterling, and whatever he thinks is just compensation for your introduction I will pay, but before you get the money, you must ensure both of us against further molestation in any way."

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Stranleigh drove up to the shop on Woodbridge Street, and listened to the account Sterling gave of Parkes' visit and conversation, and his explanation of how he had come to allow him to drive the car.

"That's quite all right and satisfactory," said his lordship. "I never for a moment distrusted you. Still, I did get your name from Parkes, and I owe him something for that. What do you think would be a fair payment to make? I threw him into the river, but though it's clean, clear water, I expect no reward."

"If you'll allow me to pay him the five hundred dollars you gave me yesterday, I think the rogue will get much more than he deserves." [Pg 86]

"Very good; I'll add another five hundred, but see that he signs some legal promise not to molest us further. I'll capitalise your company to the extent of any amount between a hundred thousand dollars and half a million."

III.—THE GOD IN THE CAR.

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Young Lord Stranleigh always proved a disappointment to a thorough-going Radical, for he differed much from the conventional idea of what a hereditary proud peer should be. He was not overbearing on the one hand, nor condescending on the other, being essentially a shy, unassuming person, easily silenced by any controversialist who uttered statements of sufficient emphasis. He never seemed very sure about anything, although undoubtedly he was a judge of well-fitting clothes, and the tailoring of even the remoter parts of America rather pleased him.

One thing that met his somewhat mild disapproval was undue publicity. He shrank from general notice, and tried to efface himself when reporters got on his track. In order, then, to live the quiet and simple life, his lordship modified a stratagem he had used on a previous occasion with complete success. He arranged that the obedient but unwilling Ponderby should enact the country gentleman of England, bent on enlarging his mind, and rounding out his experiences by residence in the United States. Ponderby wished to get back to the old country, but was too well-trained to say so. Lord Stranleigh, under the humble designation of Henry Johnson, set for himself the part of Ponderby's chauffeur, a *rôle* he was well fitted to fill, because of his love for motoring, and his expertness in the art. He dressed the character to perfection, being always particular in the matter of clothes, and was quite admirable in raising his forefinger deferentially to the edge of his cap, a salute whose effect Ponderby endangered by his unfortunate habit of blushing.

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Accustomed to self-suppression though he was, Ponderby could not altogether conceal from Lord Stranleigh his dislike of the metamorphosis that was proposed. He had been born a servant and brought up a servant, with the result that he was a capable one, and posing as a gentleman was little to his taste. Of course, he would do anything Lord Stranleigh commanded, and that without consciously hinting disapproval, but the earl shrank from giving a command as much as he would have disliked receiving one. He was suave enough with the general public, but just a little more so in dealing with those who depended on him.

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"Did you ever visit the ancient village of Burford, Ponderby?" he asked on this occasion.

"Burford in England, my lord?"

"Ponderby," pleaded Stranleigh, "kindly oblige me by omitting the appellation."

"Burford in England, sir?"

"That's better," said the earl with a smile, "but we will omit the 'sir' in future, also. I am a chauffeur, you know. Yes, I do mean Burford in Oxfordshire, nestling cosily beside the brown river Windrush, a village of very ancient houses."

"I have never been there." Ponderby swallowed the phrase "my lord" just in time.

"Then you have not seen the priory of that place; the ruins of a beautiful old English manor-house? It forms the background of a well-known modern picture by Waller—"The Empty Saddle." The estate was purchased by Lenthall, Speaker of the House of Commons during the Long Parliament. Kings have put up at the Priory, the last being William the Third. Think of that, Ponderby! Royalty! I know how you will respect the house on that account. One of Lenthall's descendants was served by an ideal butler, who was happy, contented, well-paid; therefore, to all outward appearances, satisfied. One day he fell heir to three thousand pounds, which at present would be not quite fifteen thousand dollars, but at that time was a good deal more. Against his master's protests, he resigned his butlership.

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"'I have always wished to live,' he confessed, 'at the rate of three thousand a year; to live as a gentleman for that period. I will return to you a year from to-day, and if you wish to engage me, I shall be happy to re-enter your service.'

"He spent his long-coveted year and the three thousand pounds, returning and taking up his old service again on the date he had set. Now, Ponderby, there's a precedent for you, and I know how you love precedents. Remembering this historical fact, I have placed in the bank of Altonville fifteen thousand dollars to your credit. You cannot return to old England just yet, but you may enjoy New England. Already constituting myself your servant, I have taken a furnished house for you, and all I ask in return is that I may officiate as your chauffeur. I hope to make some interesting experiments with the modern American automobile."

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And so it was arranged. Lord Stranleigh at the wheel saw much of a charming country; sometimes with Ponderby in the back seat, but more often without him, for the inestimable valet was quite evidently ill-at-ease through this change of their relative positions.

One balmy, beautiful day during the exceptionally mild Indian summer of that year, Stranleigh left Altonville alone in his motor, and turned into a road that led northward, ultimately reaching the mountains to be seen dimly in the autumn haze far to the north. It was a favourite drive of his, for it led along the uplands within sight of a group of crystal lakes with well-wooded banks on the opposite shore. The district was practically untouched by commerce, save that here and there along the valley stood substantial mills, originally built to take advantage of the water power from the brawling river connecting the lakes. Some of these factories had been abandoned, and were slowly becoming as picturesque as an old European castle. Others were still in going order, and doubtless the valley had once been prosperous, but lagging behind an age of tremendous progress, had lost step, as it were, with the procession. Lack of adequate railway connection with the outside world was the alleged cause, but the conservatism of the mill-owners, who, in an age of combination, had struggled on individually to uphold the gospel of letting well alone, a campaign that resulted in their being left alone, had probably more to do with bringing about adversity than the absence of railways. Some of the mills had been purchased by the Trusts, and closed up. One or two still struggled on, hopelessly battling for individualism and independence, everyone but themselves recognising that the result was a foregone conclusion.

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Yet for a man who wished to rest, and desired, like the old-fashioned millers, to be left alone, this countryside was indeed charming. The summer visitors had all departed, missing the sublimest time of the year. Stranleigh had the road to himself, and there was no annoying speed limit to hamper the energy of his machine. Without any thought of his disconsolate valet moping about an unnecessarily large and well-furnished house, the selfish young man breathed the exhilarating air, and revelled in his freedom.

He passed a young couple, evidently lovers, standing on a grassy knoll, gazing across a blue lake at the wooded banks on the other side, seemingly at a fine old colonial mansion which stood in an opening of the woods, with well-kept grounds sloping down to the water's edge.

A man driving a car enjoys small opportunity for admiring scenery and architecture, so Stranleigh paid little regard to the view, but caught a fleeting glimpse of a beautiful girl, in whose expression there appeared a tinge of sadness which enhanced her loveliness; then he was past, with the empty road before him. He fell into a reverie, a most dangerous state of mind for a chauffeur, since a fall into a reverie on the part of a driver may mean a fall into a ravine on the part of the machine. The reverie, however, was interrupted by a shout, and then by another. He slowed down, and looking back over his shoulder saw that the young man was sprinting towards him at a record-breaking speed. Stranleigh declutched his automobile, and applying the brakes came to a standstill. The young man ran up breathlessly.

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"You are the chauffeur of that Englishman in Altonville, are you not?" he panted, breathing hard.

"Yes."

"Are you going to meet him, or anything of that sort?"

"No; I'm out for my own pleasure."

"I'll give you a dollar if you take my wife and me back to Altonville."

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Stranleigh smiled.

"I'll go, my chief; I'm ready," he murmured. "It is not for your silver bright, but for your winsome lady."

"My wife has sprained her ankle, and cannot walk," explained the young man.

"I am sorry to hear that," replied Lord Stranleigh. "Get in, and we will go back to her in a jiffy."

The young man sprang into the car, which the amateur chauffeur turned very deftly, and in a few moments they drew up close to the grassy bank where the girl was sitting. The young husband very tenderly lifted her to the back seat, and the polite chauffeur, after again expressing his regret at the accident, drove the car swiftly to Altonville, stopping at the office of the only doctor.

The young man rang the bell, and before the door was opened, he had carried the girl up the steps. Presently he returned, and found Stranleigh still sitting in the chauffeur's seat, meditatively contemplating the trafficless street. His late passenger thrust hand in pocket, and drew forth a silver dollar.

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"I am ever so much obliged," he said, "and am sorry to have detained you so long."

"The detention was nothing. To be of assistance, however slight, is a pleasure, marred only by the fact of the lady's misadventure. I hope to hear that her injury is not serious, and then I shall be well repaid."

"You will not be repaid," returned the young man, with a slight frown on his brow, "until you have accepted this dollar."

Stranleigh laughed gently.

"I told you at the beginning that I was not working for coin."

The young man came closer to the automobile.

"To tell the truth," he said earnestly, "I fear that now we are in Altonville that pompous gentleman, your boss, may come along, and you will get into trouble. Masters do not like their motors used for other people's convenience."

"Don't worry about Mr. Ponderby. He is a very good-hearted person, and his pomposity merely a mannerism. I am waiting to take madame and yourself to your residence." [Pg 97]

"It isn't much of a residence," laughed the young man rather grimly, "only a couple of rooms and a small kitchen, and is less than a hundred yards from this spot."

"Then I'll take you that hundred yards."

"I work in Fulmer's grist mill," explained the husband, "and business is not very good, so I had the day off. This is a time of year when we ought to be busy, but the trade is merely local. The huge concerns down east, and further west, do practically all the grinding nowadays."

The door opened, and the doctor appeared at the top of the steps.

"It's all right, Mr. Challis," he said encouragingly. "Mrs. Challis must stay indoors for a few days, and be careful to rest her foot. The cure may be tedious, but not painful, thanks to prompt treatment."

Challis brought out his wife, and Stranleigh took them to the two-storied frame house, of which they occupied part. When the young man came out to thank the chauffeur, he found the street empty. [Pg 98]

A week later, Stranleigh's passengers heard the purr of an automobile outside the cottage. Challis opened the door in response to the chauffeur's knock.

"Good morning," said Stranleigh, shaking hands cheerfully. "What a lovely day! I am delighted to know that Mrs. Challis has completely recovered. I did not care to trouble you with repeated calls, but the doctor has been very kind, and has kept me informed of her progress. It is with his permission that I come to offer you a spin in the car. I'll take you anywhere you wish to go, and this invitation is extended with the concurrence of Mr. Ponderby, so you may enjoy the run to the full. My name's Johnson; not Jack, the celebrated, but Henry, the unknown."

Challis laughed.

"I'm delighted to meet you again," he said. "Come in and see my wife. Her worry has been that she has never had the opportunity to thank you for your former kindness. Yes; I shall be glad of a ride. I have been too much in the house lately." [Pg 99]

"Another day off, eh?"

"All days are off days now," growled Challis. "The grist mill has shut down."

Mrs. Challis received the alleged Johnson with a graciousness that was quite charming. She thanked him in a manner so winning that Stranleigh sat there overcome with an attack of the shyness he had never been able to shake off. He could not help noticing the subtle melancholy of her beautiful face, a hint of which he had received in that brief first glance as he passed in the automobile. He attributed it then to her mishap, but now realised its cause was something deeper and more permanent. He was astonished later to find her so resolute in refusing his invitation. She wished her husband to go for a drive, but would not avail herself of that pleasure. In vain Stranleigh urged the doctor's dictum that it would be good for her especially as the day was so fine, and she had endured a week of enforced idleness indoors. [Pg 100]

"Some other day perhaps," she said, "but not now," and he speedily recognised that her firmness was not to be shaken.

All her own powers of persuasiveness, however were turned upon her husband.

"You must go, Jim," she insisted. "I have kept you a prisoner for a week, and you need the fresh air much more than I do."

James Challis, protesting more and more faintly at last gave way, and the two men drove off together while Mrs. Challis fluttered a handkerchief from her window in adieu.

Challis had refused to sit in the back seat, and took his place beside the chauffeur.

"Where shall we go?" asked the latter.

"Drive to the place where you found us," said his passenger, and there they went. On the way thither, neither spoke, but at a sign from Challis, Stranleigh stopped the car.

"You must not think," began the former, "that my wife did not wish to come. I know from the expression of her eyes that she did. Her reason for declining was one that I imagine any woman would consider adequate, and any man the reverse." [Pg 101]

"I am an exception so far as the men are concerned," said Stranleigh, coming much nearer the truth than he suspected, "for I am sure that whatever motive actuated Mrs. Challis, it was commendable and right."

"Thank you," responded the other. "I am with you there. It is all a matter of clothes. My wife

possesses no costume suitable for a motor excursion.”

“In that case,” cried Stranleigh impulsively, “the defect is easily remedied. I have saved a bit from the ample salary Mr. Ponderby allows me, and if I may offer you——”

“I could not accept anything,” interrupted Challis.

“Merely a temporary loan, until the grist mill begins operations.”

Challis shook his head.

“That mill will never grind again with the water that is past, nor the water that is to come. Fulmer has gone smash, and I could not accept a loan that I do not see my way to repay. Nevertheless, I appreciate fully the kindness of your offer, and if you don’t mind, I will tell you how I got myself entangled, for there is no use in concealing from you what you must already have seen—that I am desperately poor, so much so that I sometimes lose courage, and consider myself a failure, which is not a pleasant state of mind to get into.”

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“Oh, I’ve often felt that way myself,” said Stranleigh, “but nobody’s a failure unless he thinks he is. You strike me as a capable man. You have youth and energy, and added to that, great good luck. I’m a believer in luck myself.”

This commendation did not chase the gloom from the face of Challis.

“You have knocked from under me,” he said, “the one frail prop on which I leaned. I have been excusing myself by blaming the run of horrid bad luck I have encountered.”

Stranleigh shook his head.

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“You can’t truthfully say that,” he rejoined quietly, “while you have had the supreme good fortune to enlist the affection of so clever and charming a wife.”

The gloom disappeared from Challis’s countenance as the shadow of a cloud at that moment flitted from the surface of the lake. He thrust forth his hand, and there being no onlookers, Stranleigh grasped it.

“Shake!” cried Challis. “I’ll never say ‘ill-luck’ again! I wish she had come with us.”

“So do I,” agreed Stranleigh.

“I’d like her to have heard you talk.”

“Oh, not for that reason. I’d like her to enjoy this scenery.”

“Yes, and the deuce of it is, she practically owns the scene. Look at that house across the lake.”

“A mansion, I should call it.”

“A mansion it is. That’s where my wife came from. Think of my selfishness in taking her from such a home to wretched rooms in a cottage, and abject poverty.”

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“I prefer not to think of your selfishness, but rather of her nobility in going. It revives in a cynical man like myself his former belief in the genuine goodness of the world.”

“It all came about in this way,” continued Challis. “I graduated at a technical college—engineering. I began work at the bottom of the ladder, and started in to do my best, being ambitious. This was appreciated, and I got on.”

“In what line?” asked Stranleigh.

“In a line which at that time was somewhat experimental. The firm for which I worked might be called a mechanical-medical association, or perhaps ‘surgical’ would be a better term. We had no plant, no factory; nothing but offices. We were advisers. I was sent here and there all over the country, to mills that were not in a good state of health; dividends falling off, business declining, competition too severe, and what-not. I looked over the works, talked with managers and men, formed conclusions, then sent a report to my firm containing details, and such suggestions as I had to offer. My firm communicated with the proprietor of the works accordingly, and collected its bill.”

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“That should be an interesting occupation,” said Stranleigh, whose attention was enlisted.

“It was. One day, I was sent up here to inspect the factory of Stanmore Anson, a large stone structure which you could see from here were it not concealed by that hill to the right. It has been in the Anson family for three generations, and had earned a lot of money in its time, but is now as old-fashioned as Noah’s Ark. It was cruelly wasteful of human energy and mechanical power. It should have had a set of turbines, instead of the ancient, moss-grown, overshot waterwheels. The machinery was out of date, and ill-placed. The material in course of manufacture had to go upstairs and downstairs, all over the building, handled and re-handled, backward and forward, instead of passing straight through the factory, entering as raw material, and coming out the finished product. I reported to my firm that the establishment needed a complete overhauling; that it ought to have new machinery, but that if it was compulsory to keep the old machines at work, they should be entirely rearranged in accordance with the sketch I submitted, so that unnecessary handling of the product might be avoided. I set down the

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minimum expense that must be incurred, and also submitted an estimate covering the cost of turbines and new machinery, which I admit was large in the bulk, but really the most economical thing to do."

"I see. And the old man objected to the expense, or perhaps had not the necessary capital to carry out your suggestion? What sort of a person is he? Unreasonable, I suppose you consider him?"

"Strangely enough, I never met him in my life."

"And you married his daughter?"

"Had to. I was determined to take the girl away, whether I reformed the factory or not, and here you see where good luck and the reverse mingled. When I arrived at Mr. Anson's factory, the old man was in New York, for the purpose, as I learned, of raising a loan, or of selling the property, neither of which projects was he able to carry out."

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"That was his misfortune, rather than his fault, wasn't it?"

"In a way, yes; still, the Trust had offered him a reasonable figure for his factory. He not only refused, but he fought the Trust tooth and nail, thinking that with low taxation, and country wages, he could meet the competition, which, of course, with the factory in its present state, he could not do. The fact that he was up against the Trust became well known, so that he could neither borrow nor sell. While in New York, he called several times on Langdon, Bliss, and Co., the firm that employed me. When my report came in and was read to him, I understand he fell into a tremendous rage, and characterised our company as a body of swindlers. Mr. Langdon ordered him out of the office.

"That was the first spoke in my wheel. Mr. Langdon was a capable man, always courteous and very calm when dealing with his fellows, so I am sure that my father-in-law must have been exceedingly violent when he provoked Langdon to vocal wrath. I judge that Langdon, when he recovered from his outbreak, regretted it extremely, and was inclined to blame me for rather muddling the affair of Anson's mill. I may say that I had been placed in rather a difficult position. The proprietor was absent, and had not taken his foreman into his confidence, therefore this foreman put difficulties in the way of investigation. The employees were suspicious, not knowing what this research by a stranger meant, so I went to Anson's house, hoping to find there someone with sufficient authority to enable me to get the information I must have.

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"I met Mrs. Anson, a kindly woman, but realised in a moment that no authority had been delegated to her. She appeared afraid to suggest anything, but called in her only daughter to assist at our conference. The girl at once said she would accompany me to the mill, and did so. I shall never forget with what infinite tact and persuasiveness she won over the foreman, and it was quite evident that the workmen all knew and liked her, for her very presence appeared to dissipate distrust. I saw Miss Anson home, and it seemed, as my investigations progressed, many conferences became more and more necessary. You're a young man, and doubtless you know how it is yourself."

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"As a matter of fact, I don't," interjected Stranleigh, "but I can guess."

"Well—your guess is right. We had no difficulty with Mrs. Anson, but both mother and daughter were uneasy about how the father would take it. I wrote him what I hoped was a straightforward letter, putting the case to him as man to man. He answered with a very brief and terse letter that left me no doubt regarding his opinion, but my own communication had arrived at an unfortunate time; the day after he had been ordered out of our office. He at once enclosed my letter to Mr. Langdon, saying in effect:—

"This is the sort of man you sent like a wolf in sheep's clothing to my home."

"Langdon telegraphed, asking if this was true. I, of course, had to admit it was, with the result of instant dismissal. I never would have let either mother or daughter know about this, but my reticence was vain, for Mr. Anson wrote a stinging letter to his daughter saying she could do what she pleased about marrying me, but that he had secured my dismissal. It is strange," Challis murmured reflectively, speaking more to himself than to his companion, "it is strange that a father rarely recognises that when he comes to a difference with one of his children, he is meeting, in part at least, some of his own characteristics. I wonder if I shall ever be so unreasonable as—"

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Stranleigh's eye twinkled as he remembered how firm the girl had been in refusing the automobile invitation, yet giving no explanation of that refusal.

"What Gertrude said to me was, holding her head very proudly: 'I have received my father's permission to marry you, and if you are ready for an immediate ceremony, I am willing.'

"We were married before the old man returned from New York."

"Has there been no further communication between Mr. Anson and yourself?"

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"On my part, yes; ignored by him. It was Gertrude who wished to stay in Altonville. She knew a financial crisis was threatening her father, and she hoped that in some way I should be able to advise him. That was not to be. She requested permission to take away her belongings. This was refused. Everything she possessed, Mr. Anson said, had been purchased with his money. They

remained at his home, and she was welcome to use them at his house, any time she chose to return, but having exchanged his care for that of another man, it was the other man's duty to provide what she needed. This ended our communication, and brings us to the present moment."

"Can you drive a car?" asked Stranleigh.

"Yes."

"The immediate question strikes me as being that of wearing apparel. I propose to return with at least a box full. I don't like to be baffled, and I wish Mrs. Challis to come out with us for a run. Will you exchange seats, and drive me down to the mill?"

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"You're up against a tough proposition," demurred Challis.

"A proposition usually gives way if you approach it tactfully, as Miss Anson approached the manager. If you have never seen her father, he will not recognise you, so let us call at the mill."

"He would not recognise me, but the foreman would, also many of the men."

"We must chance that."

The two young men exchanged seats, and Challis at the wheel, with more caution than ever Stranleigh used, sent the car spinning down the slightly descending road by the margin of the lake, until they came to the water level. No word was spoken between them, but his lordship studied with keen scrutiny from the corner of his eye, the profile of the intent driver. He was immensely taken with the young man, and meditated on the story to which he had listened. The effect left on his mind by that recital surprised him. It was a feeling of sympathy with the old man who had acted so obstreperously, and gradually he placed this feeling to the credit of Challis, who had shown no rancour against his father-in-law, either in word or tone. Yes; he liked Challis, and was sorry for the elderly Anson, one evidently advanced in years, battling against forces that were too much for him, stubbornly using antiquated methods in a world that had out-grown them; the muzzle-loader against the repeating rifle. These two men should be pulling together.

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"There's the factory," said Challis, at last, and Stranleigh, looking up, beheld further down the valley a three-storied structure, unexpectedly huge, built apparently for all the ages. There was no sign of activity about it; but the roar of waters came to their ears; idle waters, nevertheless, that were turning no wheels, the muffled sound of an unimpeded minor cataract.

"By Jove!" cried Stranleigh, jumping out as the car stopped.

Challis said nothing, but an expression of deep anxiety darkened his countenance. There were plastered here and there on the stone walls great white posters, bearing printing like the headings of a sensational newspaper, magnified several hundred times.

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AUCTION SALE.

BY ORDER OF THE BANKRUPTCY COURT,

that desirable property known as Anson's Mill, fully equipped with machinery, in condition for immediate use, with never-failing water power, which at slight expense may be enormously increased; together with ten acres of freehold land; without reserve to the highest bidder; on the Seventeenth of November!

"A desirable property," said Challis, sadly, "which nobody desires except the Trust, and probably *it* cares nothing about it now."

"You forget that it is desired by Stanmore Anson."

"I am afraid that even he is tired of it by this time. I am sorry, but I feared it was inevitable."

Stranleigh looked up at him.

"Could you make this factory pay, if it were given into your charge?"

"Not in its present condition."

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"I mean, of course, with your recommendations carried out. If the mill, free from all encumbrances, filled with modern machinery, rightly placed, were put under your management, could you make it pay?"

Challis did not answer for some moments. His brow was wrinkled in thought, and he seemed making some mental calculations.

"There would need to be a suitable amount of working capital——"

"Yes, yes; all that is understood. Could you make it pay?"

"I am almost sure I could, but there is that incalculable factor, the opposition of the Trust."

"Damn the Trust!" cried Stranleigh. "I beg your pardon; I should have said, blow the Trust! I thought I had lost the power of becoming excited, not to say profane. It must be the exhilarating air of America. The sale is a good way off yet, and I think it will be further off before I get through with it. If you will accept the management, and your father-in-law proves at all

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reasonable, I guarantee to find the necessary money.”

“You mean that, Mr. Ponderby—”

“Exactly. I am his chief business adviser, as well as his only chauffeur. But we are forgetting the matter in hand. We must rescue the wardrobe of Mrs. Challis. Drive on to the mansion. You know the way, and I don’t.”

“I’m a warned-off trespasser, but here goes.”

“You won’t be called on to trespass very much. You’re my chauffeur, *pro tem*. Perhaps you won’t need to enter the house at all. I shall see Mrs. Anson before I meet her husband, if possible, and will try to persuade her to give me the wardrobe.”

“She would not have the courage to do that without her husband’s permission, and he will never give it.”

“We’ll see about that. Ah, the mill is not the only piece of property to be sold!”

They had turned into a well-shaded avenue, to the massive stone gate-pillars of which were attached posters similar to those at the mill, only in this case it was “This valuable, desirable and palatial residence,” with the hundreds of acres of land attached, that were to be knocked down by the auctioneer’s hammer.

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“I might have known,” commented Stranleigh, “that if Mr. Anson was bankrupt at his mill, he was also bankrupt at his house.”

They drew up at the entrance. Stranleigh stepped down, and rang the bell, Challis remaining in the car. Shown into the drawing-room, the visitor was greeted by a sad-looking, elderly woman.

“Mrs. Anson,” said the young man, very deferentially, “I expect your forgiveness for this intrusion on my part when I say that I am here in some sense as an ambassador from your daughter.”

“From my daughter!” gasped the old lady in astonishment. “Is she well, and where is she?”

“She is very well, I am glad to say, and is living with her husband over in the village.”

“In her last letter she said her husband was taking her to New York. There had been a—misunderstanding.” The old lady hesitated for a moment before using that mild term. “On the day her letter was received, I went to the hotel at which they were stopping, and was told by the landlord they had gone, he did not know where. Do you tell me they have been living in Altonville all the time?”

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“I think so, but cannot be sure. I met Mr. and Mrs. Challis for the first time only a week ago.”

“I hope she is happy.”

“She is,” said Stranleigh confidently, “and before the day is done her mother will be happy also.”

Mrs. Anson shook her head. She was on the verge of tears, which Stranleigh saw and dreaded. So he said hurriedly:

“You will select me what you think she should have at once, and I will take the box or parcel to Altonville in my car.”

“When at last her father saw that everything we possessed must be sold,” rejoined Mrs. Anson, “he packed up in trunks what belonged to Gertrude, and as we could not learn where to send them, Mr. Asa Perkins, a friend of ours, who lives in Boston, lent us a room in which to store the things, and they are there now.”

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“How odd!” exclaimed Stranleigh. “I met Mr. Perkins just before he left his summer residence, and took the place furnished, acting for the present tenant. It is much too large for him, and some of the rooms are locked. Do you happen to have the key?”

“No; it is in the possession of the housekeeper. She is there still, is she not?”

“Yes; I took the house as it stood, servants and all.”

“I’ll write a note to the housekeeper, then. What name shall I say?”

“Please write it in the name of Mr. Challis. He’s outside now, in my car.”

“May I bring him in?” she asked, eagerly.

“Certainly,” said Stranleigh, with a smile. “It’s your house, you know.”

“Not for long,” she sighed.

“Ah,—” drawled Stranleigh, “Mr. Challis and I propose that this sale shall not take place. If I may have a short conversation with your husband, I think we shall come to terms.”

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An expression of anxiety overspread her face.

“Perhaps I had better not ask Jim to come in,” she hesitated.

“Your husband does not know him, and I would rather you did not tell him who is with me. Just

say that Henry Johnson and a friend wish to negotiate about the factory."

Stanmore Anson proved to be a person of the hale old English yeoman type, as portrayed by illustrators, although his ancestors originally came from Sweden. His face was determined, his lips firm, and despite his defeats, the lurking sparkle of combat still animated his eyes.

"Before we begin any conversation regarding a sale," he said, "you must answer this question, Mr. Johnson. Are you connected in any way, directly or indirectly, with the G.K.R. Trust?"

"I am not connected with it, directly or indirectly."

"You state that on your honour as a man?"

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"No; I simply state it."

"You wouldn't swear it?"

"Not unless compelled by force of law."

"Then I have nothing further to say to you, sir."

The old man seemed about to withdraw, then hesitated, remembering he was in his own house. Stranleigh sat there unperturbed.

"You have nothing further to say, Mr. Anson, because two thoughts are sure to occur to you. First, a man whose word you would not accept cannot be believed, either on his honour or his oath. Second, the Trust doesn't need to send an emissary to you; it has only to wait until November, and acquire your factory at its own figure. No one except myself would bid against the Trust."

"That's quite true," agreed Anson. "I beg your pardon. What have you to propose?"

"I wish to know the sum that will see you clear and enable you to tear down those white posters at the gates, and those on the mill."

Stanmore Anson drew a sheet of paper from his pocket, glanced over it, then named the amount.

"Very good," said Stranleigh, decisively. "I'll pay that for the mill and the ten acres."

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"They are not worth it," said Anson. "Wait till November, and even though you outbid the Trust, you'll get it at a lower figure."

"We'll make the mill worth it. You may retain the residence and the rest of the property."

"There is but one proviso," said the old man. "I wish to name the manager."

"I regret I cannot agree to that, Mr. Anson, I have already chosen the manager, and guarantee that he will prove efficient."

"I'll forego your generous offer of the house and property if you will allow me to appoint the manager."

"I am sorry, Mr. Anson, but you touch the only point on which I cannot give way."

"Very well," cried Anson, angrily, his eyes ablaze. "The arrangement is off."

Both young men saw that Stanmore Anson was indeed difficult to deal with, as his ancestors had been in many a hard-fought battle.

"Wait a moment! Wait a moment!" exclaimed Challis. "This will never do. It is absurd to wreck everything on a point so trivial. I am the man whom Mr. Johnson wishes to make manager. I now refuse to accept the position, but if the bargain is completed, I'll give Mr. Anson and his manager all the assistance and advice they care to receive from me, and that without salary."

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"Be quiet, Challis!" cried Stranleigh.

"Challis! Challis!" interrupted the old man, gazing fiercely at his junior. "Is your name Challis?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're not my son-in-law?"

"I am, sir."

"I did you a great injustice," admitted Anson. "No man has a right to deprive another of his livelihood. I have bitterly regretted it. It is you I wish appointed manager."

"Challis," said Stranleigh, "take the car, and bring your wife. Say her father wishes to see her."

Challis disappeared, and in an incredibly short space of time, during which Anson and Stranleigh chatted together, the door opened, and Gertrude Challis came in.

"Father," she cried, "Jim says he's going to scrap all the machinery in the factory. Shall we throw our differences on that scrap-heap?"

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The old man gathered her to his breast, and kissed her again and again. He could not trust his voice.



**“Shall we throw our differences on
that scrap-heap?”**

Lord Stranleigh Abroad [Page [124](#).]

IV.—THE MAD MISS MATURIN.

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“Would you like to meet the most beautiful woman in America?” asked Edward Trenton of his guest.

Lord Stranleigh drew a whiff or two from the favourite pipe he was smoking, and the faint suggestion of a smile played about his lips.

“The question seems to hint that I have not already met her,” he said at last.

“Have you?”

“Of course.”

“Where?”

“In every town of any size I ever visited.”

“Oh, I daresay you have met many pretty girls, but only one of them is the most beautiful in America.”

Again Stranleigh smiled, but this time removed his pipe, which had gone out, and gently tapped it on the ash tray. [Pg 126]

“My dear Ned,” he said at last, “on almost any other subject I should hesitate to venture an opinion that ran counter to your own experience, yet in this instance I think you wrong the great Republic. I am not very good at statistics, but if you will tell me how many of your fellow-countrymen are this moment in love, I’ll make a very accurate estimate regarding the number of most beautiful women there are in the United States.”

“Like yourself, Stranleigh, I always defer to the man of experience, and am glad to have hit on one subject in which you are qualified to be my teacher.”

“I like that! Ned Trenton depreciating his own conquests is a popular actor in a new *rôle*. But you are evading the point. I was merely trying in my awkward way to show that every woman is the most beautiful in the world to the man in love with her.”

“Very well; I’ll frame my question differently. Would you like to meet one of the most cultured of her sex?” [Pg 127]

“Bless you, my boy, of course not! Why, I’m afraid of her already. It is embarrassing enough to meet a bright, alert man, but in the presence of a clever woman, I become so painfully stupid that she thinks I’m putting it on.”

“Then let me place the case before you in still another form. Would your highness like to meet the

richest woman in Pennsylvania?"

"Certainly I should," cried Stranleigh, eagerly.

Trenton looked at him with a shade of disapproval on his brow.

"I thought wealth was the very last qualification a man in your position would care for in a woman, yet hardly have I finished the sentence, than you jump at the chance I offer."

"And why not? A lady beautiful and talented would likely strike me dumb, but if she is hideously rich, I may be certain of one thing, that I shall not be asked to invest money in some hare-brained scheme or other."

"You are quite safe from that danger, or indeed from any other danger, so far as Miss Maturin is concerned. Nevertheless, it is but just that you should understand the situation, so that if you scent danger of any kind, you may escape while there is yet time." [Pg 128]

"Unobservant though I am," remarked Stranleigh, "certain signs have not escaped my notice. This commodious and delightful mansion is being prepared for a house-party. I know the symptoms, for I have several country places of my own. If, as I begin to suspect, I am in the way here, just whisper the word and I'll take myself off in all good humour, hoping to receive an invitation for some future time."

"If that's your notion of American hospitality, Stranleigh, you've got another guess coming. You're a very patient man; will you listen to a little family history? Taking your consent for granted, I plunge. My father possessed a good deal of landed property in Pennsylvania. This house is the old homestead, as they would call it in a heart-throb drama. My father died a very wealthy man, and left his property conjointly to my sister and myself. He knew we wouldn't quarrel over the division, and we haven't. My activity has been mainly concentrated in coal mines and in the railways which they feed, and financially I have been very fortunate. I had intended to devote a good deal of attention to this estate along certain lines which my father had suggested, but I have never been able to do so, living, as I did, mostly in Philadelphia, absorbed in my own business. My sister, however, has in a measure carried out my father's plans, aided and abetted by her friend, Miss Constance Maturin. My sister married a man quite as wealthy as herself, a dreamy, impractical, scholarly person who once represented his country as Minister to Italy, in Rome. She enjoyed her Italian life very much, and studied with great interest the progress North Italy was making in utilising the water-power coming from the Alps. In this she was ably seconded by Miss Maturin, who is owner of forests and farms and factories further down the river which flows past our house. Her property, indeed, adjoins our own, but she does not possess that unlimited power over it which Sis and I have over this estate, for her father, having no faith in the business capacity of woman, formed his undertakings into a limited liability company where, although he owned the majority of stock during his life, he did not leave his daughter with untrammelled control. Had the old man known what trouble he was bequeathing to his sole heir, I imagine he would have arranged things a little differently. Miss Maturin has had to endure several expensive law-suits, which still further restricted her power and lessened her income. So she has ceased to take much interest in her own belongings, and has constituted herself adviser-in-chief to my dear sister, who has blown in a good deal of money on this estate in undertakings that, however profitable they may be in the future, are unproductive up to date. I am not criticising Sis at all, and have never objected to what she has done, although I found myself involved in a very serious action for damages, which I had the chagrin of losing, and which ran me into a lot of expense, covering me with injunctions and things of that sort. No rogue e'er felt the halter draw, with a good opinion of the law, and perhaps my own detestation of the law arises from my having frequently broken it. If this long diatribe bores you, just say so, and I'll cut it short." [Pg 129]

"On the contrary," said Stranleigh, with evident honesty, "I'm very much interested. These two ladies, as I understand the case, have been unsuccessful in law——"

"Completely so."

"And unsuccessful in the projects they have undertaken?"

"From my point of view, yes. That is to say, they are sinking pots of money, and I don't see where any of it is coming back."

"Of what do these enterprises consist?"

"Do you know anything about the conservation controversy now going on in this country?"

"I fear I do not. I am a woefully ignorant person."

"My father had ideas about conservation long before the United States took it up. It is on these ideas that Sis has been working. You preserve water in times of flood and freshet to be used for power or for irrigation throughout the year. Her first idea was to make a huge lake, extending several miles up the valley of this river. That's where I got into my law-suit. The commercial interests down below held that we had no right to put a huge concrete dam across this river." [Pg 130]

"Couldn't you put a dam on your own property?"

"It seems not. If the river ran entirely through my own property, I could. Had I paid more attention to what was being done, I might perhaps have succeeded, by getting a bill through the

Legislature. When I tried that, I was too late. The interests below had already applied to the courts for an injunction, which, quite rightly, they received. Attempting to legalise the action, not only did I find the Legislature hostile, but my clever opponents got up a muck-raking crusade against me, and I was held up by the Press of this State as a soulless monopolist, anxious to increase my already great wealth by grabbing what should belong to the whole people. The campaign of personal calumny was splendidly engineered, and, by Jupiter! they convinced me that I was unfit for human intercourse. Tables of statistics were published to prove how through railway and coal-mine manipulation I had robbed everybody, and they made me out about a hundred times richer than I am, although I have never been able to get any of the excess cash. Sermons were preached against me, the Pulpit joining the Press in denunciation. I had no friends, and not being handy with my pen, I made no attempt at defence. I got together a lot of dynamite, blew up the partially-constructed dam, and the river still flows serenely on."

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"But surely," said Stranleigh, "I saw an immense dam on this very river, when you met me at Powerville railway station the other day?"

Trenton laughed.

"Yes; that was Miss Maturin's dam."

"Miss Maturin's!" cried Stranleigh in astonishment.

"It was built years ago by her father, who went the right way about it, having obtained in a quiet, effective way, the sanction of legislature. Of course, when I say it belongs to Miss Maturin, I mean that it is part of the estate left by her father, and the odd combination of circumstances brought it about that she was one of my opponents in the action-at-law, whereas in strict justice, she should have been a defendant instead of a plaintiff. The poor girl was horrified to learn her position in the matter, and my sister was dumbfounded to find in what a dilemma she had placed me. Of course, the two girls should have secured the advice of some capable, practical lawyer in the first place, but they were very self-confident in those days, and Sis knew it was no use consulting her husband, while her brother was too deeply immersed in his own affairs to be much aid as a counsellor.

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"Well, they kept on with their conservation scheme after a time, and both on this property and on Miss Maturin's, dams have been erected on all the streams that empty into the river; streams on either side that take their rise from outlying parts of the estate. They have built roads through the forest, and have caused to be formed innumerable lakes, all connected by a serviceable highway that constitutes one of the most interesting automobile drives there is in all the United States; a drive smooth as a floor, running for miles through private property, and therefore overshadowed by no speed limit."

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"By Jove, Ned," exclaimed Stranleigh, "you must take me over that course."

"I'll do better than that, my boy. Constance Maturin is one of the best automobilists I know, and she will be your guide, for these dams are of the most modern construction, each with some little kink of its own that no one understands better than she does. There is a caretaker living in a picturesque little cottage at the outlet of every lake, and in each cottage hangs a telephone, so that no matter how far you penetrate into the wilderness, you are in touch with civilisation. From this house I could call up any one of these water-wardens, or send out a general alarm, bringing every man of the corps to the 'phone, and the instructions given from here would be heard simultaneously by the whole force. I think the organisation is admirable, but it runs into a lot of money."

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"But what good came of
it at last,
Quoth little
Peterkin,"

asked Stranleigh. "Do these artificial lakes run any dynamos, or turn any spindles? Now tell me all about the war, and what they dammed each streamlet for."

"Ah, you have me there! The ladies have not taken me into their counsel: I've got troubles enough of my own. One phase of the subject especially gratifies me: their activities have in no instance despoiled the landscape; rather the contrary. These lakes, wooded to their brims, are altogether delightful, and well stocked with fish. A great many of them overflow, causing admirable little cascades, which, although not quite so impressive as Niagara, are most refreshing on a hot day, while the cadence of falling waters serves as an acoustic background to the songs of the birds; a musical accompaniment, as one might call it."

"Bravo, Ned; I call that quite poetical, coming as it does from a successful man of business. I find myself eager for that automobile ride through this forest lakeland. When do you say Miss Maturin will arrive?"

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"I don't know. I expect my sister will call me up by telephone. Sis regards this house as her own. She is fond of leaving the giddy whirl of society, and settling down here in the solitude of the woods. I clear out or I stay in obedience to her commands. You spoke of a house-party a while ago. There is to be no house-party, but merely my sister and her husband, with Miss Maturin as their guest. If you would rather not meet any strangers, I suggest that we plunge further into the wilderness. At the most remote lake on this property, about seven miles away, quite a

commodious keeper's lodge has been built, with room for, say, half a dozen men who are not too slavishly addicted to the resources of civilisation. Yet life there is not altogether pioneering. We could take an automobile with us, and the telephone would keep us in touch with the outside world. Fond of fishing?"

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"Very."

"Then that's all right. I can offer you plenty of trout, either in pond or stream, while in a large natural lake, only a short distance away, is excellent black bass. I think you'll enjoy yourself up there."

Stranleigh laughed.

"You quite overlook the fact that I am not going. Unless ejected by force, I stay here to meet your sister and Miss Maturin."

For a moment Trenton seemed taken aback. He had lost the drift of things in his enthusiasm over the lakes.

"Oh, yes; I remember," he said at last. "You objected to meet anyone who might wish you to invest good money in wild-cat schemes. Well, you're quite safe as far as those two ladies are concerned, as I think I assured you."

Ned was interrupted, and seemed somewhat startled by a sound of murmured conversation ending in a subdued peal of musical laughter.

"Why, there's Sis now," he said, "I can tell her laugh anywhere."

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As he rose from his chair, the door opened, and there entered a most comely young woman in automobile garb, noticeably younger than Trenton, but bearing an unmistakable likeness to him.

"Hello, Ned!" she cried. "I thought I'd find you here," then seeing his visitor, who had risen, she paused.

"Lord Stranleigh," said Trenton. "My sister, Mrs. Vanderveldt."

"I am very glad to meet you, Lord Stranleigh," she said, advancing from the door and shaking hands with him.

"Why didn't you telephone?" asked her brother.

His sister laughed merrily.

"I came down like a wolf on the fold, didn't I? Why didn't I telephone? Strategy, my dear boy, strategy. This is a surprise attack, and I'd no wish that the garrison, forewarned, should escape. I am sure, Lord Stranleigh, that he has been descanting on the distraction of the woods and the camp, or perhaps the metropolitan dissipation of Philadelphia, depending on whether the yearning for sport, or his business in town was uppermost in his mind."

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"My dear Sis," cried Ned with indignation, "that is a libellous statement. I never so much as mentioned Philadelphia, did I, Stranleigh? You can corroborate what I say."

"I'm not so sure about that," said Stranleigh, lightly. "Your attempt to drag me into your family differences at this point of the game is futile. I'm going to lie low, and say nothing, as Brer Rabbit did, until I learn which of you two is the real ruler of this house. I shall then boldly announce myself on the side of the leader. My position here is much too comfortable to be jeopardised by an injudicious partisanship."

"As for who's boss," growled Ned, "I cravenly admit at once that Sis here is monarch of all she surveys."

"In that case," rejoined Stranleigh, heaving a deep sigh of apparent relief, "I'm on the side of the angels. Mrs. Vanderveldt, he did mention Philadelphia and his office there, speaking much about business interests, coal-mines, and what not, during which recital I nearly went to sleep, for I'm no business man. He also descanted on the lakes and the waterfalls and the fishing, and on trout and black bass, and would doubtless have gone on to whales and sea-serpents had you not come in at the opportune moment. Please accept me as your devoted champion, Mrs. Vanderveldt."

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"I do, I do, with appreciation and gratitude," cried the lady merrily. "I've long wished to meet you, Lord Stranleigh, for I heard such glowing accounts of you from my brother here, with most fascinating descriptions of your estates in England, and the happy hours he spent upon them while he was your guest in the old country. I hope we may be able to make some slight return for your kindness to this frowning man. He is always on nettles when I am talking; so different from my husband in that respect."

"Poor man, he never has a chance to get a word in edgewise," growled Ned. "My soul is my own, I'm happy to say."

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"Ah, yes," laughed the lady, "*pro tem*. But although I am saying so much for myself, I speak with equal authority for my friend Constance Maturin."

"Did you bring her with you, or is she coming later?" asked Trenton with some anxiety.

"She is here, dear brother, but I could not induce her to enter this room with me. Doubtless she wishes to meet you alone. She is a dear girl, Lord Stranleigh, and it will be my greatest joy to welcome her as a sister-in-law."

A warm flush was added to the frown on her brother's brow, but he made no remark.

"Gracious me!" cried the lady, laughing again "have I once more put my foot in it? Why Ned, what a fine confidential friend you are. If I were a young man, and so sweet a girl had promised to marry me, I should proclaim the fact from the house-tops."

"You wouldn't need to," groaned Ned, "if you had a sister."

"Never mind him," said Stranleigh, "you have betrayed no secret, Mrs. Vanderveldt. His own confused utterances when referring to the young lady, rendered any verbal confession unnecessary. I suspected how the land lay at a very early stage of our conversation." [Pg 143]

"Well, I think he may congratulate himself that you do not enter the lists against him. You possess some tact, which poor Ned has never acquired, and now I'll make him sit up by informing him that Connie Maturin took a special trip over to England recently, in order to meet you."

"To meet me?" cried Stranleigh in astonishment.

"Yes, indeed, and an amazed girl she was to learn that you had sailed for America. She came right back by the next boat. She has a great plan in her mind which requires heavy financing. My brother here isn't rich enough, and I, of course, am much poorer than he is, so she thought if she could interest you, as the leading capitalist of England——"

"Good heavens, girl," interrupted Ned, the perspiration standing out on his brow, "do show some consideration for what you are saying! Why, you rattle on without a thought to your words. Lord Stranleigh just made it a proviso that——. Oh, hang it all, Sis; you've put your foot in it this time, sure enough." [Pg 144]

The lady turned on him now with no laughter on her lips, or merriment in her tone.

"Why, Ned, you're actually scolding me. I promised Connie Maturin to help her, and my way of accomplishing anything is to go directly for it."

"Oh, heaven help me," murmured Ned, "the law courts have already taught me that."

"Mrs. Vanderveldt," said the Earl of Stranleigh, very quietly, "please turn to your champion, and ignore this wretched man, whose unnecessary reticence is finding him out."

The only person to be embarrassed by this tangle of concealments and revelations was Constance Maturin, who had indulged in neither the one nor the other. The Earl of Stranleigh found it difficult to become acquainted with her. She seemed always on her guard, and never even approached the subject which he had been given to understand chiefly occupied her thoughts. [Pg 145]

On the day set for their automobile ride, Miss Maturin appeared at the wheel of the very latest thing in runabouts; a six-cylindered machine of extraordinary power, that ran as silently and smoothly as an American watch, and all merely for the purpose of carrying two persons. Stranleigh ran his eye over the graceful proportions of the new car with an expert's keen appreciation, walking round it slowly and critically, quite forgetting the girl who regarded him with an expression of amusement. Looking up at last, he saw a smile playing about her pretty lips.

"I beg your pardon," he said.

"I'm not sure that I shall grant it," she replied, laughing. "To be ignored in this callous fashion for even the latest project of engineering, is not in the least flattering."

"Not ignored, Miss Maturin," said Stranleigh, "for I was thinking of you, although I may have appeared absorbed in the machine."

"Thinking of me!" she cried. "You surely can't expect me to believe that! The gaze of a man fascinated by a piece of machinery is quite different from that of a man fascinated by a woman. I know, because I have seen both." [Pg 146]

"I am sure you have seen the latter, Miss Maturin. But what I have just been regarding is an omen."

"Really? How mysterious! I thought you saw only an automobile."

"No, I was looking through the automobile, and beyond, if I may put it that way. I am quite familiar with the plan of this car, although this is the first specimen that I have examined. The car is yours by purchase, I suppose, but it is mine by manufacture. Your money bought it, but mine made it, in conjunction with the genius of a young engineer in whom I became interested. Perhaps you begin to see the omen. Some time ago I was fortunate enough to be of assistance to a young man, and the result has been an unqualified success. To-day perhaps I may be permitted to aid a young woman with a success that will be equally gratifying."

Stranleigh gazed steadily into the clear, honest eyes of the girl, who returned his look with a half-amused smile. Now she seemed suddenly covered with confusion, and flushing slightly, turned her attention to the forest that surrounded them. Presently she said— [Pg 147]

"Do you men worship only the god of success? You have used the word three or four times."

"Most men wish to be successful, I suppose, but we all worship a goddess, too."

"I'm sorry," said Miss Maturin, "that Mrs. Vanderveldt mentioned my search for a capitalist. I have abandoned the quest. I am now merely your guide to the lakes. Please take a seat in this automobile of yours, Lord Stranleigh, and I will be your conductor."

The young man stepped in beside her, and a few moments later they were gliding, rather than running over a perfect road, under the trees, in a machine as noiseless as the forest. The Earl of Stranleigh had seen many beautiful regions of this world, but never any landscape just like this. Its artificiality and its lack of artificiality interested him. Nothing could be more businesslike than the construction of the stout dams, and nothing more gently rural than the limpid lakes, with the grand old forest trees marshalled round their margins like a veteran army that had marched down to drink, only to be stricken motionless at the water's edge.

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It seemed that the silence of the motor-car had enchanted into silence its occupants. The girl devoted her whole attention to the machine and its management. Stranleigh sat dumb, and gave himself up to the full enjoyment of the Vallombrosic tour.

For more than half an hour no word had been spoken; finally the competent chauffeur brought the auto to a standstill at a view-point near the head of the valley, which offered a prospect of the brawling main stream.

"We have now reached the last of the lakes in this direction," she said quietly. "I think your automobile is admirable, Lord Stranleigh."

The young man indulged in a deep sigh of satisfaction.

"As a landscape gardener on a marvellous scale, you are without a competitor, Miss Maturin."

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The girl laughed very sweetly.

"That is a compliment to nature rather than to me. I have merely let the wilderness alone, so far as road-making and dam-building would allow me."

"In that very moderation lies genius—the leaving alone. Will you forgive the inquisitiveness of a mere man whom you suspected at our outset of success-worship, if he asks what practical object you have in view?"

"Oh, I should have thought that was self-evident to an observant person like yourself," she said airily. "These lakes conserve the water, storing it in time of flood for use in time of scarcity. By means of sluices we obtain partial control of the main stream."

"You flatter me by saying I am observant. I fear that I am rather the reverse, except where my interest is aroused, as is the case this morning. Is conservation your sole object, then?"

"Is not that enough?"

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"I suppose it is. I know little of civil engineering, absorbing craft though it is. I have seen its marvels along your own lines in America, Egypt, India, and elsewhere. As we progressed I could not help noticing that the dams built to restrain these lakes seemed unnecessarily strong."

A slight shadow of annoyance flitted across the expressive countenance of Constance Maturin, but was gone before he saw it.

"You are shrewder than you admit, Lord Stranleigh, but you forget what I said about freshets. The lakes are placid enough now, but you should see them after a cloud-burst back in the mountains."

"Nevertheless, the dams look bulky enough to hold back the Nile."

"Appearances are often deceitful. They are simply strong enough for the work they have to do. American engineering practice does not go in for useless encumbrance. Each dam serves two purposes. It holds back the water and it contains a power-house. In some of these power-houses turbines and dynamos are already placed."

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"Ah, now I understand. You must perceive that I am a very stupid individual."

"You are a very persistent person," said the young woman decisively.

Stranleigh laughed.

"Allow me to take advantage of that reputation by asking you what you intend to do with the electricity when you have produced it?"

"We have no plans."

"Oh, I say!"

"*What* do you say?"

"That was merely an Anglicised expression of astonishment."

"Don't you believe me?"

"No."

They were sitting together on the automobile seat, deep in the shade of the foliage above them, but when he caught sight of the indignant face which she turned towards him, it almost appeared as if the sun shone upon it. She seemed about to speak, thought better of it, and reached forward to the little lever that controlled the self-starting apparatus. She found his hand there before she could carry out her intention.

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"I am returning, Lord Stranleigh," she said icily.

"Not yet."

She leaned back in the seat.

"Mr. Trenton told me that you were the most polite man he had ever met. I have seldom found him so mistaken in an impression."

"Was it a polite man you set out to find in your recent trip to Europe?"

As the girl made no reply, Stranleigh went on—

"My politeness is something like the dams we have been considering. It contains more than appears on the surface. There is concealed power within it. You may meet myriads of men well qualified to teach me courtesy, but when this veneer of social observance is broken, you come to pretty much the same material underneath. I seldom permit myself the luxury of an escape from the conventions, but on rare occasions I break through. For that I ask your pardon. Impressed by your sincerity, I forgot for the moment everything but your own need in the present crisis."

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"What crisis?" she asked indignantly.

"The financial crisis caused by your spending every available resource on this so-called conservation policy. To all intents and purposes you are now a bankrupt. Mrs. Vanderveldt has contributed all she can, and both you and she are afraid to tell her brother the true state of the case. You fear you will get little sympathy from him, for he is absorbed in coal-mines and railways, and both of you have already felt his annoyance at the law-suit in which you have involved him. Hence your desperate need of a capitalist. A really polite man would be a more pleasant companion than I, but he is not worth that, Miss Maturin!"

Stranleigh removed his hand from the lever long enough to snap fingers and thumb, but he instantly replaced it when he saw her determination to start the machine.

"The man of the moment, Miss Maturin, is a large and reckless capitalist. I am that capitalist."

He released his hold of the lever, and sat upright. The sternness of his face relaxed.

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"Now, Miss Maturin, turn on the power; take me where you like; dump me into any of those lakes you choose; the water is crystal clear, and I'm a good swimmer," and with this Stranleigh indulged in a hearty laugh, his own genial self once more.

"You are laughing at me," she said resentfully.

"Indeed I am not. Another contradiction, you see! I am laughing at myself. There's nothing I loathe so much as strenuousness, and here I have fallen into the vice. It is the influence of that brawling river below us, I think. But the river becomes still enough, and useful enough, when it reaches the great lake at Powerville, which is big enough to swallow all these little ponds."

The girl made no motion towards the lever, but sat very still, lost in thought. When she spoke, her voice was exceedingly quiet.

"You complimented Nature a while ago, intending, as I suppose, to compliment me, but I think after all the greater compliment is your straight talk, which I admire, although I received it so petulantly. I shall make no apology, beyond saying that my mind is very much perturbed. Your surmise is absolutely correct. It isn't that I've spent the whole of my fortune and my friend's fortune in this conservation scheme. It is because I have built a model city on the heights above Powerville. I was promised assistance from the banks, which is now withheld, largely, I suspect, through the opposition of John L. Boscombe, a reputed millionaire. To all intents and purposes Boscombe and I are the owners of Powerville and the mills there, but although this place was founded and built up by my father, I am a minority stock-holder, and powerless. Boscombe exercises control. Any suggestions or protests of mine are ignored, for Boscombe, like my father, has little faith—no faith at all, in fact—in the business capacity of a woman.

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"I have tried, as I hinted, to enlist the co-operation of other capitalists, but experience has taught me that any appeal is futile that does not impinge directly upon cupidity. If there is the least hint of philanthropy in the project, every man of money fights shy of it."

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"I am an exception," said Stranleigh, eagerly. "Philanthropy used to be a strong point with me, though I confess I was never very successful in its exercise. What humanitarian scheme is in your mind, Miss Maturin?"

Again she sat silent for some moments, indecision and doubt on her fair brow. Presently she said, as if pulling herself together—

"I will not tell you, Lord Stranleigh. You yourself have just admitted disbelief, and my plan is so

fantastic that I dare not submit it to criticism."

"I suppose your new city is in opposition to the old town down in the valley? You alone are going to compete with Boscombe and yourself."

"That is one way of putting it."

"Very well, I am with you. Blow Boscombe! say I. I've no head for business, so I sha'n't need to take any advice. I shall do exactly what you tell me. What is the first move?"

"The first move is to set your brokers in New York at work, and buy a block of Powerville stock." [Pg 157]

"I see; so that you and I together have control, instead of Boscombe?"

"Yes."

"That shall be done as quick as telegraph can give instructions. What next?"

"There will be required a large sum of money to liquidate the claims upon me incurred through the building of the city."

"Very good. That money shall be at your disposal within two or three days."

"As for security, I regret——"

"Don't mention it. My security is my great faith in Ned Trenton, also in yourself. Say no more about it."

"You are very kind, Lord Stranleigh, but there is one thing I must say. This may involve you in a law-suit so serious that the litigation of which Ned complains will appear a mere amicable arrangement by comparison."

"That's all right and doesn't disturb me in the least. I love a legal contest, because I have nothing to do but place it in the hands of competent lawyers. No personal activity is required of me, and I am an indolent man." [Pg 158]

The second part of the programme was accomplished even sooner than Stranleigh had promised, but the first part hung fire. The brokers in New York could not acquire any Powerville stock, as was shown by their application to Miss Maturin herself, neither had their efforts been executed with that secrecy which Stranleigh had enjoined. He realised this when John L. Boscombe called upon him. He went directly to the point.

"I am happy to meet you, Lord Stranleigh, and if you'll excuse me, I'd like to say that you are more greatly in need of advice at this moment than any man in America."

"You are perfectly right, Mr. Boscombe. I am always in need of good advice, and I appreciate it."

"An application was made to me from New York for a block of stock. That stock is not for sale, but I dallied with the brokers, made investigations, and traced the inquiry to you."

"Very clever of you, Mr. Boscombe."

"I learn that you propose to finance Miss Constance Maturin, who is a junior partner in my business." [Pg 159]

"I should not think of contradicting so shrewd a man as yourself, Mr. Boscombe. What do you advise in the premises?"

"I advise you to get out, and quick, too."

"If I don't, what are you going to do to me?"

"Oh, I shall do nothing. She will do all that is necessary. That woman is stark mad, Lord Stranleigh. Her own father recognised it when he bereft her of all power in the great business he founded. If she had her way, she'd ruin the company inside a year with her hare-brained schemes; love of the dear people, and that sort of guff."

"I am sorry to hear that. I noticed no dementia on the part of Miss Maturin, who seemed to me a most cultivated and very charming young lady. You will permit me, I hope, to thank you for your warning, and will not be surprised that I can give you no decision on the spur of the moment. I am a slow-minded person, and need time to think over things."

"Certainly, certainly; personally I come to sudden conclusions, and once I make up my mind, I never change it." [Pg 160]

"A most admirable gift. I wish I possessed it."

Lord Stranleigh said nothing of this interview to Constance Maturin, beyond telling her that the acquisition of stock appeared to be hopeless, as indeed proved to be the case.

"Boscombe must be a stubborn person," he said.

"Oh, he's all that," the girl replied, with a sigh. "He cares for one thing only, the making of money, and in that I must admit he has been very successful."

"Well, we've got a little cash of our own," said Stranleigh, with a laugh.

Miss Maturin and Mrs. Vanderveldt celebrated a national holiday by the greatest entertainment ever given in that district. The mills had been shut down for a week, and every man, woman and child in the valley city had been invited up to the new town on the heights. There was a brass band, and a sumptuous spread of refreshments, all free to the immense crowd. The ladies, for days before, visited everyone in the valley, and got a promise of attendance, but to make assurance doubly sure, an amazing corps of men was organised, equipped with motor cars, which scoured the valley from Powerville downwards, gathering in such remnants of humanity as for any reason had neglected to attend the show. Miss Maturin said she was resolved this entertainment should be a feature unique in the history of the State.

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The shutting down of the mills had caused the water in the immense dam to rise, so that now the sluices at the top added to the picturesqueness of the scene by supplying waterfalls more than sixty feet high, a splendid view of which was obtainable from the new city on the heights. Suddenly it was noticed that these waterfalls increased in power, until their roar filled the valley. At last the whole lip of the immense dam began to trickle, and an ever augmenting Niagara of waters poured over.

"Great heavens!" cried Boscombe, who was present to sneer at these activities, "there must have been a cloud-burst in the mountains!"

He shouted for the foreman.

"Where are the tenders of the dam?" he cried. "Send them to lower those sluices, and let more water out."

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"Wait a moment," said Constance Maturin, who had just come out of the main telephone building. "There can be no danger, Mr. Boscombe. You always said that dam was strong enough, when I protested it wasn't."

"So it is strong enough, but not——"

"Look!" she cried, pointing over the surface of the lake. "See that wave!"

"Suffering Noah and the Flood!" exclaimed Boscombe.

As he spoke, the wave burst against the dam, and now they had Niagara in reality. There was a crash, and what seemed to be a series of explosions, then the whole structure dissolved away, and before the appalled eyes of the sight-seers, the valley town crumpled up like a pack of cards, and even the tall mills themselves, that staggered at the impact of the flood, slowly settled down, and were engulfed in the seething turmoil of maddened waters.



"'This,' he cried, 'is murder.'"

***Lord Stranleigh Abroad* [Page 163.]**

For a time no voice could be heard in the deafening uproar. It was Boscombe who spoke when the waters began to subside.

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"This," he cried, "is murder!"

He glared at Constance Maturin, who stood pale, silent and trembling.

"I told you she was mad," he roared at Stranleigh. "It is your money that in some devilish way has caused this catastrophe. If any lives are lost, it is rank murder!"

"It is murder," agreed Stranleigh, quietly. "Whoever is responsible for the weakness of that dam should be hanged!"

V.—IN SEARCH OF GAME.

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The warm morning gave promise of a blistering hot day, as Lord Stranleigh strolled, in his usual leisurely fashion, up Fifth Avenue. High as the thermometer already stood, the young man gave no evidence that he was in the least incommoded by the temperature. In a welter of heated, hurrying people, he produced the effect of an iceberg that had somehow drifted down into the tropics. The New York tailor entrusted with the duty of clothing him quite outdistanced his London rival, who had given Lord Stranleigh the reputation of being the best-dressed man in England. Now his lordship was dangerously near the point where he might be called the best-dressed man in New York, an achievement worthy of a Prince's ambition.

His lordship, with nothing to do, and no companionship to hope for, since everyone was at work, strolled into the splendour of the University Club and sought the comparative coolness of the smoking room, where, seating himself in that seductive invitation to laziness, a leather-covered arm chair, he began to glance over the illustrated English weeklies. He had the huge room to himself. These were business hours, and a feeling of loneliness crept over him, perhaps germinated by his sight of the illustrated papers, and accentuated by an attempted perusal of them. They were a little too stolid for a hot day, so Stranleigh turned to the lighter entertainment of the American humorous press.

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Presently there entered this hall of silence the stout figure of Mr. John L. Banks, senior attorney for the Ice Trust, a man well known to Stranleigh, who had often sought his advice, with profit to both of them. The lawyer approached the lounge.

"Hello, Banks, I was just thinking of you, reflecting how delightful it must be in this weather to be connected, even remotely, with the ice supply of New York."

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Mr. Banks's panama hat was in one hand, while the other drew a handkerchief across his perspiring brow.

"Well, Stranleigh, you're looking very cool and collected. Enacting the part of the idle rich, I suppose?"

"No, I'm a specimen of labour unrest."

"Perhaps I can appease that. I'm open to a deal at fair compensation for you. If you will simply parade the streets in that leisurely fashion we all admire, bearing a placard 'Pure Ice Company,' I'll guarantee you a living wage and an eight hours' day."

"Should I be required to carry about crystal blocks of the product?"

"No; you're frigid enough as it is. Besides, ice at the present moment is too scarce to be expended on even so important a matter as advertisement."

Banks wheeled forward an arm chair, and sat down opposite his lordship. A useful feature of a panama hat is its flexibility. You may roll one brim to fit the hand, and use the other as a fan, and this Banks did with the perfection of practice.

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"What's the cause of the unrest, Stranleigh?"

"Thinking. That's the cause of unrest all the world over. Whenever people begin to think, there is trouble."

"I've never noticed any undue thoughtfulness in you, Stranleigh."

"That's just it. Thinking doesn't agree with me, and as you hint, I rarely indulge in it, but this is a land that somehow stimulates thought, and thought compels action. Action is all very well in moderation, but in these United States of yours it is developed into a fever, or frenzy rather, curable only by a breakdown or death."

"Do you think it's as bad as all that?"

"Yes, I do. You call it enterprise; I call it greed. I've never yet met an American who knew when he'd had enough."

"Did you ever meet an Englishman who knew that?"

"Thousands of them."

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Banks laughed.

"I imagine," he said, "it's all a matter of nomenclature. You think us fast over here, and doubtless you are wrong; *we* think *you* slow over there, and doubtless we are wrong. I don't think we're greedy. No man is so lavish in his expenditure as an American, and no man more generous. A

greedy man does not spend money. Our motive power is interest in the game."

"Yes; everyone has told me that, but I regard the phrase as an excuse, not as a reason."

"Look here, Stranleigh, who's been looting you? What deal have you lost? I warned you against mixing philanthropy with business, you remember."

Stranleigh threw back his head and laughed.

"There you have it. According to you a man cannot form an opinion that is uninfluenced by his pocket. As a matter of fact, I have won all along the line. I tried the game, as you call it, hoping to find it interesting, but it doesn't seem to me worth while. I pocket the stakes, and I am going home, in no way elated at my success, any more than I should have been discouraged had I failed."

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Leaning forward, Mr. Banks spoke as earnestly as the weather permitted.

"What you need, Stranleigh, is a doctor's advice, not a lawyer's. You have been just a little too long in New York, and although New Yorkers don't believe it, there are other parts of the country worthy of consideration. Your talk, instead of being an indictment of life as you find it, has been merely an exposition of your own ignorance, a sample of that British insularity which we all deplore. I hope you don't mind my stating the case as I see it?"

"Not at all," said Stranleigh. "I am delighted to hear your point of view. Go on."

"Very well; here am I plugging away during this hot weather in this hot city. Greed, says you."

"I say nothing of the kind," replied his lordship calmly. "I am merely lost in admiration of a hard-working man, enduring the rigours of toil in the most luxurious club of which I have ever been an honorary member. Let me soften the asperities of labour by ordering something with ice in it."

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The good-natured attorney accepted the invitation, and then went on—

"We have a saying regarding any futile proposition to the effect that it cuts no ice. This is the position of the Trust in which I am interested. In this hot weather we cut no ice, but we sell it. Winter is a peaceable season with us, and the harder the winter, the better we are pleased, but summer is a time of trouble. It is a period of complaints and law-suits, and our newspaper reading is mostly articles on the greed and general villainy of the Trust. So my position is literally that of what-you-may-call-him on the burning deck, whence almost all but he have fled to the lakes, to the mountains, to the sea shore. Now, I don't intend to do this always. I have set a limit of accumulated cash, and when I reach it I quit. It would be high falutin' if I said duty held me here, so I will not say it."

"A lawyer can always out-talk a layman," said Stranleigh, wearily, "and I suppose all this impinges on my ignorance."

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"Certainly," said Banks. "It's a large subject, you know. But I'll leave theory, and come down to practice. As I said before, you've had too much of New York. You are known to have a little money laid by against a rainy day, so everybody wants you to invest in something, and you've got tired of it. Have you ever had a taste of ranch life out West?"

"I've never been further West than Chicago."

"Good. When you were speaking of setting a limit to financial ambition, I remembered my old friend, Stanley Armstrong, the best companion on a shooting or fishing expedition I ever encountered. It is not to be wondered at that he is an expert in sport, for often he has had to depend on rod and gun for sustenance. He was a mining engineer, and very few know the mining west as well as he does. He might have been a millionaire or a pauper, but he chose a middle course, and set his limit at a hundred thousand pounds. When land was cheap he bought a large ranch, partly plain and partly foothills, with the eternal snow mountains beyond. Now, if you take with you an assortment of guns and fishing rods, and spend a month with Stanley Armstrong, your pessimism will evaporate."

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"A good idea," said Stranleigh. "If you give me a letter of introduction to Mr. Armstrong, I'll telegraph at once to be sure of accommodation."

"Telegraph?" cried the lawyer. "He'd never get your message. I don't suppose there's a telegraph office within fifty miles. You don't need a letter of introduction, but I'll write you one, and give your name merely as Stranleigh. You won't have any use for a title out there; in fact, it is a necessary part of my prescription that you should get away from yours, with the consequences it entails. Not that you're likely to come across would-be investors, or any one with designs on your wealth. As for accommodation, take a tent with you, and be independent. When I return to my office, I'll dictate full instructions for reaching the ranch."

"Is it so difficult of access as all that?"

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"You might find it so. When you reach the nearest railway station, which is a couple of days' journey from the ranch, you can acquire a horse for yourself, and two or three men with pack mules for your belongings. They'll guide you to Armstrong's place."

Stranleigh found no difficulty in getting a cavalcade together at Bleachers' station, an amazingly long distance west of New York. A man finds little trouble in obtaining what he wants, if he never

cavils at the price asked, and is willing to pay in advance. The party passed through a wild country, though for a time the road was reasonably good. It degenerated presently into a cart-track, however, and finally became a mere trail through the wilderness. As night fell, the tent was put up by the side of a brawling stream, through which they had forded.

Next morning the procession started early, but it was noon before it came to the clearing which Stranleigh rightly surmised was the outskirts of the ranch. The guide, who had been riding in front, reined in, and allowed Stranleigh to come alongside.

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"That," he said, pointing down the valley, "is Armstrong's ranch."

Before Stranleigh could reply, if he had intended doing so, a shot rang out from the forest, and he felt the sharp sting of a bullet in his left shoulder. The guide flung himself from the saddle with the speed of lightning, and stood with both hands upraised, his horse between himself and the unseen assailant.

"Throw up your hands!" he shouted to Stranleigh.

"Impossible!" was the quiet answer, "my left is helpless."

"Then hold up your right."

Stranleigh did so.

"Slide off them packs," roared the guide to his followers, whereupon ropes were untied on the instant, and the packs slid to the ground, while the mules shook themselves, overjoyed at this sudden freedom.

"Turn back!" cried the guide. "Keep your hand up, and they won't shoot. They want the goods."

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"Then you mean to desert me?" asked Stranleigh.

"Desert nothing!" rejoined the guide, gruffly.

"We can't stand up against these fellows, whoever they are. We're no posse. To fight them is the sheriff's business. I engaged to bring you and your dunnage to Armstrong's ranch. I've delivered the goods, and now it's me for the railroad."

"I'm going to that house," said Stranleigh.

"The more fool you," replied the guide, "but I guess you'll get there safe enough, if you don't try to save the plunder."

The unladen mules, now bearing the men on their backs, had disappeared. The guide washed his hands of the whole affair, despite the fact that his hands were upraised. He whistled to his horse, and marched up the trail for a hundred yards or so, still without lowering his arms, then sprang into the saddle, fading out of sight in the direction his men had taken. Stranleigh sat on his horse, apparently the sole inhabitant of a lonely world.

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"That comes of paying in advance," he muttered, looking round at his abandoned luggage. Then it struck him as ridiculous that he was enacting the part of an equestrian statue, with his arm raised aloft. Still, he remembered enough of the pernicious literature that had lent enchantment to his early days, to know that in certain circumstances the holding up of hands was a safeguard not to be neglected, so he lowered his right hand, and took in it the forefinger of his left, and thus raised both arms over his head, turning round in the saddle to face the direction from whence the shots had come. Then he released the forefinger, and allowed the left arm to drop as if it had been a semaphore. He winced under the pain that this pantomime cost him, then in a loud voice he called out:

"If there is anyone within hearing, I beg to inform him that I am wounded slightly; that I carry no firearms; that my escort has vanished, and that I'm going to the house down yonder to have my injury looked after. Now's the opportunity for a parley, if he wants it."

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He waited for some moments, but there was no response, then he gathered up the reins, and quite unmolested proceeded down the declivity until he came to the homestead.

The place appeared to be deserted, and for the first time it crossed Stranleigh's mind that perhaps the New York lawyer had sent him on this expedition as a sort of practical joke. He couldn't discover where the humour of it came in, but perhaps that might be the density with which his countrymen were universally credited. Nevertheless, he determined to follow the adventure to an end, and slipped from his horse, making an ineffectual attempt to fasten the bridle rein to a rail of the fence that surrounded the habitation. The horse began placidly to crop the grass, so he let it go at that, and advancing to the front door, knocked.

Presently the door was opened by an elderly woman of benign appearance, who nevertheless regarded him with some suspicion. She stood holding the door, without speaking, seemingly waiting for her unexpected visitor to proclaim his mission.

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"Is this the house of Stanley Armstrong?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Is he at home? I have a letter of introduction to him."

"No; he is not at home."

"Do you expect him soon?"

"He is in Chicago," answered the woman.

"In Chicago?" echoed Stranleigh. "We must have passed one another on the road. I was in Chicago myself, but it seems months ago; in fact, I can hardly believe such a place exists." The young man smiled a little grimly, but there was no relaxation of the serious expression with which the woman had greeted him.

"What was your business with my husband?"

"No business at all; rather the reverse. Pleasure, it might be called. I expected to do a little shooting and fishing. A friend in New York kindly gave me a letter of introduction to Mr. Armstrong, who, he said, would possibly accompany me." [Pg 179]

"Won't you come inside?" was her reluctant invitation. "I don't think you told me your name."

"My name is Stranleigh, madam. I hope you will excuse my persistence, but the truth is I have been slightly hurt, and if, as I surmise, it is inconvenient to accept me as a lodger, I should be deeply indebted for permission to remain here while I put a bandage on the wound. I must return at once to Bleachers, where I suppose I can find a physician more or less competent."

"Hurt?" cried the woman in amazement, "and I've been keeping you standing there at the door. Why didn't you tell me at once?"

"Oh, I think it's no great matter, and the pain is not as keen as I might have expected. Still, I like to be on the safe side, and must return after I have rested for a few minutes."

"I'm very sorry to hear of your accident," said Mrs. Armstrong, with concern. "Sit down in that rocking-chair until I call my daughter." [Pg 180]

The unexpected beauty of the young woman who entered brought an expression of mild surprise to Stranleigh's face. In spite of her homely costume, a less appreciative person than his lordship must have been struck by Miss Armstrong's charm, and her air of intelligent refinement.

"This is Mr. Stranleigh, who has met with an accident," said Mrs. Armstrong to her daughter.

"Merely a trifle," Stranleigh hastened to say, "but I find I cannot raise my left arm."

"Is it broken?" asked the girl, with some anxiety.

"I don't think so; I fancy the trouble is in the shoulder. A rifle bullet has passed through it."

"A rifle bullet?" echoed the girl, in a voice of alarm. "How did that happen? But—never mind telling me now. The main thing is to attend to the wound. Let me help you off with your coat."

Stranleigh stood up.

"No exertion, please," commanded the girl. "Bring some warm water and a sponge," she continued, turning to her mother. [Pg 181]

She removed Stranleigh's coat with a dexterity that aroused his admiration. The elder woman returned with dressings and sponge, which she placed on a chair. Stranleigh's white shirt was stained with blood, and to this Miss Armstrong applied the warm water.

"I must sacrifice your linen," she said calmly. "Please sit down again."

In a few moments his shoulder was bare; not the shoulder of an athlete, but nevertheless of a young man in perfect health. The girl's soft fingers pressed it gently.

"I shall have to hurt you a little," she said.

Stranleigh smiled.

"It is all for my good, as they say to little boys before whipping them."

The girl smiled back at him.

"Yes; but I cannot add the complementary fiction that it hurts me more than it does you. There! Did you feel that?"

"Not more than usual."

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"There are no bones broken, which is a good thing. After all, it is a simple case, Mr. Stranleigh. You must remain quiet for a few days, and allow me to put this arm in a sling. I ought to send you off to bed, but if you promise not to exert yourself, you may sit out on the verandah where it is cool, and where the view may interest you."

"You are very kind, Miss Armstrong, but I cannot stay. I must return to Bleachers."

"I shall not allow you to go back," she said with decision.

Stranleigh laughed.

"In a long and comparatively useless life I have never contradicted a lady, but on this occasion I must insist on having my own way."

"I quite understand your reason, Mr. Stranleigh, though it is very uncomplimentary to me. It is simply an instance of man's distrust of a woman when it comes to serious work. Like most men, you would be content to accept me as a nurse, but not as a physician. There are two doctors in Bleachers, and you are anxious to get under the care of one of them. No—please don't trouble to deny it. You are not to blame. You are merely a victim of the universal conceit of man."

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"Ah, it is you who are not complimentary now! You must think me a very commonplace individual."

She had thrown the coat over his shoulders, after having washed and dressed the wound. The bullet had been considerate enough to pass right through, making all probing unnecessary. With a safety-pin she attached his shirt sleeve to his shirt front.

"That will do," she said, "until I prepare a regular sling. And now come out to the verandah. No; don't carry the chair. There are several on the platform. Don't try to be polite, and remember I have already ordered you to avoid exertion."

He followed her to the broad piazza, and sat down, drawing a deep breath of admiration. Immediately in front ran a broad, clear stream of water; swift, deep, transparent.

"An ideal trout stream," he said to himself.

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A wide vista of rolling green fields stretched away to a range of foothills, overtopped in the far distance by snow mountains.

"By Jove!" he cried. "This is splendid. I have seen nothing like it out of Switzerland."

"Talking of Switzerland," said Miss Armstrong, seating herself opposite him, "have you ever been at Thun?"

"Oh, yes."

"You stopped at the *Thunerhof*, I suppose?"

"I don't remember what it was called, but it was the largest hotel in the place, I believe."

"That would be the *Thunerhof*," she said. "I went to a much more modest inn, the *Falken*, and the stream that runs in front of it reminded me of this, and made me quite lonesome for the ranch. Of course, you had the river opposite you at the *Thunerhof*, but there the river is half a dozen times as wide as the branch that runs past the *Falken*. I used to sit out on the terrace watching that stream, murmuring to its accompaniment 'Home, sweet Home.'"

"You are by way of being a traveller, then?"

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"Not a traveller, Mr. Stranleigh," said the girl, laughing a little, "but a dabbler. I took dabs of travel, like my little visit to Thun. For more than a year I lived in Lausanne, studying my profession, and during that time I made brief excursions here and there."

"Your profession," asked Stranleigh, with evident astonishment.

"Yes; can't you guess what it is, and why I am relating this bit of personal history on such very short acquaintance?"

The girl's smile was beautiful.

"Don't you know Europe?" she added.

"I ought to; I'm a native."

"Then you are aware that Lausanne is a centre of medical teaching and medical practice. I am a doctor, Mr. Stranleigh. Had your wound been really serious, which it is not, and you had come under the care of either physician in Bleachers, he would have sent for me, if he knew I were at home."

"What you have said interests me very much, Miss Armstrong, or should I say Doctor Armstrong?"

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"I will answer to either designation, Mr. Stranleigh, but I should qualify the latter by adding that I am not a practising physician. 'Professor,' perhaps, would be the more accurate title. I am a member of the faculty in an eastern college of medicine, but by and by I hope to give up teaching, and devote myself entirely to research work. It is my ambition to become the American Madame Curie."

"A laudable ambition, Professor, and I hope you will succeed. Do you mind if I tell you how completely wrong you are in your diagnosis of the subject now before you?"

"In my surgical diagnosis I am not wrong. Your wound will be cured in a very few days."

"Oh, I am not impugning your medical skill. I knew the moment you spoke about your work that you were an expert. It is your diagnosis of me that is all astray. I have no such disbelief in the capacity of woman as you credit me with. I have no desire to place myself under the ministrations

of either of those doctors in Bleachers. My desire for the metropolitan delights of that scattered town is of the most commonplace nature. I must buy for myself an outfit of clothes. I possess nothing in the way of raiment except what I am wearing, and part of that you've cut up with your scissors."

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"Surely you never came all this distance without being well provided in that respect?"

"No; I had ample supplies, and I brought them with me safely to a point within sight of this house. In fact, I came hither like a sheik of the desert, at the head of a caravan, only the animals were mules instead of camels. All went well until we came to the edge of the forest, but the moment I emerged a shot rang out, and it seemed to me I was stung by a gigantic bee, as invisible as the shooter. The guide said there was a band of robbers intent on plunder, and he and the escort acted as escorts usually do in such circumstances. They unloaded the mules with most admirable celerity, and then made off much faster than they came. I never knew a body of men so unanimous in action. They would make a splendid board of directors in a commercial company that wished to get its work accomplished without undue discussion."

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The girl had risen to her feet.

"And your baggage?" she asked.

"I suppose it is in the hands of the brigands by this time. I left it scattered along the trail."

"But, Mr. Stranleigh, what you say is incredible. There are no brigands, thieves or road agents in this district."

"The wound that you dressed so skilfully is my witness, and a witness whose testimony cannot be impugned on cross-examination."

"There is a mistake somewhere. Why, just think of it; the most energetic bandit would starve in this locality! There is no traffic. If your belongings were scattered along the trail, they are there yet."

"Then why shoot the belonger of those belongings?"

"That's just what I must discover. Excuse me for a moment."

She passed through the house, and the young man heard a shrill whistle blown, which was answered by a call some distance away. The girl returned, and sat down again, her brow perplexed, and presently there came on to the platform a stalwart, good-natured looking man, dressed in what Stranleigh took to be a cowboy costume; at least, it was the kind of apparel he had read about in books of the Wild West. His head was covered with a broad-brimmed slouch hat, which he swept off in deference to the lady.

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"Jim," she said, "did you hear any shooting out by the Bleachers trail about an hour ago?"

"No, Ma'am; I can't say that I did, except a rifle I shot off."

"That *you* shot off! What were you shooting at?"

"Well," said Jim, with a humorous chuckle, "I guess perhaps it was this gentleman."

"Why did you wish to murder *me*?" asked Stranleigh, with pardonable concern.

"Murder you, sir? Why, I didn't try to murder you. I could have winged you a dozen times while you were riding down to the house, if I'd wanted to. Where were you hit?"

"In the left shoulder."

"Then that's all right. That's what I aimed to do. I just set out to nip you, and scare you back where you came from."

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"But why?" insisted the perplexed Stranleigh.

"You came along with a posse behind you, and I thought you were the sheriff, but I wouldn't kill even a sheriff unless I had to. I'm the peaceablest man on earth, as Miss Armstrong there will tell you."

"If that's your idea of peace," said Stranleigh, puzzled, "I hope next time I'll fall among warlike people."

Jim grinned. It was Miss Armstrong who spoke, and, it seemed to Stranleigh, with unexpected mildness, considering she knew so much of the Eastern States and Europe.

"I understand," she said, "but next time, Jim, it will be as well merely to fire the gun, without hitting anybody."

"Oh," explained Jim, in an off-hand manner, "our folk don't pay any attention to the like of that. You've got to show them you mean business. If this gentleman had come on, the next shot would have hit him where it would hurt, but seeing he was peaceable minded, he was safe as in a church."

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"Is the baggage where he left it?"

"Certainly, Ma'am; do you wish it brought here?"

"Yes; I do."

"All right, Ma'am; I'll see to that. It's all a little mistake, sir," he said amiably, as he turned to Stranleigh. "Accidents will happen in the best regulated family, as the saying goes," and with a flourish of the hat he departed.

Miss Armstrong rose as if to leave the verandah. As she did so Stranleigh said in a tone of mild reproach:

"I confess I am puzzled."

"So am I," replied the girl, brightly. "I'm puzzled to know what I can offer you in the way of books. Our stock is rather limited."

"I don't want to read, Miss Armstrong, but I do want to know why there is such a prejudice here against a sheriff. In the land I came from a sheriff is not only regarded with great respect, but even with veneration. He rides about in a gilded coach, and wears magnificent robes, decorated with gold lace. I believe that he develops ultimately into a Lord Mayor, just as a grub, if one may call so glorious a personage as a sheriff a grub, ultimately becomes a butterfly. We'd never think of shooting a sheriff. Why, then, do you pot at sheriffs, and hit innocent people, out here?"

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The girl laughed.

"I saw the Lord Mayor of London once in his carriage, and behind it were two most magnificent persons. Were they sheriffs?"

"Oh, dear no; they were merely flunkeys."

"Our sheriffs are elected persons, drawn from the politician class, and if you know America, you will understand what that means. Among the various duties of a sheriff is that of seizing property and selling it, if the owner of that property hasn't paid his debts."

"They act as bailiffs, then?"

"Very likely; I am not acquainted with legal procedure. But I must go, Mr. Stranleigh, for whatever the position of a sheriff may be, mine is that of assistant to my mother, who is just now preparing the dinner, a meal that, further East, is called lunch. And now, what would you prefer to read? The latest magazine or a pharmaceutical journal?"

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"Thank you, Miss Armstrong; I prefer gazing at the scenery to either of them."

"Then good-bye until dinner time," whereupon she disappeared into the house.

The meal proved unexpectedly good. There was about it an enticing freshness, and a variety that was surprising when the distance from the house to the nearest market was considered. Stranleigh could not remember any repast he had enjoyed so much, although he suspected that horseback exercise in the keen air had helped his appreciation of it. When he mentioned his gratification at so satisfactory a menu, the girl smiled.

"Plain living and lofty thought is our motto on the ranch," she said.

"This is anything but plain living," he replied, "and I consider myself no mean judge in such matters. How far away is your market town?"

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"Oh, a market is merely one of those effete contrivances of civilisation. What you buy in a market has been handled and re-handled, and artificially made to look what it is not. The basis of our provender is the farm. All round us here is what economists call, in a double sense of the term, raw material. Farm house fare is often what it should not be because art belongs to the city while nature belongs to the farm. To produce a good result, the two must be united. We were speaking just now of Thun. If, leaving that town, you proceed along the left hand road by the lake, you will arrive at a large institution which is devoted entirely to the art of cookery. The more I progressed with my studies at Lausanne, the more I realised that the basis of health is good food, properly prepared. So I interrupted my medical studies for a time, entered that establishment, and learned to cook."

"Miss Armstrong, you are the most efficient individual I ever met."

"You are very complimentary, Mr. Stranleigh, because, like the various meals you have enjoyed in different parts of the world, you must have met a great many people. To enhance myself further in your eyes, I may add that I have brought another much-needed accomplishment to the farm. I am an expert accountant, and can manage business affairs in a way that would startle you, and regarding this statement of mine, I should like to ask you, hoping you won't think I am impertinent, are you a rich man?"

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Stranleigh was indeed startled—she had succeeded in that—and he hesitated before he answered

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"I am considered reasonably well off."

"I am very glad to hear it, for it has been the custom of my father, who is not a good business man, to charge boarders two or three dollars a week when they come with their guns and fishing tackle. Now, we are in a unique position. We have the advantage of being free from competition.

The hotels of New York are as thick as blackberries. They meet competition in its fiercest form, yet the prices they charge are much more per day than we charge for a month. I am determined that our prices shall be equal to New York prices, but I think it is only fair to let any customer know the fact before he is called upon to pay his bill."

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"A very excellent arrangement," said Stranleigh, heartily, "and in my case there will be an additional account for medical services. Will that be on the basis of professional charges in London, New York, Vienna, Berlin, or Lausanne?"

"Not on the basis of Lausanne, certainly, for there an excellent doctor is contented with a fee of five francs, so if you don't object, I'll convert francs into dollars."

"My admiration for your business capacity is waning, Miss Armstrong. If this is to be an international matter, why choose your own country instead of mine? Transpose your francs into pounds, Professor. There are five francs in a dollar, but five dollars in a pound sterling. Let me recommend to you my own currency."

"A very good idea, Mr. Stranleigh," rejoined Miss Armstrong, promptly. "I shall at once take it into consideration, but I hope you won't be shocked when the final round-up arrives."

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"I shall have no excuse for astonishment, being so honestly forewarned, and now that we are conversing so internationally, I'd like to carry it a little further. In Italy they call an accident a 'disgrazia,' and when you read in an Italian paper that a man is 'disgraced,' you realise that he has met with an accident. Then the account ends by saying that the patient is guaranteed curable in two days, or a week, or a month, as the case may be. How long, then, doctor, must I rest under this 'disgrace'?"

"I should say a week, but that's merely an off-hand guess, as I suppose is the case with the estimate of an Italian physician."

"I hope your orders won't be too strict. By the way, has my luggage arrived?"

"It is all in the large room upstairs, but if you have any designs upon it, you are disobeying orders."

"I must get at a portmanteau that is in one of the bundles."

"I will fetch what you want, so don't worry about that, but come and sit on the verandah once more."

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Stranleigh protested, and finally a compromise was arrived at. Miss Armstrong would whistle for Jim, and he would do the unpacking. She saw a shade of distrust pass over Stranleigh's face, and she reassured him that Jim was the most honest and harmless man in the world, except, perhaps, where sheriffs were concerned.

"Now," she continued, when he had seated himself, "you have talked enough for one day, so you must keep quiet for the rest of the afternoon. I will do the talking, giving you an explanation of our brigandish conduct."

"I shall be an interested listener," said Stranleigh, resignedly. "But permit me, before silence falls, to ask what you may regard an impertinent question. Do you smoke?"

"Goodness, no!" she replied, with widely opened eyes.

"Many ladies do, you know, and I thought you might have acquired the habit during your travels abroad. In that case, I should have been delighted to offer you some excellent cigarettes from my portmanteau."

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Jumping up, the girl laughed brightly.

"Poor man! I understand at last. You shall have the cigarettes in less than five minutes. Give me your keys, please."

"That particular piece of luggage is not locked. I am so sorry to trouble you, but after such a memorable dinner——"

"Yes, yes; I know, I know!" she cried, as she vanished.

"Interesting girl, that," murmured Stranleigh to himself, "and unusually accomplished."

He listened for a whistle, but the first break in the silence was the coming of Miss Armstrong, holding a box of cigars in one hand and a packet of cigarettes in the other.

"Then you didn't call for help, after all," said Stranleigh, a shade of reproach in his tone.

"Oh, it was quite easy. By punching the bundles I guessed what they contained, and soon found where the portmanteau was concealed. Now, light up," she continued, "lean back, and smoke. I'll do the talking. My father, as I've told you, is a very poor business man, and that is why I endeavoured to acquire some knowledge of affairs. He is generous and sympathetic, believing no evil of anyone, consequently he is often imposed upon to his financial disadvantage. Our position as father and daughter is the reverse of what is usual in such relationships. I attempt to guide him in the way he should go, and as a general thing he accepts my advice and acts upon it, but on the occasion of which I speak, I was at work in New York, and knew nothing of the disastrous

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contract into which he had entered, until it was too late.

"I always come West and spend the vacation on the ranch, and this time brought with me all the money I had saved, but it proved insufficient to cope with the situation. In his early days my father was a mining engineer. He was successful, and might have been a very rich man to-day if — But that 'if' always intervened. Nevertheless, he accumulated money, and bought this ranch, determined to retire.

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"The lower part of the ranch is good grazing ground, but the upper or western part is rocky, rising to the foothills. My father was not a success as a rancher, partly because we are too far from the markets, and partly because he chose as cowboys men who did not understand their business. I told you that my father is a sympathetic man. No one ever appealed to him in vain. He has always been very popular, but it seems to me that his friends are always poorer than himself. Thus it came about that miners who knew him, and were out of work, applied for something to do, and he engaged them as cowboys, until he had half a dozen on his pay roll, and thus began the gradual loss of his money. These men were excellent as miners, but useless as cowboys, and there was no one here to teach them their duties, my father being himself a miner. It seemed, then, a dispensation of Providence that as he rambled over the western part of his property he struck signs of silver. He was not mistaken in his prospecting. He and the cowboys took hilariously to their old trade, and worked away at the rocks until all his money was gone."

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"Did they find any real silver?" asked Stranleigh, interested.

"Oh yes, plenty of it," answered the girl. "It is evident they have opened a very rich mine."

"Then where is the difficulty?"

"The difficulty is the want of machinery, which there is no capital to purchase. My father tried to get that capital in this district, but there is very little ready money to be obtained out here. He enlisted the interest of Mr. Ricketts, a lawyer in Bleachers, and reputed the only rich man in the town. Ricketts came to the ranch with a mining engineer, and they examined the opening. Seemingly they were not impressed with the contents, and Ricketts advised my father to go East and form a company.

"My father explained his financial situation, and Ricketts, with apparent generosity, offered to lend him five thousand dollars on his note, to be paid on demand, with the ranch as security. Thus my father put himself entirely in the other's power. Ricketts gave him the address of a lawyer in Chicago, who, he said, would be of assistance to him. The latest word we received from my father is that this lawyer, in one way or another, has got hold of all his money. Father telegraphed to Ricketts for help, which was refused. So he left Chicago on foot, determined to walk home, since he had not even money enough left to pay his fare home. Where he is at present, we have no idea, except that he is making for this ranch.

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"Ricketts at once took action to sell the ranch. Apparently he is quite within his legal rights, but there are formalities to be gone through, and one of these is the arrival of the sheriff to seize the property. That arrival the men, headed by Jim, are determined to prevent, and now, perhaps, you understand why you rode into danger when you came from Bleachers this morning.

"When I learnt of my father's predicament, I went out to Bleachers to see Mr. Ricketts, offering him what money I had brought from New York if he would hold his hand for a year. He refused, and from his conversation I realised he was determined to secure the ranch for himself, and I believe the whole transaction is a plot toward that end."

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"Then the mine must be a valuable one?"

"I am sure it is; indeed, my father could make no mistake in that matter."

"Well, the position seems very simple after all. What you need, Miss Armstrong, is a change of creditors. You want a creditor who is not in a hurry for his money. In other words, if you could transfer that debt, you would be out of immediate danger. Would you allow me to go into Bleachers to-morrow, and see Mr. Ricketts?"

"Most decidedly not!"

"How much money did you bring with you from New York?"

"Two thousand dollars."

"I brought just twice that amount, so I think the affair may be arranged, and you can go to Ricketts to-morrow, and take up the note. I think perhaps you had better have five thousand five hundred dollars with you, as there will certainly be some interest and expenses to pay, for if the case is as you state it, Ricketts will be reluctant to part with the document. Is there another lawyer in Bleachers?"

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"Yes."

"Well, get him to accompany you, and make formal tender of the money."

The girl had reddened while he was speaking, and now she said, in tones of distress—

"I fear you completely misunderstood my object in telling you of my difficulties. My object was not to borrow money, but to explain why Jim Dean shot at you."

"Oh, I understand perfectly why you spoke as frankly as you did, and I am very much obliged to you for doing so, but you must have no diffidence in accepting the money. It is purely a business transaction, and, as you say, you are a business woman. Therefore, as a matter of business, it would be folly to reject an offer that is to our mutual advantage. The security is ample."

"That is true, Mr. Stranleigh, but, you see, I have no power, no authority, to give this ranch as security; it belongs to my father." [Pg 206]

"True; but you are not nearly so competent a business woman as you would have me believe. You will receive from Ricketts your father's promissory note. That you will hand to me, then I shall be your debtor for two thousand dollars. Those two thousand dollars I shall pay as soon as I get some money from New York, and your father will become my debtor for five thousand dollars. All perfectly simple, you see. In the first instance I trust you for three thousand dollars, and in the second instance you trust me for two thousand dollars. After I have paid you the two thousand dollars, I hold the note, and can sell you up whenever I please. I give you my word I won't do that, though even if I did you would be no worse off than you are now."

"Very well, Mr. Stranleigh; I will take the money."

It was several days later when Miss Armstrong returned from Bleachers. Her first interest was to satisfy herself of the patient's progress. He had been getting on well.

"You are an admirable physician, Miss Armstrong," he said. "Now let me know whether you are equally capable as a financier." [Pg 207]

"I have failed completely," she answered, dejectedly. "Mr. Ricketts has refused the money."

"Did you take the other lawyer with you?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"He said Ricketts had no right to refuse, but a different question has arisen. The guide who accompanied you to the ranch brought back news of the shooting. Ricketts guessed at once why you were shot at, and the sheriff has signed an affidavit, or some such instrument, to show that his life, and his men's lives, are in danger if they go to seize the property, so this complication has been overcome by some order from the legislature, and the personal seizure is waived. The sale is announced to take place in Bleachers two weeks from to-day. Mr. Timmins—that is the other lawyer—fears that Ricketts is within his rights in refusing the money at this stage."

"This is all very interesting, Miss Armstrong, but we have a fortnight to turn round in." [Pg 208]

"Yes; that is so."

"I am delighted, for now I shall have the pleasure of trying a fall with the estimable Mr. Ricketts."

VI.—THE BUNK HOUSE PRISONER.

[Pg 209]

As the wound in his shoulder healed, Stranleigh began to enjoy himself on the ranch. He was experiencing a life entirely new to him, and being always a lover of waving woods and rushing waters, even in the tamed state which England presents, he keenly appreciated these natural beauties in the wilderness, where so-called human improvements had not interfered with them. Without attempting to indulge in the sport for which he had come, he wandered about the ranch a good deal, studying its features, and at the same time developing an appetite that did justice to the excellent meals prepared for him. He visited Jim Dean, who had shot him, and tried to scrape acquaintance with his five aiders and abettors in that drastic act, but they met his advances with suspicion, naturally regarding him as a tenderfoot, nor were they satisfied that his long residence among them was as friendly as he evidently wished it to appear. [Pg 210]

The men resided in a huge bunk house, which consisted of one room only, with a shack outside where the cooking was done. In the large room were a dozen bunks; half of them in a very dishevelled state, giving sleeping accommodation for the company, while the other half were ready in case of an accession of help, should the mine prosper.

The cabin was as securely built as a fortress, of the rugged stone which had been blasted from the rocks in opening the mine. The mine itself was situated about five hundred yards to the south of this edifice, but instead of being dug downwards, as Stranleigh expected, it extended westward on the level toward the heart of the mountain, so that a rudely built truck could carry out the débris, and dump it down the steep hill. To his æsthetic fancy this seemed a pity, because a short distance south from the opening of the mine, the river formed a cascade descending a hundred feet or more; a cascade of entrancing beauty, whose loveliness would be more or less destroyed as the mining operations progressed. [Pg 211]

The rising sun illumined the tunnel to its final wall, and Stranleigh found no difficulty in exploring it to the remotest corner. He passed the abandoned truck partly turned over beside an assortment of picks, shovels, hand-drills and the like. To his unpractised eye there was no sign of silver on walls, floor or ceiling. At the extreme end was piled up a quantity of what appeared to

be huge cartridges.

Before entering the cavern he had noticed three or four of the miners standing in front of the bunk house, evidently watching him, but he paid no attention to them, and while he was inside, the roar of the cataract prevented him from hearing approaching footsteps. As he came out to the lip of the mine, he found Jim and three others waiting for him. Each had a rifle on his shoulder.

"Inspecting the property?" said Jim, casually.

"Yes," replied Stranleigh.

"What do you think of it?"

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"My opinion would be of very little value. I know nothing of mining."

"The deuce you don't!" said Jim. "What are you doing with that lump of rock in your hand?"

"Oh, that," said Stranleigh, "I happened to pick up. I wanted to examine it in clear daylight. Is there silver in it?"

"How should I know?" replied Jim, gruffly. "I'm not a mining engineer. I only take a hand at the drill or the pick, as the case may be. But when you throw that back where you got it, throw it carefully, and not too far."

"I don't intend to throw it," said Stranleigh. "I'm going to take it down to the house."

"Oh, you think you're not going to throw it, but you are. We've just come up to explain that to you."

"I see. If it is compulsory, why shouldn't I throw it as far as I can?"

"Because," explained Jim, politely, "there's a lot of dynamite stored in the end of that hole, and dynamite isn't a thing to fool with, you know."

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Stranleigh laughed.

"I rather fancy you're right, though I know as little about dynamite as I do about mines. But to be sure of being on the right side, I will leave the tossing of the stone to you. Here it is," whereupon he handed the lump of rock to Jim, who flung it carelessly into the mine again, but did not join in his visitor's hilarity.

"You seem to regard me as a dangerous person?"

"Oh, not at all, but we do love a man that attends to his own business. We understood that you came here for shooting and fishing."

"So I did, but other people were out shooting before I got a chance. A man who's had a bullet through his shoulder neither hunts nor fishes."

"That's so," admitted Jim, with the suavity of one who recognises a reasonable statement, "but now that you are better, what do you come nosing round the mine for? Why don't you go on with your shooting and your fishing?"

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"Because Mr. Armstrong was to be my guide, and he, I regret to say, has not yet returned home. As he is tramping from Chicago to the ranch, no one knows when he will put in an appearance."

"Well, Mr. Stranleigh, we are plain, ordinary backwoods folks, that have no reason for loving or trusting people who come from the city, as you do. You say that shooting is your game. Now, we can do a bit of shooting ourselves, and I tell you plainly that if any stranger was found prowling around here, he'd have got a bullet in a more vital spot than you did. Do you understand me?"

"Your meaning, sir, is perfectly plain. What do you want me to do? Go away from here before Mr. Armstrong returns?"

"No; we don't say that, but we draw an imaginary line, such as they tell me the equator is, past this end of the farm house, and we ask you not to cross it westward. There's all the fishing you want down stream, but there's none up here by the waterfall, neither is there any game to shoot, so you see we're proposing no hardship if your intentions are what you say they are."

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"Sir, you speak so beautifully that I must address you less familiarly than I am doing. My own name is Ned, but few take the liberty of calling me by that title. I don't know that I should like it if they did. You are already aware, perhaps, that I answer to the name of Stranleigh. May I enquire what your name is?"

"I'm James Dean."

"Ah, the Dean of the Faculty? You are leader of this band of brothers?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"Are they unanimous in restricting my liberty on this ranch?"

"You bet!"

"You've no right to do such a thing, and besides, it is inhospitable. I came to this ranch properly

accredited, with a letter of introduction to Mr. Armstrong. He happens to be away; if he had been here, and I had seen that my visit was unwelcome to him, I should instantly have taken my leave, but I refuse to have my liberty restricted by Mr. Armstrong's hired men." [Pg 216]

"That's exactly where you're wrong, Mr. Stranleigh. In the first place, we're not hired men; we're Mr. Armstrong's partners, and we don't restrict your liberty on the ranch."

"A partner contributes his share to the expenses of the combination. I understand Mr. Armstrong bears the burden alone."

"We contribute our labour, which is cash in another form, therefore whether Mr. Armstrong is here, or whether he is away, we mean to defend our property. So when you cross the imaginary line I spoke of, you are trespassing, and no jury will convict a man who shoots a trespasser after he has been fully warned, as we warn you."

"Well, Mr. Dean, I admit that you have right on your side, even if there is not much wisdom at the back of it. There is just one more thing I should like to know. Why do you treat me as an enemy?" [Pg 217]

"As a possible enemy," corrected Dean.

"As a possible enemy, then?"

"Because we don't like your actions, and we don't think much of you. You're a city man, and we don't trust any such."

"But Mr. Banks, who gave me the letter to your chief, is not only a city man, but a lawyer. He has been here, and spoke highly of his reception."

"That was before the mine was opened, and as for being a lawyer, we hate 'em, of course, but they're like rattlesnakes. In some seasons of the year they are harmless. The opening of the silver mine opened the rattlesnake season, and that's why this lawyer snake in Bleachers is trying to cheat Armstrong out of his ranch. He came over here with a mining engineer and learnt the whole value of the ground. How do we know you're not a mining engineer?"

"I regret to say I'm nothing so useful."

"And didn't you send Miss Armstrong into Bleachers to see that villain Ricketts? What connection have you with him?" [Pg 218]

"None at all, Mr. Dean. I never saw Ricketts in my life, and never heard of him before the day you mistook me for the sheriff."

Dean glanced at his companions, who had taken no part in the colloquy, but who listened with an interest at once critical and suspicious. It was evident that their distrust could not be dissipated, or even mitigated, by strenuous talk, and for a moment Stranleigh was tempted to tell them that he had lent three thousand dollars to Miss Armstrong, in the hope that this money, added to her own, would gain some sort of concession from the obdurate lawyer. But he remembered that the girl was in constant communication with these men, and if she had not already informed them of his futile assistance, it was because she did not want them to know.

Dean pondered for a few moments before he spoke. He seemed to have gathered in the purport of his men's thoughts without the necessity for words. At last he said:

"May I take it you agree hereafter to attend to your own business?" [Pg 219]

Stranleigh laughed.

"There would be no use in my making that promise, for I have never in my life attended to my own business. My business affairs are all looked after by men who are experts. They live in New York and in London, and although I make a decision now and then, I do that as seldom as possible. It fatigues me."

"So you are a loafer?"

"That's it exactly, Mr. Dean, and I freely give you my promise not to loaf about your silver mine."

"Are you so rich as all that?"

"You are not consistent, Mr. Dean. How can you ask me to attend to my business if you do not attend to yours? Whether I am rich or poor is none of your affair?"

"Quite true," agreed Jim, nonchalantly, "we will let it go at that."

Stranleigh, with a smile, bowed courteously to the group.

"I wish you a very good day," he said, and turning, strolled down to the house at a leisurely gait, quite in keeping with his self-declared character of loafer. His back offered an excellent target, but no man raised his rifle, and Stranleigh never looked over his shoulder, never hurried a step, but walked as one very sure of himself, and in no fear of attack. [Pg 220]

"Stuck up cuss," said Jim to his comrades. "I'd like to take that chap down a peg. Let's get back to the bunk house and talk it over," so they, too, left the pit mouth, and returned to their cabin.

When the Earl of Stranleigh entered the house, he was accosted by Miss Armstrong, on whose

fair face were traces of deep anxiety, which his lordship thought were easily accounted for by the fact that the homestead was to be sold in less than a fortnight.

"I have been anxious to see you, Mr. Stranleigh," she said. "Won't you come out on the verandah where we can talk?"

"With great pleasure, Miss Armstrong."

When they were seated, she continued—

"You have been talking with the men?"

"Yes; we had a little chat together."

"Did they tell you anything of their intentions?"

"No; except in so far as they were determined not to let me examine the mine."

"Ah; they have distrusted you from the first. Did you insist on visiting it?"

"I have visited it."

"Without asking one of them to accompany you?"

"I regarded them as hired men. They say they are your father's partners."

"So they are."

"Ah, well, if that is really the case, I must apologise to them. I thought when you ordered Dean to bring in my luggage, and he obeyed with such docility, that he was your servant. I intended to offer him some money for that service, but I suppose I must not."

"Certainly not. Those men will do anything for a friend, but nothing for one of whom they are suspicious. Their distrust, once aroused, is not easily removed. I am sure, however, you were tactful with them."

Stranleigh smiled ruefully.

"I am not so certain of that myself. I fear I failed in diplomacy."

"I do wish my father were here," she said, ignoring his last remark. "I am very much worried about the men."

"What do they know of your trouble with that man Ricketts?"

"They know all about it, and they now threaten to march into Bleachers in a body and, as we say, shoot up the town, including Ricketts, of course."

"When do they intend to do this?"

"On the day of the auction sale."

"Don't they understand that that would be futile?"

"It would cause an infinite amount of harm, and ultimately might result in their being wiped out themselves. Not that Bleachers could do such a thing, but because they would be pitting themselves against the United States Government, which is a mere name to those men, carrying no authority. All their lives have been spent in camps, where the only law is that of the mob. I have tried my best to influence them, but they regard me merely as a woman, and a woman from the East at that, who has no knowledge of practical affairs, so I have every reason for wishing my father were here."

"I should not trouble about that if I were you, Miss Armstrong. If they intended to carry out their resolution to-morrow, or next day, there might be reason for anxiety, but we have luckily plenty of time in which to act. The one immediate thing is to find your father. I'll undertake that task. He's travelling somewhere between here and Chicago, on foot. May I see the latest letter he wrote you?"

The girl brought it to him.

"Might I take this with me?"

"Yes. What do you intend to do?"

Stranleigh smiled.

"Oh, I never do anything. As I was telling your men, who wished me to mind my own business, I always have people to do that for me. I am a great believer in the expert. Now, America seems to be the land of experts, and the man to deal with this case is Detective Burns, of New York. I shall get into touch with him by telegraph, and if he cannot attend to the matter himself, he will select the best substitute that is to be had, and as Burns and his men invariably track down anyone they want, even though he be seeking to elude them, it will be an easy task to find your father, who is tramping the straightest possible line between Chicago and this ranch. I shall give instructions for two or three hundred dollars to be handed to Mr. Armstrong, with directions to take the next train to Bleachers, as we need his presence here. I shall do nothing but send a telegram, and Mr.

Burns will do the rest. Now, if you will assist me by ordering out my horse, I shall be ready to start within ten minutes. I'd order the horse myself, but I don't think your men would obey me."

In less than the time mentioned, Jim brought the horse to the door. All his men were standing in front of their cabin, looking on. They quite naturally believed that their guest had taken alarm, and was making off to some district where he would be in less danger. When his lordship came downstairs and out to the front, Jim was overcome with astonishment. His lordship was accoutred amazingly, after the fashion of the English horseman. He had dressed himself in a riding costume such as an English gentleman would wear at home. Jim and his comrades had never seen such an outfit before, and they greeted his appearance with a roar of laughter.

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Stranleigh sprang into his saddle with the agility of a cowboy, and smiling good-humouredly at his audience, raised his hat to them, and rode off.

As Stranleigh's horse entered the forest the young man began to ponder over the problem that confronted him. When the unfortunate Armstrong borrowed money from Ricketts, he had, of course, fully explained the situation. The lender had examined the property in company with a mining engineer, and this expert doubtless took away with him some ore to analyse at his leisure. Ricketts, being in possession of the engineer's estimate of the pit's value, had probably formed a syndicate, or perhaps made arrangements with other capitalists, to see him through with the speculation. Undoubtedly Ricketts expected no competition when the estate was put up at auction, but if he was a shrewd man, as was almost certain to be the case, events had occurred which might stimulate thought regarding his position.

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Miss Armstrong had ridden out to Bleachers, having in her possession five thousand dollars, the face value of the notes. Ricketts would wonder how she had obtained the money. She possessed only two thousand dollars on her first visit, as he knew from the fact that she had offered it to him for refraining from action until her father returned. Who could have given her the extra three thousand? Whoever had done so must have known the girl could offer no security for its repayment. He was therefore a rich man, or he could not afford to throw away a sum so considerable.

It was likely that such reflections as these had put Ricketts on the alert, and the sudden advent in Bleachers of a smartly costumed stranger, a stranger coming from the direction of the ranch, would almost certainly convince Ricketts that here was his opponent. In Bleachers, too, each inhabitant very probably knew every one else's business. That he could elude the astute Ricketts was therefore exceedingly doubtful, and Stranleigh already knew enough about the lawlessness of the district to believe that he might ride into considerable danger. In that sparsely-settled country, people were not too scrupulous in their methods of getting rid of an enemy.

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He wondered how far down the line the next town was, for he was certain that any telegraphing he did from Bleachers would speedily be known to Ricketts. Would it be possible to deflect his course, and make for the next station eastwards? He possessed no map of the State, however, and there was little chance of meeting anyone, so there seemed nothing for it but to push on to Bleachers.

At this point his meditations were interrupted by the dimly heard sound of horses' hoofs on the trail behind him. He pulled up and listened. Pausing for a few minutes, he heard nothing more, and so went on again, with an uneasy feeling of being followed. He determined not to camp out when night overtook him, but to hurry on until he reached Bleachers. He had made a two days' journey to reach the ranch, but that was because the laden mules were slow. Before dark he would be on the high road, and after that he could not lose his way. After all, perhaps it was better to reach Bleachers at night, and trust to rousing up the people in the one tavern of the place.

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It was after midnight when his task was accomplished, and having seen to the accommodation of a very tired and hungry horse, Stranleigh threw himself down, dressed as he was, upon the bed to which he was shown by a sleepy ostler. He had had quite enough equestrian exercise for one day.

Ten o'clock had struck next morning before he woke, and went down to breakfast. His mind had become clarified, and he knew now exactly what he meant to do. To avoid the cognizance of Ricketts was impossible; of that he was certain. His first object, then, was to draw a red herring across the trail, so he enquired from the hotel-keeper the whereabouts of Ricketts' office, and was directed to it.

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He crossed the street and ascended a stair. Ricketts kept neither clerk nor office boy, so Stranleigh knocked at the door, was gruffly commanded to enter, and obeyed.

Silas A. Ricketts was seated at a large table strewn with books and legal-looking documents, and he stared in astonishment at the figure which presented itself. He, like the men on the ranch, had never seen such a costume before.

"Are you Mr. Ricketts?" asked his lordship.

"Yes, sir."

"My name is Stranleigh. I took the liberty of calling upon you to learn, if possible, the whereabouts of Mr. Stanley Armstrong."

"Why should I know anything of his whereabouts?" demanded Ricketts.

"Permit me to explain——"

"Now, before we go any further," interrupted the lawyer, "I want you to know that this is a business office, and I'm a business man. My time is valuable. I thought when you came in that you were a client. If you have come here for aimless gossip, I'm not your man. I have my own affairs to look after."

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"You state the case very lucidly, Mr. Ricketts, and I congratulate your clients. My own time is far from precious, for I'm here after sport. How valuable is your time? How much does an hour's conference with you cost?"

"It all depends on the business transacted."

"I can't agree with you, Mr. Ricketts. An hour is an hour. I want to buy sixty minutes of your time and attention. What do you ask for it?"

"Five dollars!" snapped Ricketts.

Stranleigh drew forth a five-dollar bill, and placed it on the table.

"May I sit down?" he enquired. "No healthy man should be tired in the morning, but I endured a long horseback ride yesterday, and had an indifferent night's rest."

"Where did you come from?"

"I have been living for the past few days at Armstrong's ranch."

"Are you the man who was shot last week?"

"Yes; by mistake for your estimable sheriff I understand. You see, I came here from New York with a letter of introduction to Mr. Armstrong, being told that I might enjoy some good fishing and a little shooting, while Armstrong was described as a most admirable guide to these sports. I waited at the ranch day after day, hoping that Armstrong would return, but nobody seems to know yet where he is, or when he will return, so I came out here, hoping to get into telegraphic communication with him. I'm well enough now to take part in the chase, and I am loth to return to New York without having had any sport."

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"I still don't understand why you come to me about the matter."

"I was told by his daughter that Armstrong had written to you. She does not know in the least where he is, and so on the chance of your having received a recent letter, I have called to enquire."

"I see. Armstrong's letter to me was written from Chicago. It was a request for money. I had already loaned him a considerable sum and was unable to accede to his further demand. I answered to this effect, but have heard no more from him. It is likely that his own people have received word since the letter to me was written. Of course, you don't know the date of their last letter from him?"

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"Yes, I do," said Stranleigh, "I have the letter with me. It contains all the data of which Miss Armstrong is possessed, and she gave me the letter to assist me in my search."

He drew the letter from his pocket, and showed the date to the lawyer, who consulted his file, and then said—

"It is just as I expected. That letter was written ten days later than the one I received. Sorry I am unable to give you any definite assistance, Mr. Stranleigh."

Stranleigh rose.

"I am sorry also. I suppose there wouldn't be much use in telegraphing to the address he gives in Chicago?"

"I see no object in that. The place is probably a boarding-house, and he's not there."

"Thank you, Mr. Ricketts. Good morning."

Stranleigh went slowly down the steep stairs, and reaching the sidewalk, almost fell into the arms of Jim Dean. Here, then, was the man who had been following him.

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"Good morning, Mr. Dean."

"Morning," snarled Jim, briefly.

"I've just been up to see Mr. Ricketts, whom I think you mentioned the other day."

"So I supposed," agreed Dean.

"I expected to get some information from him about Mr. Armstrong, but he doesn't appear to know very much."

"Well, you're the first man I ever heard say that S. A. Ricketts doesn't know very much, but I think by and by you will find that others know a great deal."

"Perhaps they know a great deal that is not so; there's a lot of knowledge of that kind lying around loose."

"Very likely," remarked Jim, laconically, then turned on his heel and walked down the street, while Stranleigh went towards the depôt to enlist the services of a telegraph operator, and learn when the next train left for the east. [Pg 234]

Stranleigh found the telegraph operator dozing in a wooden chair tilted back against the wall, his soft hat drawn over his eyes, his feet resting on a rung of the chair. It was a hot day, and the commercial inactivity of Bleachers called for very little exertion on the part of the telegraphist. The young man slowly roused himself as the door opened and shut. His unexpected customer nodded good morning to him.

"Could you oblige me with some forms?" asked the newcomer.

"Forms? Forms of what?" The operator's feet came down with a crash on the board floor as he rose from his chair.

"Well, telegraph blanks, perhaps I should have said."

"Oh, certainly."

The young man fished one out from a drawer, and flung it on the counter.

"This will do excellently for a beginning," said Stranleigh, "but you'd better let me have a dozen to go on with."

The young man was waking up. He supplied the demand, and with ever-increasing amazement, watched his client write. [Pg 235]

Stranleigh gave the New York detective particulars in great detail so far as he possessed them, asked him to spare no expense, and requested that Armstrong, when found, should be presented with two hundred dollars or more, as he required, with admonition to take the first train home, where his presence was urgently needed.

"Great Scott!" cried the operator, "is that all one message?"

"Yes," said Stranleigh.

"Where is it going?"

"I've written the address as plainly as I can. It's going to New York."

"I say, stranger," protested the telegraphist, "have you any idea what it costs to send a message across the Continent to New York?"

"No, I haven't, but I expect to be in possession of that information as soon as you have mastered my handwriting, and counted the words."

The operator was practically speechless when he reached the end of his enumeration, but after making a note on the pad, he was sufficiently recovered to remark— [Pg 236]

"Say, stranger, you'll have to dig up a pretty big wad to pay for this. We don't give credit in a Western Union office."

"I shouldn't think of asking credit from a downtrodden monopoly," said Stranleigh, pulling out his pocket book, and liquidating his debt. "You ought to be happy if you get a percentage."

"Worse luck, I don't."

"Well, I think you're entitled to one. I've given a fee this morning and received no particular equivalent for it. Do you, being a useful man, object to accepting a five-dollar bill?"

"Not on your life!" assented the operator with great earnestness.

Stranleigh passed it over.

"I'm expecting a reply. At what time shall I call for it?"

"You don't need to call, Mr. Stranleigh. When it comes, I'll lock up the office, and find you if you're anywhere in town."

"I'm stopping over at the tavern."

"All right; you'll get it."

"Thanks. Good morning."

"See you later," said the now thoroughly-awakened operator, and Stranleigh proceeded to the railway station. He took the next train to the nearest town east, and there did some more telegraphing, but this time the message was in cypher, and it was addressed to his agent in New York. Translated, it read— [Pg 237]

"Send me at once by express, registered and insured, twenty thousand dollars in currency, made up of five dollar, ten dollar, and hundred dollar bills."

The address was fully written out in plain English. He found there was time for a satisfactory lunch before the west-bound train arrived, and he partook of it in the chief hotel, whose accommodation was much superior to that of the Bleachers tavern.

On his return to headquarters, he called in at the telegraph office. The young man in charge, at once recognising him, announced—

“Nothing doing. The moment anything comes I’ll take it over to the tavern. Say, is there anything secret about that telegram you sent?” [Pg 238]

“No; why do you ask?”

“Well, Mr. Ricketts, a lawyer here, came in about ten minutes ago, and described you, and wanted to know if you had sent a telegram.”

“What did you say to him?”

“I said nobody had sent a telegram, and that I knew nothing of you. He seemed powerful anxious, and offered me a dollar to let him know if you telegraphed anything. I went over to the tavern to tell you about it, but they said you hadn’t been in since breakfast.”

“I suppose you haven’t many chances of picking up an extra dollar in Bleachers?”

“No; I haven’t. Ricketts is always mighty curious about anyone who arrives here, but I never knew him offer a cent for information before.”

“I’m very much obliged to you. You go right over to Ricketts’ office and pick up his dollar, but don’t say I gave you the advice. By the way, wouldn’t you be breaking the rules of the Western Telegraph Company if you divulged the purport of any message that passed through your hands?” [Pg 239]

A look of trouble, almost of fear, came over the young man’s face.

“If a telegram is secret,” he said, “the sender usually writes it in cypher.”

“Quite so, but even in that case wouldn’t you be punished if it became known that you had shown Mr. Ricketts a private despatch entrusted to your care?”

“Certainly,” admitted the telegraphist, exhibiting more and more uneasiness, “but I have not shown your telegram to anybody, and what I told you was entirely in confidence.”

“Oh, you need have no fear of my rounding on you. I am merely endeavouring to put you in possession of that dollar without getting your neck in a noose. Don’t you see that you are placing yourself entirely at Mr. Ricketts’ mercy?”

“But you,” protested the frightened young man, “advised me to do so.”

“Undoubtedly. I want you to get that dollar, but not to place yourself in jeopardy. From what I saw of Ricketts this morning, I should not like to be in his power, yet his dollar is just as good as any other man’s dollar, and I want you to detach it from him with safety, and profit to yourself. Let me have another telegraph blank.” [Pg 240]

Stranleigh wrote rapidly—

“Pinkerton Detective Agency, Chicago.

“I want to be put into communication with Stanley Armstrong, who left Chicago on foot ten days ago, for the West, and I am willing to pay one hundred dollars for the job.

“EDMUND STRANLEIGH.

“White’s Hotel, Bleachers.”

“There,” said Stranleigh, passing over the sheet to the operator, “you show that to our inquisitive friend Ricketts, but don’t send it over the line.”

Stranleigh slept that night at White’s Hotel, and shortly after breakfast next morning the telegraph clerk came across with a very satisfactory telegram from New York. The sender could not positively predict the finding of Armstrong, but anticipated no difficulty in the task. [Pg 241]

Stranleigh paid his bill at the hotel, ordered out his horse, and trotted off towards the ranch. He saw no more of Ricketts, who, if on any trail, was following the wrong one.

Dusk had fallen as he was about to emerge into the clearing which in daylight would have afforded him a sight of Armstrong’s house. Suddenly and stealthily he was surrounded by six armed men, and the voice of Jim Dean broke the stillness.

“Good evening, Mr. Stranleigh. I must ask you to get down from your horse.”

“Willingly,” replied the rider. “I confess I have had enough equestrian exercise for one day.”

“We have supper ready for you at the bunk house.”

“Why at the bunk house? I am perfectly satisfied with the fare that Mr. Armstrong’s family

provides.”

“We’d like a little conversation with you, and the conversation must take place in private.”

“In that case, Mr. Dean, you could hardly find a better spot than this.”

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“We’re a kindly set of chaps, and couldn’t think of keeping a hungry man out here.”

“But I’m not very hungry. I took a pocketful of sandwiches with me from the tavern.”

“Nevertheless, you are coming with us, either peaceably, or by force, whichever you choose.”

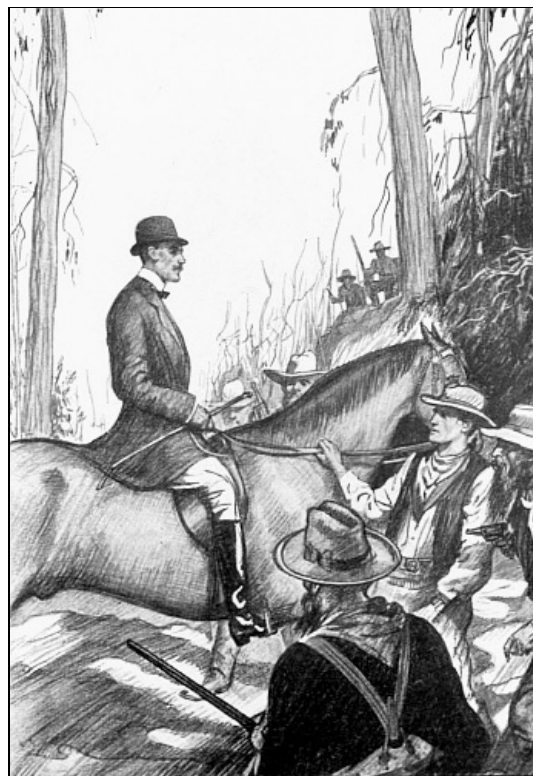
“Oh, quite willingly, of course. I should be ungrateful if I gave you any unnecessary trouble, while accepting your hospitality. I may add that I am unarmed, so if you keep your guns in readiness you need fear no reprisal on my part.”

“That’s all right,” responded Jim. “We’re not easily scared, but are prepared to protect ourselves should you try any funny business.”

“Is Peter going to take my horse to the farm?”

“Sure; your horse will be put in its old quarters, and will be well taken care of.”

“Then I should be glad if Peter would oblige me by telling Miss Armstrong that I have arrived safely, and will give her an account of my journey when next I have the pleasure of meeting her.”



“I may add that I am unarmed, so if you keep your guns in readiness you need fear no reprisal on my part.”

Lord Stranleigh Abroad [Page 242.]

“I’m afraid Peter can’t carry any messages; indeed, it’s not at all necessary. I’ve told Miss Armstrong that your horse will be brought back, and that I saw you off on the east-bound train, which is quite true. You’ve brought back the horse, and you did go east on the train. Miss Armstrong thinks you have become tired of waiting for her father, and that you’ve gone either to Chicago or New York.”

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“Am I to regard myself as your prisoner, then?”

“Prisoner is an ugly word, and we are not entitled to call ourselves gaolers, but if you wouldn’t mind looking on it in that way, it’s all the same to us.”

“Well, truthful Jim, I’m your man in every sense of the word. Let us begin our amicable journey. I yearn for the bunk house.”

“You will keep silent? No shouting or calling for help? There’s no help to be had anyhow, and a noise would merely alarm the women.”

“I recognise the necessity for silence, and I shall make no outcry. Indeed, my whole future conduct while with you will be governed by the strictest secrecy. When I get tired of the bunk house I shall merely cut all your throats while you are asleep, and will do it in the quietest and gentlest manner.”

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Jim laughed.

"I guess we can take care of our throats, but I'm much obliged for the suggestion, which may come in handy if you get funny, as I said before."

They reached the bunk house by a circuitous route. A fine fire of logs was blazing on the ample hearth, for even in summer a fire was good to look at when night came on, at that elevation.

When Stranleigh sat down to supper, he regretted more than ever the civilised fare of the farm house. The menu was rough, but plentiful, and they all sat together at the long table. A meal was a serious event, and they partook of it in silence. It was evident that the men were going to adopt full precautions, for while they supped one of them sat by the door, a rifle over his knees. He came in for the second course, and another took his place. After the table was cleared, they all sat round the big fire, and smoked.

Remembering that the best tobacco in the world came from the south-east of their country, the aroma of the weed they had chosen was not as grateful to Stranleigh's nostrils as might have been expected, so partly for good fellowship, and partly for his own protection, he presented each with a fine Havana cigar, such as would be welcomed in a London club, where pipes are not permitted. The men amiably accepted this contribution, but each put the cigar in his pocket against a future occasion, and went on with his pipe. Cheap as was the tobacco they were using, it was naturally scarce among men who had received no money for some months.

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"I don't wish to appear unduly inquisitive," began their guest, "but now that we have all night before us, would you mind telling me why I am thus taken charge of by strangers on whom I have no claim?"

"There are several reasons," replied Jim, who was always the spokesman for the company, "and we are quite willing to mention them. You appear to be a person of some intelligence—"

"Thanks," interjected Stranleigh.

Jim went on, unheeding the interruption—"and so perhaps you know that we suspect you of being in cohorts with Ricketts."

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"Does 'cohoots' mean co-partnership?"

"Something of that sort. You partly persuaded us that wasn't so, but I followed you to make sure. Perhaps you remember that I caught you coming out from Ricketts' office. You made for that office the moment you reached Bleachers."

"Pardon me, but I went first to the hotel."

"Yes; and you enquired there where Ricketts hung out."

"Certainly; but that's in my favour. It showed that so far from being in the employ of the lawyer, I didn't even know where he lived."

"It was a good bluff."

"It's very circumstantial evidence of my innocence. But for the sake of argument, I will admit that I am in 'cohoots,' as you call it, with the estimable Ricketts. What next?"

"The next thing is that you learnt from Miss Armstrong of our intention to go into Bleachers and shoot up the town, including Ricketts."

"That is true."

"You didn't like the plan and said so."

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"That also is correct."

"You said it should be stopped, not knowing the ways of this country."

"Certainly. Desirable as may be the shooting up of Bleachers, the odds are too strongly against you."

"Oh, we'll chance that. But the next thing you do is to put your funny clothes on, get out your horse, and ride directly to Mr. Ricketts. You are an informer."

"An informer is always a despicable character, Mr. Dean. What's the next item in the indictment?"

"Don't you think that's enough? Men have been hanged for less. An informer is the most poisonous wretch in the world except a horse thief."

"Then I am in danger of being hanged?"

"You sure are."

"Isn't there any way in which I can compound my felony?"

"Well, I don't quite know what confounding a felony is, but you're the sleekest fellow I ever met, and if you think you can palaver us to let you go, you've made the mistake of your life."

"I shouldn't think of attempting such a thing. I am merely endeavouring to discover your state of mind. You're strong on muscle, Jim, and I admire your build, but I'm beginning to doubt whether your brain equals your frame. There was a time when your equipment would have been victorious, but those days are long since past. Nowadays it's brain that wins every time, and in every country. Physical force has had to give way before it. Jimmy, my boy, you're out of date."

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"Brain isn't going to help you any," said Dean, evidently annoyed by these strictures on his mentality.

"Perhaps it won't, but if there was a corresponding brain in your head, I'd appeal to it, and probably win. Are all your men here as stupid as you, Jim?"

Jim rose up from his chair, a forbidding frown on his brow.

"Look here, stranger," he called out, "I've had enough of that line of talk."

"Oh no, you haven't. Please sit down. This line of talk is only beginning, and I say, Jim, lay aside that pipe, and smoke the Havana cigar. It will put reason into your head if anything will."

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Some of the company laughed, and Jim sat down, seeing that his opponent failed to show any fear at his captors' threatening attitude. He tried to change the course of the conversation into a less personal channel.

"You see, Mr. Stranleigh, we're short on tobacco, and I want to keep this cigar until to-morrow. I can tell by the smell it's a good one."

"That's all right," said Stranleigh, "I have plenty more of them down at the house, and when they are finished, I'll telegraph east for a fresh supply. If you will let me know your favourite brand of tobacco, I'll order a ton of it at the same time."

For a moment Jim's eyes twinkled, then they narrowed into their usual caution.

"Was that what you meant by confusing a penalty? Well, stranger, it doesn't go here. We ain't to be bought, even by a ton of tobacco."

"I hadn't thought of either buying or bribing you," said Stranleigh, "therefore we will get back to our original subject, the difference between brain and muscle. I see here on the table a pack of cards in a deplorably greasy condition. If you were playing a game with an opponent who was beating you, would you shoot him?"

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"Yes," promptly replied Jim, "if I found he was cheating."

"Whereupon his friends would lynch you."

"A cheater hasn't any friends."

"Jim, I shouldn't like to sit down to a game with you. You would shoot first, and think afterwards, while I, being unarmed, should be at a disadvantage. That, indeed, is just what you are doing now. If you succeed in holding me here you will spoil my game. What I propose to do is not to attack Ricketts with a gun, but to learn his style of play, and beat him at it. Any confounded fool can shoot off a gun; there's no credit in that. It's a coward's trick."

"You say we'll spoil your game. You may bet your life we will. You daren't tell us what it is."

"Oh yes, I dare, because I have a trick that will quite delude you."

"I know you'll try to do that."

"Exactly. Well, my trick is to tell the truth. The situation is very simple. That morning when from the pit mouth you warned me off the premises, I found Miss Armstrong very much worried because she had learned of your intention to shoot up the town, and could not persuade you to abandon so foolish a project. It then became my duty to prevent you doing what you proposed."

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"Do you think you can?"

"Of course; I knew it was no use attempting to reason with you, so the instant necessity was to get one man of common sense to counteract the stupidity of the bunk house. That I set out to do. I rode to Bleachers, called on Lawyer Ricketts, paid him five dollars down for whatever knowledge he could give me concerning the whereabouts of Mr. Armstrong. He could give me none that I did not already possess. He kept the five dollars, though. You saw me go off in the train. I merely went to the next town, to do some telegraphing that might be more or less secret from Ricketts. A detective agency will find Mr. Armstrong, and hand him two hundred dollars, asking him at the same time to make for home by the earliest train. Then, unless I'm much mistaken, Mr. Armstrong will see the idiocy of what you propose, and will prevent you from carrying out your scheme."

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Jim pondered over this announcement for some minutes. At last he broke the silence.

"What you say may be true, but I don't believe a word of it. It's more likely Ricketts is your boss, and you went in to report to him and tell him what we intended to do. Then he'll see that Bleachers is prepared to meet us."

"Yes; that would be a simple way of turning the trick. There are good points about it, but it

happens not to be my way, as you will learn in a few days when Mr. Armstrong returns.”

Again Jim meditated for a while, and finally rose, walked to the further end of the room, and engaged for some minutes in earnest cogitation with his fellows, carried on in tones so low that Stranleigh could not hear. Resuming his seat, he spoke with deliberation—

“You want us to believe that you are a friend of Mr. Armstrong?”

“I don’t care whether you believe it or not. I can hardly be a friend of Stanley Armstrong, because I’ve never seen him.” [Pg 253]

“Well, we’ll put your good intentions to the test. When Mr. Armstrong gets here, he will have no money. Stony broke, that’s what he is. Now, unless we shoot ‘em up in Bleachers when they try to sell his place, Armstrong will lose it. We take it you are a rich man. Will you promise to lend him enough money to hold this ranch, and run the mine?”

“No; I won’t,” said Stranleigh, with decision.

“All right. Then you stay here until you cough up that cash. Even if Armstrong comes, he will never know you’re here, because we shall tell him that you’ve gone East. Nobody else knows where you are, so there isn’t any chance of a search being made.”

“This is rank brigandage,” remarked Stranleigh.

“I guess that’s the right title, but a man who brags so much of his brains as you do, ought to see that if we’re ready to shoot up a town, we won’t stop at such a trifle as brigandage.”

“That’s so. And now, gentlemen, I’m tired after my long journey, and I think we’ve talked a great deal to very little purpose, so if you’ll show me what bunk I am to occupy, I’ll turn in.” [Pg 254]

“There are six unused bunks, Mr. Stranleigh, and you can take your choice. There’s nothing mean about us.”

Stranleigh made his selection, and rough as the accommodation was, he slept as soundly as ever he had done in his London palace, or his luxurious yacht.

Although the Earl of Stranleigh was naturally an indolent man, the enforced rest of the next few days grew very irksome. He had expected the guard set over him to relax as time went on, but this was not the case. The genial Jim saw to that, and it was soon evident to Stranleigh that Dean ruled his company with an iron hand. Such casual examination of the premises as he was able to make impressed him more and more with the difficulty of escape. Had the structure been built of logs, there might have been some hope, but the imperviousness of the thick stone walls was evident to the most stupid examiner. The place was lit in daytime by two slits, one at each gable, which were without panes, and narrow, so that they might as much as possible keep out the rain. No man could creep through, even if he could reach the height at which they were placed. During the day the stout door, fit to encounter a battering ram, was open, but a guard sat constantly at the sill, with a rifle across his knees. At night it was strongly locked. Stranleigh was handicapped by the fact that heretofore he had never been required to think out any difficult problem for himself. He had merely to give the order, and other people did his thinking for him, and when a plan was formed, there were others to carry it out, being well paid for doing so. Thus it happened that the means of escape were so obvious that a ten year old boy might have discovered them. [Pg 255]

Each evening passed very pleasantly, for Stranleigh was a good story-teller, and had many interesting tales to relate. In spite of the fact that his gaolers were unanimous in their opinion that Stranleigh was a useless encumbrance upon earth, they began rather to like him. One night Stranleigh asked Jim if anything had yet been heard of Mr. Armstrong, and Dean, after hesitating a moment, replied that there was so far no news of him or from him. [Pg 256]

“I’m sorry for Armstrong,” said Stranleigh, more as if talking to himself than to anyone else. “Poor fellow, away from home all this time, and yet compelled to support six stalwart loafers without commonsense enough to do the obvious thing.”

“What is the obvious thing?” asked Dean.

“Why, to work, of course. There’s your mine; you’ve got plenty of dynamite to go on with, and yet you lounge about here not earning enough to keep yourselves in tobacco. If there is silver in that hole, you could by this time have had enough out to buy the ranch and furnish your own working capital. You say you are partners in the scheme, but you seem to be merely a blunderheaded lot of hired men, determined not to do any work.”

Jim answered with acerbity— [Pg 257]

“If you weren’t a fool you’d know we’d gone already as far as hand work can go. We need a steam engine and a crusher.”

“A steam engine?” echoed Stranleigh. “What on earth would you have to pay for coal, with railway haulage, and the cost of getting it out here from the line? Why, right there, rushing past you, is all the power you need. You’ve only to make a water-wheel, with a straight log, thrown across the falls as axle, and there you are. Pioneers have done that sort of thing since civilisation began, and here you don’t need even to build a dam.”

Jim was about to make an angry retort when the company were scattered by a roar and a heavy

fall of soot on the log fire. The chimney was ablaze, but that didn't matter in the least, as the house was fireproof. In a short time the flames had died out, and the party gathered round the fire once more.

"Well," said Jim, "go on with your pretty advice."

Stranleigh replied dreamily, gazing into the fire.

"Oh, well, I think my advice doesn't amount to much, as you hinted. It is none of my affair. You are a most capable body of men, I have no doubt, only the fact has been concealed from me up to date. I find I am developing the vice of talking too much, so I'm going to turn in. Good-night!"

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But the fall of soot had suggested to Stranleigh a method of escape.

VII.—THE END OF THE CONTEST.

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A wood fire is an evanescent thing, having none of the calm determination of coal combustion. A wood fire requires constant replenishing, and that in the bunk house did not receive this attention. When the men, tired with doing nothing, overcome by the lassitude enduring an empty day had caused, turned into sleep, the wood fire, left to itself, crumbled into a heap of ashes. The guarding of Stranleigh became more perfunctory as time passed. He proved to be a model prisoner, and usually the sentinel at the door fell into peaceful slumber as night wore on. On the particular evening Stranleigh chose for his attempt, Jim Dean sat on the chair against the door. Jim's jaw worked so much during the day, he talked so incessantly, emptying his mind of all it contained, that he was naturally exhausted when his turn for watching came. Each of the men slumbered more or less soundly at his post, but the confident Jim outdid them all, so Stranleigh selected him as the man destined to hold the empty bag.

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It was two hours after midnight when his lordship slipped down from his bunk. The fire had long since gone out, and the stone chimney was reasonably cool. The climbing of that ample flue presented no difficulty to an athletic young man who in his time had ascended the Matterhorn. The inside of the chimney offered to the amateur sweep walls of rough stone, which projected here and there, forming an effective, if unequal ladder. He attained the top with such ease that he wondered he had remained so long a prisoner. Descending the roof silently, he let himself down to the top of the lean-to which acted as kitchen and supply store, and dropped from that elevation lightly to the ground. It was a night of clear moonlight, and Stranleigh smiled to think how nearly he must represent the popular idea of the devil, covered as he was with soot from head to foot.

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He made directly down the hill to the farm house by the stream, and risked a few minutes of time in washing his face in the rapid current. He now took off his boots, the better to enact the part of burglar. The doors of the house, he knew, were never locked. First he secured his favourite magazine rifle and a large quantity of cartridges, then as, after all, he was entitled to the board he paid for, he penetrated softly to the kitchen. Here he secured a couple of loaves of bread and a cooked ham, together with some other things he wanted, including a supply of tobacco, and thus overloaded as he had rarely been in his life before, he stole softly outside, slipped his feet into his boots, and slowly climbed the hill to the silver cavern. Depositing within his goods and chattels, he examined his store carefully to learn whether there was anything more he needed to stand a siege.

Bright as was the moonlight outside, the cavern was pitch dark, so Stranleigh determined on another expedition to the house, and he brought back a bunch of candles and an armful of bedclothes.

"Now for the night's work," he said to himself, and having lit a candle, which he placed at the remote end of the cave, he began picking up stones, and with them building a wall across the mouth of the pit. No Roman wall was ever built with such care, and no Roman wall ever contained within itself such possibilities of wholesale obliteration, because the structure was intersticed with sticks of dynamite, which Stranleigh carried with the most cautious tenderness from the rear to the front of the cavern. When his task was completed the moon had gone down, and the misty, luminous grey of the eastern sky betokened the approach of dawn. The young man was thoroughly tired, and with a sigh of relief he stretched himself out on the bedclothes he had brought from the house.

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The early sun shining on his face awakened him. He knew from experience that the bunk house men were not afflicted with the vice of early rising. There was no aperture in their habitation, unless the door was open, through which the sun might shine upon them. He was therefore not surprised that no one was visible anywhere near the sleeping quarters. So he breakfasted in peace, alternating slices of bread with slices of ham, thus constructing some admirable sandwiches.

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A providential jug, which doubtless in its time had contained whisky, was one of the utensils left when the mine was abandoned. Stranleigh took this, and stepping over the dangerous wall, filled it three or four times at the rushing cataract, rinsing out all indication of its former use. He brought it back, filled with very clear and cold water. He could not help thinking as he returned what an excellent place the waterfall would be for the washing of dishes, if a person ran the risk

of standing upon spray-drenched, slippery rock ledges.

Stranleigh sat down where he could see the enemy's quarters, and carefully examined his rifle, assured himself that the magazine was full, then with the weapon over his knees in the fashion adopted by his recent gaolers, watched the bunk house patiently, wishing he had a morning paper to while away the time.

The laggard sentinel was the first to rouse himself. The broad door opened, and Jim Dean, palpably bewildered, stepped out. With hand shading his eyes he minutely examined the landscape, slowly turning his head from left to right as he scrutinised the distant horizon and the ground intervening. Stranleigh, kneeling, rested his rifle on the top of the wall, and as Jim's left ear, a rather prominent feature, became fully visible, the young man fired. [Pg 264]

Jim's action instantaneously verified the Indian romances of Stranleigh's youth. He sprang clear up into the air and clapped a hand upon his wounded ear. He was at that moment the most astonished man on the western hemisphere. His first instinct being to bolt for cover, he did so without pausing to close the door, which opened outwards, and this broad piece of woodwork now offered a much more prominent target than Jim's ear had done a moment before.

Stranleigh, exercising a care that seemed unnecessary with so big a target, fired out the cartridges of his magazine, then immediately restocked it, and shot away the second charge. Putting in a third load, he sat there with his customary nonchalance, awaiting the turn of events. In that clear atmosphere, and with his sharp vision, he saw that he had accomplished his intention, and had punctured the letter "S" on the panel of the open door. [Pg 265]

Meanwhile, there was commotion in the bunk house. The first sharp report, accompanied by Jim's yell, woke every man within. The subsequent fusilade engendered a belief that the enemy was in possession of a Maxim gun, and brought every man to the floor, thankful that he was under better cover than if he stood behind the door, through the panel of which all the bullets had penetrated.

"How did he escape?" demanded one, addressing Jim, who was holding his left hand to his ear.

"I don't know," said the wounded man ruefully. "You can search me."

"Seems from that shooting that we'd better search outside. What in the fiend's name made him batter the door?"

"Sorry he left us, I suppose," muttered Dean, grimly. "Knocking because he wanted to come in again."

"How did he get his gun?"

"Hanged if I know," said the questioned man, impatiently. [Pg 266]

"But you were on guard. You ought to know something about it."

"Look here," said Jim. "There's no use in talking. He got out some way, and he's got his gun some way. He's holding us up, and we must make terms with him."

"But where is he?"

"I tell you I don't know! The bullet came from the direction of the mine. Now, one of you boys throw up your hands, and go outside and hail him."

At this command, Jim met the first rebellion against his authority.

"Go outside yourself. It is you who have brought all this upon us. You shot him through the shoulder; you proposed capturing him, and it was you who fell asleep last night and let him escape."

Jim did not combat their charges.

"All right," he said. "I'll go out, and you sit here and shiver while I enjoy a little conversation with him."

Raising his hands above his head, Dean stepped across the threshold into the open, and stood like an oriental about to begin his prayers. He saw at once the wall that had been built during the night, and then caught sight of Stranleigh standing behind it. Pulling out a white handkerchief, and waving it, Dean proceeded towards the mine. [Pg 267]

"Have you got a revolver?" shouted Stranleigh.

"No," answered Dean.

"Then put down your hands, and approach as a Christian should."

Jim obeyed.

"Now stand where you are," said Stranleigh, when the other was within four or five yards of the wall. "I see your ear is bleeding. That was rather a neat shot of mine, don't you think?"

"It was," admitted Dean, without enthusiasm.

"When you shot at my shoulder, you had a bigger mark."

"Oh, not so very much," growled Dean. "My ears are celebrated for their size."

"You'd better wrap it up in this handkerchief," commented Stranleigh, rolling it up in a ball, and flinging it towards Jim. The wounded man tied it round his voluminous ear.

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"And now," said Stranleigh, "get through with your parley as soon as possible, then go to Miss Armstrong, who will very expertly attend to your hurt. But in order to win the privilege of surgical treatment, you must recognise that you are a prisoner."

"A prisoner?" echoed Dean.

"Certainly. You must give me your word you will say nothing to Miss Armstrong to show that I have had a hand in the game. Make whatever excuse you like for the disaster, and then get back to the bunk house, tell your fellows the condition of the game as far as we have gone. I will allow you five minutes after your return to show those chaps the letter 'S' I have perforated in the door. They are a very unbelieving lot, and I wish to gain their affection and respect. Without hurting anybody I mean to prove that I am a dead shot. I'm well provisioned here, and prepared to stand a siege. Until Mr. Armstrong returns, not one of you will be allowed outside the ch[^]let. Don't be misled by the fact that you outnumber me six to one. I hold a magazine rifle, possess an ample supply of ammunition, and have just given evidence of the rapidity with which reloading can be performed."

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"Yes," said Dean, meditatively, "your position would be bull strong and hog tight, if you had a chum with you who could shoot as well as you do. But as it is, you've nobody to relieve you, and a man must sleep. It will only take one of us to defeat you. We've no magazine rifles and don't need none. I'll undertake the job myself."

"How do you propose to do it?"

"That would be telling," said Jim, craftily.

"Why not?" answered Stranleigh. "I'm placing my cards on the table. Why don't you do the same? I'm not yearning for war and bloodshed, but have inaugurated a sort of Hague tribunal. There were two things I determined to accomplish when I broke jail. I hope that wounded ear hasn't impaired your hearing, so that you may listen with attention. It's always as well to know what your enemy desires."

"I'm listening," said Jim.

"The first thing was to shoot you through the leg or the arm or the ear, choosing some spot that was not vital. This in return for your shooting me. One good turn deserves another, you know. That part of my programme I have accomplished."

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"What's the other part?"

"The second is to keep you gentlemen in prison just as long as you kept me in prison. One good imprisonment deserves another. Now will you tell me what you intend to do?"

"No; I won't."

"That's mean of you, Jim; secretive, over-cautious and that sort of thing. I'm not so chary and so will give you the information. There are only two portions of the night during which you can come out unnoticed; before the moon rises and after it sets. You will steal out and take up a position where you can see the barricade when day begins to dawn. You'll need to chose a spot a long way off, because the explosion, when it comes, will wreck everything in the neighbourhood."

"What explosion?"

"The dynamite explosion. This wall is built of rock intersticed with those dynamite cartridges of yours. It is very likely you will obliterate the farm-house."

"I'll obliterate you, anyway."

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"Quite so, but at a tremendous cost, because whatever the fate of Mr. Armstrong's residence, the doom of the bunk house is certain. You may be outside that danger, but you won't be free of another. You suppose, doubtless, that I shall be asleep in the cavern. As a matter of fact I shall be sleeping placidly under the stars, quite out of reach of the main disaster. Your first shot will awaken me. Now, it is by no means certain that your first shot will send off the dynamite. You may have to fire half a dozen times, and your best rifle is an old breech-loader. I use smokeless powder, and you don't. I could pepper away at you for half an hour and you'd never know where the bullets were coming from. The smoke from your rifle would give *you* away at once. When I fire at you next time, Jim, I shall aim at a more vital point, because, my dear boy, the person who sets off that dynamite is a murderer. So before you put your plan into operation, just consult your comrades and explain to them its disadvantages."

Dean stood there meditating for a few moments before he spoke.

"I'm very much obliged to you," he said at last, "for telling me what you mean to do. We'll change that plan a little, and come out of the bunk house together. We'll search the country for you, and so won't need to blow up the mine."

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"That's a much more humane expedient, and will prevent unnecessary loss of life. I shall be lying

quiet under whatever cover I can find. Your crowd will perambulate the locality, and I may remind you that you are no lightfooted Cinderellas. A herd of elephants would make less noise. I shall see you long before you see me, and I leave the result to your own imagination. And now, Jimmy, take the advice of a true friend. Your time to act was when you were snoring at that door and I was climbing the chimney. Once you allowed me to get my rifle, you had permitted opportunity to pass you, because I am a good shot, and I came West in order to shoot. When a person accustomed to downy beds of ease slumbers peacefully, as I did this morning, on hard and jagged rocks thinly disguised by a blanket, with my right ear against a dynamite cartridge, there's nothing the matter with his nerves, is there?"

"No; there isn't," said Dean, with conviction.

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"Now, what you chaps want is not a battle, but an armistice. Leave well enough alone, I say, and accept the *status quo*. If you remain in the bunk house, you are as safe as in a Presbyterian church."

Jim did not reply, but deliberated, his open palm against his bandaged ear.

"Hurt?" asked Stranleigh.

"Yes, it does," admitted Jim, ruefully.

"Well, my shoulder hurt a good deal after you fired at me. Now, I'll tell you what I'll do, Jim. Next time I shoot at you, I'll take the other ear. You're determined to prove yourself a brigand, or a pirate, or something of that sort, and as pirates always wear earrings, that will put you in a position to adopt them. What do you say to my proposal for an armistice?"

"I can't answer for the rest of the boys without consulting them. If we need an armistice or a *status quo*, why, I suppose we ought to have them."

"All right. If your ear hurts, the sooner you get it attended to, the better. You go directly down to the house and see Miss Armstrong, and you can reflect upon the situation while she is dressing the wound. Deep thinking will take your mind from the pain. Then go up and consult the company. Come and let me know what they decide. Meanwhile, I'll guarantee that no one comes out of that bunk house without being shot at."

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"Mr. Stranleigh, I'll do what you say, but I'll change the order. I'll go first to our shack, and warn the boys. That's only fair, for they're watching from that door, and if they see me going to the house they may think it's all right, and come outside. After talking with them, I'll visit Miss Armstrong, and then come back here to tell you what the boys say."

"Yes, Jim; that's a better plan than mine. But first give me your word that you will take no advantage of this respite until war. An armistice, you know, is a cessation of hostilities."

"You mean that there will be no shenanigan? I give you my word."

The wounded man made his way to the bunk house. Shortly afterwards Stranleigh saw him emerge, and go towards the homestead. After a longer interval he came slowly up towards the fortress, his ear neatly bandaged in white linen, which showed up, as one might say, like a small flag of truce.

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"Well, what did Miss Armstrong say about the wounded ear?"

"She says it's about as serious as the sting of a bee, and won't hurt much longer than that would, and will be cured nearly as soon."

"That's first-rate, and relieves my conscience, which has been troubling me, because I'd much rather smite a man on the ear with my fist than with a bullet. For the same reason I hope you found your messmates undergoing a spasm of common sense."

"They agreed with me that it wasn't very healthy to take outdoor exercise for a while. If we decide to begin fighting again, we'll give you twelve hours' notice. Will that suit you?"

"I don't know that it does, quite. I want you to promise that you will not break loose either until Mr. Armstrong returns, or the auction is over."

"The boys wouldn't agree to that, Mr. Stranleigh. We're bound to attend that auction."

Stranleigh sighed.

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"Very good," he conceded. "I must content myself with what you offer. I accept your proposal, for I feel certain that Mr. Armstrong will return before the ranch is sold. So good-bye. Give my love to the boys."

Stranleigh watched the retreating figure until it disappeared into the bunk house. A moment later the perforated door was drawn shut, and then he rolled up the bedclothes into a bundle, and deposited it at the further end of the cavern. This done, he took his rifle under his arm, crossed the barricade, and strolled down to the farm-house. Miss Armstrong greeted him with surprise.

"I thought you had gone to New York," she said.

"I took the train east, but only to the next station from Bleachers."

"You've not been stopping at that wretched hotel in Bleachers ever since?"

"Oh no; I received a pressing invitation from some friends of mine to be their guest, with a prospect of a little shooting, so I've been staying with them ever since."

"Did you have a pleasant time?"

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"Oh, excellent, and I heard more entertaining stories than ever I listened to in a similar period."

"Good shooting?"

"First rate. Limited in quantity, but of finest quality. Indeed, I may boast of a record; I hit everything I aimed at. Camp fare, however, left a good deal to be desired, so you may imagine how glad I am to return."

"I'm very pleased to have an opportunity of giving you something better. How would you like some nice broiled trout, freshly caught this morning?"

"Oh, heavenly!" cried Stranleigh, enthusiastically. "I haven't had anything but bread and salt pork since I saw you. Who caught the trout?"

"I did. I went down the river early this morning. I must have had a premonition that you would return, famished for trout, and I had quite an adventure, or rather, plunged into a mystery which I have not yet solved. I heard the sound of firing; first a single shot, then a fusilade. I could not tell from whence the sound came. I hurried home with my basket, but there was no one in sight. After a while Jim came in, very much crestfallen, it seemed to me, with his ear tied up clumsily in a handkerchief. He had been shot through the ear, and of course I came to his aid at once. With a woman's curiosity, I asked him how the accident happened. Now, one of Jim's infirmities is that he can only tell the truth when it suits his convenience."

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"Many of us are like that," said Stranleigh.

"Well, this time it didn't suit his convenience."

"What did he say?"

"That the boys were having a sort of shooting match. I told him I had heard the firing, and feared that there had been a battle of some sort. He said it was the first shot that did for him. They had some bet on as to who could fire the quickest at a flying mark. In his hurry to get ready he had mishandled his gun, and sent a bullet through his ear. The other men had then fired almost simultaneously."

"Miss Armstrong, I fear you are too sceptical. Why shouldn't that be a true story?"

"Mr. Stranleigh, you quite underrate my intelligence. The wound in Jim's ear was not caused by the gun he held. In the first place, his ear would have been blackened with gunpowder, and likely would have been partly torn off. Secondly, a mishandled gun would have fired upwards. The bullet that wounded him was fired from a distance by someone higher up than the spot where Jim stood. The wound was clean cut, slightly inclining downwards. Besides all that, Jim's bullet, coming from an old-fashioned rifle, would make a bigger hole. I know that, for you remember I tended your shoulder, through which his bullet had gone."

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"By Jove, Miss Armstrong, if Sherlock Holmes had a daughter, she would be just about your age. Was there anything else?"

"Yes; I looked at the handkerchief in which he had bound his ear. It was of a finer cambric than we have ever seen in this district, or indeed, than I have seen anywhere else. The corner was embroidered with a very delicately-worked crest."

"A crest?" said Stranleigh, rather breathlessly.

"I asked Jim where he had got this handkerchief. He seemed confused, but said he had always had it. Bought it once at a five-cent store in Denver."

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Stranleigh could not refrain from laughing.

"You think it cost more than five cents?"

"Yes; I am sure it cost more than twenty-five."

"Perhaps he stole it?"

"Jim might shoot a man, but he'd never steal."

"I think that when you discover the owner of that handkerchief, you will have solved the mystery," remarked Stranleigh calmly.

"I think so, too," said the girl quietly. "Now I am going to cook your trout."

The three days following were among the most enjoyable Stranleigh had ever spent. He asked Miss Armstrong to show him the portion of the river in which she had caught those delicious trout. Heretofore, she had used a baited hook when fishing, landing her spoil with a trout pole, but now she was to be initiated in the delicate mysteries of fly fishing. Stranleigh remembered the story told of an English official sent to view the debateable land adjoining the far western

boundary of Canada who reported the territory useless, because the fish wouldn't rise to the fly. He wondered what lure the official used, for here they rose readily enough, and fought like demons until Miss Armstrong deftly lifted them from the water in the new-fangled landing net, the like of which she had never seen before. [Pg 281]

But in spite of the excellent sport he was enjoying, Stranleigh became more and more anxious as time went on. Nothing had been heard from Stanley Armstrong. The fisher began to fear that the detective had failed in his search. On the morning of the fourth day he dressed in his ordinary tweed suit. The riding costume attracted more attention than was altogether convenient. He put in his pocket an automatic revolver of the latest construction; light, accurate and deadly. The day of the auction was drawing uncomfortably near, and he was determined that his journey should not be interrupted, as his former ride had been. Aside from this, he expected to carry with him a large amount of money, and if any word of that got abroad, he knew a holdup was quite within the range of possibility. The coterie confined in the bunk house would doubtless learn that they were their own gaolers, and with that gang once free upon the landscape, he anticipated interruption which, if successful, would completely nullify his plans. [Pg 282]

"Are you going fishing to-day?" asked Miss Armstrong, when he came downstairs. He had appeared unexpectedly soon that morning. The young woman was always an early riser.

"Fishing!" echoed Stranleigh. "Yes, in a manner of speaking. Isn't there a text which refers to fishers of men? I'm going fishing for your father. We should have had him here before this, but now the need of him becomes imperative. I imagine that a telegram awaits me in Bleachers. If not, I must communicate with New York, and wait for a reply."

Stranleigh walked up the hill to the bunk house, and rapped at the panel with the butt of his riding whip. Dean himself threw open the door, and he could not conceal his astonishment at seeing the young man standing there, apparently unarmed.

"Good morning, Jim," said Stranleigh cordially.

"I wish to enjoy a few minutes' conversation with the company before leaving for Bleachers." [Pg 283]

"None of the company are out of their bunks yet, except myself, but I guess they're wide enough awake to hear what you say. Won't you come inside?"

"Thank you," said Stranleigh, stepping across the threshold; then, to the sleeping beauties—"The top of the morning to you! Early to bed and late to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise. Has wisdom come to you since I left? Do you still intend to shoot up Bleachers on auction day?"

"You bet we do," said Dean.

Stranleigh seated himself upon the chair he had formerly occupied.

"How did you propose to get out?"

"By the same way you escaped," responded Dean with determination.

"What an inconvenient exit! I speak from sooty experience. Why not have gone by the doorway?"

"We didn't want to get shot," said Jim.

"There was no danger of that. I have been spending my days in fishing, and my nights in sound sleep." [Pg 284]

"Do you mean to say," cried Jim, "that there's been nobody on guard?"

"No; you've been as free as air to go where you pleased."

Dean laughed heartily, and the others joined him. The joke was on them, but they seemed to enjoy rather than resent it.

"You were right about brain and muscle," observed Jim at last.

Stranleigh ignored the compliment.

"I've got a proposal to make to you men," he went on. "I'm off to Bleachers to do some telegraphing, trying to learn the whereabouts of Mr. Armstrong, who has not yet put in an appearance. The sale takes place day after to-morrow."



“Put down your hands and approach as a Christian should.”

*Lord Stranleigh
Abroad]*

*[Page Chapter
VII.*

Stranleigh paused in his recital. He noticed a stealthy movement among the bunkers. He had observed that the first to sit up cast a longing glance at the rifles stacked in the corner, and it seemed to him that a simultaneous rush towards them was going to take place. [Pg 285]

“As you know, gentlemen,” he went on, “I have an objection to shooting as a settlement of any legal question, but if shooting has to be done, I am quite prepared for it, and the inhabitants of Bleachers will regret provoking me to a fusilade.”

He took from his pocket the neat little automatic pistol.

“I don’t suppose,” he went on, “that you ever saw anything exactly like this. It will simply rain bullets, and I can re-load before any of those Bleachers men can get his hand to his hip pocket. Next to the Maxim gun, it’s the most deadly object in existence.” Casually he cast his eye along the bunks. Each man had withdrawn the leg that had been quietly reaching for the floor. Stranleigh still fondled his weapon.

“Just before you captured me, I had sent to New York for a considerable sum of money, which was to reach me by express. I thought it better to have no dealings with the bank, as I didn’t wish Ricketts to learn what I was doing. I expect that sum of money is at this moment resting in the express office, and on the day of the sale I shall have more currency on my person than is perhaps quite safe to carry. I therefore wish to engage you as a bodyguard, if you agree to certain conditions. I shall expect you all in Bleachers day after to-morrow, and shall pay each of you fifty dollars for the day, and so that there may be no mistake, I tender you the money now. Do you agree?” [Pg 286]

“What are the conditions?” asked Jim, cautiously.

“First, you will keep clear of the tavern, and not drink.”

“That’s easy. What next?”

“You will not shoot until I give the word of command, and until I have emptied my pistol.”

Jim consulted with his fellows, then turned to Stranleigh.

“We agree,” he said.

“Right you are.” Stranleigh rose, took from his pocket-book six fifty-dollar bills, and laid them on the table.

“Look here,” cried Dean, “we don’t want any money for this job.”

“I’m quite sure of that, but six honest men are as much entitled to their pay as is a dishonest lawyer like Ricketts. So good-bye, until I see you at Bleachers day after to-morrow.” [Pg 287]

Stranleigh went down to the house, mounted his horse, and rode away.

He had accomplished little more than half the distance when he perceived a horseman coming towards him. They approached one another with some caution. Stranleigh would have passed in silence had not the other accosted him.

"Hello, stranger!" he said. "You from the ranch?"

"Yes."

"Been stopping there?"

"Yes."

"How's everything? Folks all well?"

"Yes; they were when I left. Is there any chance that you are Mr. Armstrong?"

"That's my name."

"I'm very glad to meet you, sir. I'm Stranleigh, who telegraphed the detective to find you and hand you two hundred dollars, begging you to get home in a hurry."

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"Well, Mr. Stranleigh, all that was done, and here I am, but as for paying back that two hundred dollars and expenses, I don't see how I am to do it. I'm broke."

"So I understand. Do you know your place is to be disposed of by forced sale day after tomorrow?"

"Yes; they've got me with my hands up."

"I don't think so. I'm going to attend that sale, and probably our friend Ricketts will regret the fact. Now, you turn your horse round and accompany me to the settlement. I've got some money coming by express, and being rather a stupid sort of person, it never occurred to me until half an hour ago that I'd need to be identified before I got my hands on that express package. So if you'll take my word that I am Stranleigh, we'll collar the currency and attend the sale. I have a letter of introduction to you from Mr. Banks, of New York, but I left it at your house."

"That's all right. I'll go surety that you're the man. I'd like mighty well to see a little money, even if it belongs to another fellow."

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Armstrong turned his horse, who was not loth to set his face in the other direction, because he belonged to White's Tavern. As the two men jogged along together, Stranleigh explained the situation. Armstrong was silent for some time, evidently in a state of dejection.

"Well, Mr. Stranleigh," he said at last, "as you know, I am quite helpless. I haven't a cent to bless myself nor curse an enemy with. I'm no good as a business man, and the slick way in which those rascals in Chicago separated me from what cash I had would make you laugh at me if you knew how it was done."

"I shouldn't be inclined to laugh. We read in Scripture of the man who fell among thieves, and I imagine Chicago is a good place to find such cattle, although I believe there are a few of them further west. I think that Ricketts, in refusing the money when it was offered to him, exceeded his legal rights."

"Our sharpers out here," said Armstrong, "are always exceeding their legal rights, but they get rich all the same. I confess I haven't so much dependence on legality as a law-abiding citizen should have."

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"Your men on the ranch seem to hold the same opinion. In spite of all I could say, they were determined to make a raid on Bleachers."

"Did you manage to stop them?" enquired Armstrong eagerly.

"I think I did," was the reply.

There had been a flash of hope in Armstrong's eyes, but it now died down to dejection again.

"I am sorry for that," he said.

Stranleigh gazed at him in astonishment.

"You don't mean to say that you approve of such violence?"

"Oh, well," said Armstrong nonchalantly, "when a man's in a corner, he'll do most anything, and at such times a little gun play is not out of place. I'll bet the boys would have stopped that sale."

"Doubtless, but what good would that do?"

"We should gain breathing space, and perhaps Ricketts wouldn't go on with his villainy."

"But it would land all your men in gaol."

"Don't you believe it. The sheriff would have to catch the boys first, and they know every ravine and stream and gully in the mountains, and every trail in the woods, and if Ricketts was sacrificed in the scrimmage, I, for one, wouldn't be chief mourner. These boys might not be much good in Chicago, but they are very useful out here. A scoundrel like Ricketts, who tries legally to

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steal a man's property, takes big chances and runs a lot of risks, and no one knows that better than himself. He has taken advantage of my being away from home."

"It's not too late yet to carry out your plan. Although your men hold to their resolve to visit Bleachers on the day of the sale, they have promised not to shoot until I give the word of command."

"They will be there, then, after all?" cried Armstrong, eagerly.

"Certainly; I have engaged them as bodyguard, because, as I told you, I shall have a considerable sum of money in my possession, and I don't wish to be detached from that cash, either by Chicago methods, or those of Bleachers. I want the sale to go on without any disturbance."

"What's your plan?"

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"I intend to buy the ranch."

"Do you imagine for a moment that you'll be allowed to?"

"How can they prevent me if I've got the cash in my pocket?"

"Why, first thing they'll do is to postpone the sale."

"Has Ricketts power to do that?"

"No; but the sheriff has, and the sheriff is Ricketts' man."

"Official bribery, eh? Are you personally acquainted with the sheriff?"

"Yes; I voted for him."

"Is he a man who would rather do right than wrong?"

"It depends how much money there is in either course."

"Then I think our path is reasonably clear. If Ricketts can bribe him to do wrong, we can bribe him to do right."

Armstrong shook his head doubtfully.

"It's not so easy as you think. He would take our money all right, but he might not deliver the goods. He wouldn't stay bought."

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"That is a useful thing to know. We'll pay him half the money cash down, and the other half when he *has* delivered the goods. Would a hundred dollars be sufficient?"

"Oh, lord, yes! It gives Ricketts a pain when he parts with a ten-dollar bill, so it won't take very much money to compete with him."

"As you know the man, and as it's your ranch that is in jeopardy, you can carry out the negotiations better than a stranger like myself."

"That's so; if I have the cash. A hundred dollars would turn the trick."

"Better take five hundred dollars and be sure of it."

They stopped their horses and made the transfer of money where they stood, as being safer than in the tavern.

Arriving at Bleachers, they found the express office closed for the night, but next day his lordship, with Armstrong as his identifier, secured the package.

The land sale took place in the Agricultural Hall, the largest building in town. Stanley Armstrong's six armed followers arrived in good time, and quite unobtrusively seated themselves in a row on a bench at the rear of the hall. When Stranleigh, accompanied by Armstrong, came in, the half dozen shook hands with their chief, and expressed no more surprise at meeting him than if he had left them the week before. Large as the hall was, it speedily filled up, but Lawyer Ricketts, on entering, as he cast his eye over the assemblage, knew there were few moneyed men among the crowd gathered there, and so anticipated no serious opposition when the bidding began.

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The lawyer was accompanied by two friends; strangers in Bleachers, who took their places beside him on the chairs provided near the auctioneer's desk. Ricketts was an important man, and quite entitled to reserved seats for himself and his friends. Last of all the sheriff entered, and mounted the platform, bowing graciously to the meeting, which was composed of constituents whose votes he would need next year. It was quite evident that the sheriff was a popular man, for there was a round of applause the moment he appeared.

He got down to business without any unnecessary loss of time, reading the documents giving the conditions of the sale, the item on which Stranleigh was relying being that no cheques would be accepted, or credit allowed. Payment must be cash down on the fall of the auctioneer's gavel. This the clever lawyer had insisted upon, to prevent all possibility of his being outbid by someone who desired time for payment. Thus he dug a pit for his own undoing.

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Having finished this reading, the sheriff took a sip from the glass supposed to hold water, and

promptly began—

“You all know the property, gentlemen, so I need not detain you by any lengthy description of it. How much am I offered for Armstrong’s ranch?”

“Three thousand dollars,” said Ricketts.

“Five thousand,” promptly outbid the Earl of Stranleigh.

There was a buzz of interest in the crowd, as if some one had stirred up a nest of bees. They had not expected competition. Ricketts stood up and scrutinised the numerous faces turned towards him, endeavouring to discover from whom the bid came. Then he sat down, and whispered to each of the men beside him. They nodded, and one of them stole quietly out through the door by which the sheriff had entered.

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“He’s gone for more money,” said Stranleigh quietly to Armstrong.

“Five thousand dollars I am bid,” went on the sheriff. “Is there any advance on five thousand dollars?”

His gavel hovered over the table.

“Six thousand,” said Ricketts.

“Ten thousand,” offered Stranleigh, realising that his opponent was playing for time.

“Ten thousand dollars!” echoed the sheriff, then, glancing at the lawyer; “It’s against you, Mr. Ricketts.”

The lawyer hesitated.

“Eleven thousand!” he said at last.

“Fifteen thousand,” bid Stranleigh, promptly.

There were two anxious men in that hall. Stranleigh was wishing he had sent for a hundred thousand dollars. It was evident that Ricketts possessed good backing, but he had no means of knowing whether or not these men had the necessary money actually in hand. Ricketts was the second anxious man, and he was now gazing with apprehension at the door through which his companion had disappeared. He was called to attention by the strident voice of the sheriff.

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“Fifteen thousand dollars is the last bid. Going at fifteen thousand once; going at fifteen thousand twice——”

“Wait a moment, Mr. Sheriff: there’s no hurry.”

“The sale must go on, Mr. Ricketts.”

“Certainly,” replied the lawyer, “but it’s your duty to get as much as you can for the property. We all sympathise very much with our neighbour, Mr. Armstrong, and whatever is paid over and above his debt to me, goes to him.”

“I am aware of that, Mr. Ricketts, and your compassion for Mr. Armstrong does you credit. Still, as I have said before, the sale must go on, and unless there is another bid, I am compelled to knock the property down to the last offer. Fifteen thousand dollars I am bid, and for the third time——”

“Sixteen thousand,” cried Ricketts, taking out a handkerchief, and mopping his brow.

The missing man now re-appeared, and took his place beside the lawyer. The three heads came closer together, and Stranleigh watched them with half-closed eyes, apparently indifferent.

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“The bid is against you, sir,” said the Sheriff. “By the way, what name, please?”

“Stranleigh.”

“Well, Mr. Stranleigh, I’m waiting for your bid.”

“Don’t wait any longer, Mr. Sheriff. I’m anxious to know how much money Mr. Ricketts possesses at the present moment. The ranch belongs to him if he can hand over to you sixteen thousand dollars.”

Down came the gavel on the table.

“Mr. Ricketts, the ranch is yours.”

Mr. Ricketts rose to his feet.

“I ask for a postponement of this sale for a week from to-day.”

“I have no objection,” said the Sheriff, “as of course I shall earn another fee.”

There was a laugh at this, then the Sheriff continued—

“But I cannot postpone the sale without the consent of Mr. Stranleigh. What do you say, Mr. Stranleigh?”

"A postponement would be very inconvenient to me, much as I should like to oblige Mr. Ricketts. I therefore refuse my consent." [Pg 299]

"If the Sheriff is willing," roared Ricketts, "we will postpone without your consent, even if we have to turn you out by force."

"I shouldn't try that if I were you, Mr. Ricketts. There are six friends of mine sitting beside me, who are dead shots, and I don't think this crowd would stand in the way if the first gun were levelled at you. I ask that the sale go peacefully on, Mr. Sheriff."

"There must be a postponement! The Sheriff has control over this meeting!"

"I am counting on that," said Stranleigh, "and I am sure that the Sheriff will adhere strictly to the law. How much money have you collected, Mr. Ricketts?"

"That's none of your business."

"Perhaps not; and so to make everything easy and agreeable to all concerned, I bid seventeen thousand dollars for the property."

"Show your money," demanded Ricketts.

"You wouldn't show yours, so why should I show mine?"

"Knock it down to him, Sheriff. I don't believe he has the cash." [Pg 300]

"Seventeen thousand I am offered. Going at seventeen thousand once; going at seventeen thousand twice; going at seventeen thousand third and last time. Going! Gone!"

Down came the mallet.

"I shall be obliged if you will hand over to me seventeen thousand dollars, Mr. Stranleigh."

"Certainly. With your permission, gentlemen!" and the crowd parted good-naturedly. Stranleigh counted out the money on the Sheriff's table.

Armstrong and his men went home directly the sale was over, but Stranleigh remained until all the legal business was finished, and the documents were in his possession. As he rode back to the ranch, he meditated upon the situation in which he found himself. The object of his trip to the West had been achieved. He had left New York tired of its noise, its heated pavements and other uncomfortable disadvantages. He had thought he would never care to see the metropolis again, but now he was yearning for the atmosphere of a large city; London for choice. He determined to bid farewell at once to the Armstrongs and the bunk house men, then turn his face eastwards. [Pg 301]

Miss Armstrong was amazed to learn his decision.

"But you haven't had even one day's shooting!" she protested.

"Oh, I'll come for that another time," he assured her.

"Before you go away, my father would like to make some arrangement with you about this ranch."

"I shall be very glad to come to an agreement with him."

The girl sped up to the silver mine, where her father was superintending the removal of the dynamite to its proper place, a job requiring some little care. Armstrong accompanied his daughter down to the house, and greeted Stranleigh with eagerness.

"I am anxious to lease this place from you, Mr. Stranleigh, with the option of buying it later on. I am sure I can make money from the silver mine."

"You must apply to the owner of the ranch, Mr. Armstrong."

"The owner!" echoed Armstrong, in some alarm. "You haven't sold the ranch since I saw you, I hope?" [Pg 302]

"No; but like most other men, I am in debt, and I intend to use this property in payment of my obligation."

Armstrong was taken aback by this declaration. Turning to Miss Armstrong, Stranleigh took from his pocket a long, well-filled envelope.

"These, Professor, are all the legal documents necessary to make you the owner of the ranch, including deed and what-not. I am quite incapable of understanding the red tape wound round the transaction, but I am assured it is all right. I tender this in payment of my medical bill."

"Oh," cried the girl, softly. Then she smiled. "As the sensational plays have it, this is too much!"

"Not a bit of it," returned Stranleigh. "You have no idea of the appalling charges made by specialists in New York and London. Besides, this includes payment of Jim's bill. You cured Jim's ear as well as my shoulder, and I am responsible for Jim. His ear is the only shooting I have had since I came to the ranch."

The girl again began to protest, but Stranleigh interrupted. [Pg 303]

"As you are so loth to receive the property, I shall burden it with some conditions. Your father will ask you to mortgage this land to raise money for him. You must refuse that. Keep the ranch in your own name. You have just seen how much trouble has been caused by Ricketts getting his claws on the place. Your father has got, or will get, something between ten and twelve thousand dollars from the proceeds of the sale. Will you put that money into your daughter's hands, Mr. Armstrong?"

"I suppose I'll have to if you say so," rather grudgingly conceded the rancher.

"Yes; I say so, because she is a good business woman. Now, Miss Armstrong, you own the ranch, and with this money at your disposal, you should be able to prove conclusively whether there is profitable ore in that mine. When you are ready to demonstrate that fact, write to me, and I'll get together the capital you need for the energetic development of the mine. And now I must be off. Will you bid good-bye for me to my friends, the bunk house men?"

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"Certainly; where shall I write to you when there is news of the mine to send?"

"Mr. Banks of New York always has my address."

The girl held forward her hand.

"Good-bye to you, Lord Stranleigh of Wychwood," she said.

For the first time in his life, his lordship neglected to take the proffered hand of a lady.

"Are you making a guess, or stating a certainty, Miss Armstrong?"

"I guess it's a certainty. I saw in a New York paper that Earl Stranleigh of Wychwood was coming into this district to shoot. Then from Jim's ear I unbound a handkerchief with a crest and a monogram on it."

Stranleigh laughed, and took the hand still outstretched to him.

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