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LOADED DICE



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BY

ELLERY H. CLARK

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

F. GRAHAM COOTES

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TO
MY FATHER

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LOADED DICE

PART I

THE FOOTHOLD

LOADED DICE

CHAPTER I

A GAME OF BRIDGE AT THE FEDERAL

Half-way up the slope of the tall hill, beyond the park, looking far out over the city to where, in the distance, the broad blue waters of the bay sparkle and gleam in the sunshine, stands the Federal Club.

Serenely it has held its place there for more than half a century, alike undaunted by winter snows and unmoved by all the beauty of springtime's bud and blossom, by the cloudless blue of summer skies and the lingering glory of autumn's scarlet and gold. And ever, year by year, with tolerant interest, it has watched the great, new, busy city beneath it grow and grow, stretching always farther and farther away to north and south and east and west in eager, resistless advance. Regret and compassion and longing for the old, pleasant days of its youth, all of these the club has known, as it has seen green field and swamp and meadow vanish for ever, and crowded office-building and mill and factory spring up and reign in their stead. And thus it stands there to-day, looking quietly on at the rushing tide of life below, a type of the life of the older city, aristocratic, dignified and reserved.

The year was 1904; the month, August; the time, late evening. The long, low-ceilinged card room was all but deserted, the shades drawn, the lights turned low. The round, green-topped tables, appearing to the eye like some field of giant mushrooms, stood in orderly rows, their outlines blending faintly with the dark oak paneling in the gloom. In the far distance, at the end of the room, a waiter, white-aproned, napkin on arm, hovered expectantly, for generous winners did not always heed the club's injunction regarding tips. Thus he made a pretense of dusting the tables, and waited, biding his time.

Over by the window, where the faint cooling breeze from the bay stole softly in, four men were finishing their rubber of bridge. Vanulm, the portly brewer, prosperous, kindly, slow of speech, resolute of purpose, saying little, smiled often; from time to time, when perplexed as to the proper play, stroking his dark, closely-cropped beard with his large white hand. His partner, young Harry Palmer, scrupulously well dressed, carefully groomed, showed in his every action the handicap of having been born with more money than brains, of never having had to lift a finger to help himself, and, drifting with the tide, of never having wasted a thought on anything outside his own pleasures and how best to gratify them. Many times a millionaire, he had but recently come into his fortune, and was making a sincere and honest effort to spend as much of it as he could in the shortest possible time. His thoughts, seemingly, were far from being on the fall of the cards.

At times he sought restlessly to urge on the speed of the game; again, as if trying to get control of unruly nerves, he made an effort to pull himself together and strove to play leisurely, with a pretense at thought, the frown on his weak, good-natured face, however, deceiving no one. Dick Gordon, the stock broker, reputed to be one of the handsomest men about town, dark, saturnine, played in silence, his whole mind centered on the game, noting each card as it fell with observant, inscrutable gaze. The last of the four, little Mott-Smith, was the typical briefless barrister, who had sacrificed whatever chance of success he might have had in his profession for the dangerous charm of dabbling in the stock market, and whose continual struggles to keep above water financially had been severe enough fully to account for the nervous and worried expression that had now become habitual with him.

Vanulm recorded the score of the hand just ended, and laid his pencil aside.

"Game apiece, Gordon," he said, "and we're twenty-six to four on the rubber. Your deal. And your cut, Harry."

Young Palmer lit another cigarette with an elaborate show of nonchalance. In obedience to that curious law of our nature which makes us admire and aspire to be that which we are not, Palmer's fondest ambition was to be known as a humorist. Therefore, before cutting, he made a feeble and misguided effort to raise a smile.

"Oh, I say, Vanulm," he drawled, "don't be in such a deuced hurry to get their coin. It's bad form, you know, and besides, it's twice as much fun to keep them worrying."

From neither Vanulm nor Gordon was the hoped-for smile forthcoming. Mott-Smith, indeed, laughed, but nervously and with apprehension. For him, bridge at five cents a point was not in

any sense a pleasurable pastime, but a serious and indeed a somewhat dangerous occupation.

Gordon, observing him, smiled faintly as he dealt with the mechanical dexterity born of long practice, each card falling quickly and smoothly from his skilful fingers. Tall, dark and unusually fine looking, he was by all odds the most noticeable man of the four; perhaps, indeed, the only one who would have attracted attention in almost any company. His face, especially when he smiled, was attractive beyond all question, and yet something in his expression hard to define made it difficult to say whether the charm was that of good or of evil.

As the last card fell, he gathered up his hand, sorting it quickly, yet without haste. Then, scanning his cards carefully for a moment, he smiled again as he looked up and met his partner's anxious gaze.

"Sorry, partner," he said, with a trace of mockery in his tone, "but I'll have to ask you to name a trump."

Mott-Smith's thin, nervous face was a study in conflicting emotions. Anxiety, caution, resolve, all were recorded there, until finally his regard for the laws of the game triumphed, and in a voice which he tried hard to make appear firm and determined, he announced, with real heroism, "Partner, we'll try it without."

Vanulm studied his cards for a moment only; then asked the conventional, "May I play?"

Palmer's face flushed. "No, by Jove, I'll be hanged if you may!" he exclaimed. "I'm going over."

Mott-Smith sighed with the air of one thoroughly accustomed to unpleasant surprises and reversals of fortune. "Perfectly satisfied," he said with resignation.

Gordon's expression alone did not change or alter in the slightest degree. There was a moment's tense silence. Then, "I'll come back," he said quietly.

Palmer stared at him wrathfully. "You will, confound you!" he exclaimed. "Well, I've got a mighty good mind to boost her again. No, I guess I won't, though. Satisfied here."

"Satisfied," echoed Vanulm, and Mott-Smith, as the lead was made, glancing fearfully at his partner's expressionless face, laid down his hand, ace, king and low in two suits, queen and two low in another, and queen, knave and two low in the fourth. Gordon studied the cards for a moment, glanced once at his own hand as if for confirmation, and then played in his turn.

The play of the hand, as the play of a close hand of cards always does, afforded an interesting character study. Vanulm played phlegmatically, cautiously, but with hesitancy and much painstaking effort; Palmer fidgeted in his chair, drummed on the table with his nervous fingers, and occasionally swore under his breath; Gordon played incisively, unhesitatingly, almost mechanically, much as if he had placed every card in the pack, knew already what the final result would be, and regarded the actual fall of the cards as a necessary but scarcely interesting detail of the game. Six tricks to six was the score when Gordon, left with the lead, made good the queen of Mott-Smith's long suit, Palmer's carefully treasured ace of spades falling useless, and game and rubber were won.

Mott-Smith made no attempt to conceal his relief. "That was great, Gordon!" he cried. "You did wonders. You couldn't have played it better if you'd tried."

Palmer scowled, and bit his lip with vexation. "What an ass I was!" he exclaimed irritably, "carrying home an ace like that. What the deuce did I want to double for, anyway? Then they couldn't have gone out. I'm awfully sorry, Vanulm."

The brewer shrugged his big shoulders philosophically. "Don't worry, Palmer," he said kindly. "It's all in a lifetime; anyway, we made them work. Have we time for another?"

Mott-Smith consulted his watch. He knew that the last hand must have left him a little better than even, and he hated to tempt Fate again, and perhaps pay for it with a sleepless night. "It's almost twelve," he demurred, "but if you fellows want to play another game—"

Vanulm smiled quietly. He knew of Mott-Smith's means, or rather lack of them, and his consequent little eccentricities. Therefore he yawned out of pure good fellowship. "It is late," he agreed. "I'm getting sleepy myself. What do you say, Gordon?"

Gordon shrugged his shoulders. "Don't ask me," he answered indolently. "I believe up to date I'm the heavy winner. Stop now or play till morning. It's all one to me."

With a sudden impatient gesture Palmer swept the cards together. "Let's cut it out!" he cried. "We've had enough bridge, and, besides, I've got something I want to tell you fellows. It isn't really supposed to be out until to-morrow, but it's so near that I guess it's all right."

He paused a moment, as if uncertain how to proceed, while the others gazed at him curiously without speaking.

Then Gordon broke the silence. "This sounds suspicious, Harry," he said quizzically. "Out

tomorrow' has come to mean only one thing nowadays."

Palmer caught at the offered opening with evident relief. "That's what it is!" he cried. "I've had enough of sporting around, and I'm going to quit it and settle down. You all know who she is. May Sinclair, General Sinclair's daughter, and I think I'm the luckiest chap going."

Gordon was the first to extend his hand, and a careful observer might have noted an unusual gleam of genuine interest in eyes as a rule carefully schooled not to show any emotion whatever. "Lucky!" he exclaimed. "Well, I should say you were! You're a sharp one to steal a march on us like this. Why, that's the best news I've heard in a long time."

Vanulm and Mott-Smith in turn added their congratulations to his, and then Gordon touched the bell.

"John," he cried gaily, as the waiter appeared in answer, "will you kindly bring us the oldest, biggest and best magnum of champagne you've got in your cellar? We want to celebrate a great event."

Palmer raised a protesting hand. "Oh, I say, Gordon!" he exclaimed, his face flushing as he spoke, "thank you just as much, but please don't bother. I'm not drinking now. You know I really can't touch the stuff. I—"

Gordon cut him short. "There, there," he said good-humoredly, "I refuse to listen to any such talk as that. On any ordinary occasion I'd say you were perfectly right, but this is the one time in a man's life when a drink is really the only proper thing. It would hardly be fair to the lady, otherwise, Harry."

The appeal to Palmer's pride was successful. "Well," he assented half-doubt fully, "if you really think so, Gordon—perhaps this once—but I'm going to cut the whole thing out, you know," and Gordon's point, as usual, was gained.

Then, while they waited for John's reappearance, a slightly embarrassed silence fell upon them. Mott-Smith was thinking half enviously of a girl he himself knew, and of the difference between his income and Palmer's. Gordon, too, was thinking, not at random, but quickly, daringly and to the point. Vanulm began mechanically to figure up the bridge scores. Then he laughed. "'Unlucky at cards, Harry,'" he quoted. "You're sixty-eight dollars to the bad, I'm out forty-five, and Mott-Smith's plus thirteen. Our friend Gordon must be deucedly unlucky in love, for he's robbed us of an even century."

Gordon laughed again. "Poor consolation," he said. "I think we'll all agree that Harry's the real winner to-night." And then, as John filled the glasses, he added: "Here's to you both, my boy, and may the Goddess of Fortune bring you all the luck you deserve."

The glasses clinked, and were drained dry. Almost at once a subtle change came over Palmer's face. "That's great stuff!" he cried. "You were right, Gordon. I believe you always are. It wouldn't do not to celebrate the occasion. Lots of time afterwards, you know, and all that sort of thing. John, John—" and he tapped at the bell impatiently until the waiter again appeared, "John, your first bottle's all right. Now you want to get us another just like it, and then another just like that, and then you want to stand by for further orders—stand by for first aid to the injured, I mean—what the devil do I mean, anyway?"

The others laughed, but Gordon's laugh was too hearty to ring true, and the way in which he bent forward and slapped Palmer on the back savored of deliberate acting. "You'll be the death of me yet, old man," he cried. "I swear you're the brightest fellow in the whole club. You don't realize what a sense of humor you've got."

And then, as Palmer, glowing with the joy of just appreciation, went on to be more and more humorous still, John appeared with the second bottle, and later with the third; later still, long after Vanulm and Mott-Smith had gone home, at Gordon's suggestion he brought the fourth and fifth, and about two o'clock in the morning, as the young millionaire's unruly legs balked at the long flight of stairs which led to the sleeping rooms on the floor above, it was as "first aid to the injured," after all, that he was finally called upon to serve.

CHAPTER II

A LITTLE DINNER AT THE ALBEMARLE

Lieutenant Osborne, commander of the new submarine, *Anhinga*, wiry, alert, bronzed, had proved to be the most entertaining of companions, and the little dinner in his honor had turned out to be an entire success.

Osborne leaned forward in his chair and meditatively relit his cigar. "So that," he concluded, "was the first and only time the engines really bothered us. It was close enough while it lasted, though. Still, we got by."

Young Carrington drew in his breath sharply. "Close enough," he echoed. "I should say it was. That's the only trouble with you pioneers, Lieutenant. You get so interested in what you're doing that you get reckless, and then you blaze ahead with some fool experiment, and the first thing you know something happens. Then they grapple your boat up, and lay you all decently away on dry land, where you belong, and some other chap has the benefit of your experience, and knows one thing more to avoid if he's anxious to keep his health. It's glorious, Lieutenant, but it's going ahead too fast. There's such a thing as being too brave."

Osborne smiled. "Oh, well, of course there's some risk," he acquiesced; "no one would deny that. But not nearly so much as you think. We're pretty well prepared for all emergencies now, and in the last analysis the interior of a submarine isn't the only dangerous place in the world. It sounds trite to say 'you never can tell,' but that's what danger and death amount to, after all."

Vanulm nodded assent. "You're right, Lieutenant," he said. "You see it and read of it every day. A man makes a trip through darkest Africa and comes home to be run over by a trolley car. We take a thousand risks by land and sea, far and wide, and then come to peace and safety, and break our leg going down the cellar stairs. 'You never can tell' hits it about right for most of us."

Osborne nodded. "I'm afraid I've monopolized the conversation too much already," he said, "but I'd like to tell you a queer illustration of this that we had at the yards a year or so ago. One of the construction men there was a Norwegian named Rolfson, a man with the most remarkable head for heights, barring none, that I think I've ever seen. He was celebrated even among his mates, and you can imagine what that means among men who are just as much at home walking about like flies on top of a girder sixty feet from the ground as we are seated here at this table this moment. Well, one day this fellow—not out of bravado, you understand; he wasn't that kind, but just because he took a notion to do it—after he got through a job he was doing on the mainmast of a big seven-master, deliberately climbed clean up to the main truck, somehow crawled on top of it, and stood there, one hundred and eighty-seven feet above the deck, waving his cap to the fellows below. How was that for absolute nerve?"

"Well, the point I am coming to is this: Three or four months later this same man, working on a staging about thirty-five feet above the deck of a bark, sitting down, mind you, with a support on either side of him to hang on to, fell and broke his neck. We never knew just what the trouble really was. He might have looked down, I suppose, or might have been taken suddenly ill; possibly all at once he lost his nerve. That happens sometimes. We never knew. So, you see, you can't always tell what's risky and what isn't."

He stopped abruptly. There was a moment's silence, broken presently by Gordon. "Still," he said, "to a landsman like myself there's something uncanny about a submarine. What does a man think about just before he goes down for a twenty-four-hour plunge, Osborne? Does he get worried about death and eternity and the state of his soul, or does he simply wonder whether or not he's forgotten his tobacco?"

Osborne laughed. "Why, speaking for myself," he answered, "I'm generally too busy figuring on where we're bound in this world to wonder much, if anything should happen, where I'd be bound in the next. I suppose it all depends on a man's temperament, and even that doesn't always work out the way you'd think. I know the last time we went down there was one of the crew, a quiet, rather gloomy old chap, with no nerves at all, just the kind of man you need in our business, who turned out, very much as you might have supposed, to be a firm believer in predestination. Now, going down didn't worry that fellow a bit. In fact, I'd have liked it better if he had worried a little more, I like to see the men just as anxious as I am to know that everything's in first-class shape. But his ideas were that if we were going to be drowned, we were going to be drowned, and that was all there was to it. Now, on the other hand, we had another chap who was the most reckless man in the whole bunch, really a regular dare-devil, afraid of nothing afloat or ashore. This fellow, also, as you might have supposed, so far from believing in predestination, didn't believe in anything at all—an out-and-out atheist. Result was that out of regard for his precious life he was tremendously in earnest to see we'd taken every possible precaution before we went under. Rather a curious result, I thought, and something of a blow at practical religion if we should advertise, 'Picked men wanted to ship on submarine *Anhinga*. Atheists given preference over all others.'"

There was a general laugh. "Poor old Religion," said Carrington reflectively; "she's had to take some pretty hard knocks lately. What with enemies without and factions within, I sometimes wonder what the future of the Church is really going to be."

Doctor Norton, the host of the evening, nodded assent. "I suppose the trouble really is," he said, "that there's such an endless field for speculation in such matters, and people's minds work so very diversely anyway, that no one ever really quite agrees with any one else about anything."

Hence the rows."

Carrington shook his head in dissent. "That's going it a little too strong, Doctor," he objected. "I imagine most of us think along about the same lines on religious matters these days, don't we?"

Norton smiled. "Well," he answered, "nothing easier than to test the question, right here and now. I should say the five of us make up a fairly representative crowd—a stock broker, a merchant, a naval officer, a journalist and a medical man. Now, if we'll all agree to give our honest ideas—our honest ideas, mind you, not hackneyed stuff we've been told or that we pretend to believe—on religion, or the probability of a hereafter, or however you choose to phrase it, a comparison of results might prove entertaining, although the subject, I'll grant, is a little shopworn and not nearly so interesting as what the lieutenant has been telling us about submarines. Is it a bargain?"

There was a ready chorus of assent, and Norton, after a moment's pause, continued: "I don't mind setting the example and confessing first. My creed at least has the merit of simplicity. I haven't the faintest shadow of a belief in any kind of a future life. I haven't had the good fortune to see any evidence of it, and I never expect to. There's one view. Now, Carrington, suppose you unbosom yourself."

Carrington pondered. "Why," he said at length, "I suppose I might be described as a hopeful agnostic. Lots of hope, but no belief. I guess that covers it pretty well."

Norton nodded. "Well, we're not so very far apart," he said more gravely. "I suppose practically every man likes to indulge his hopes at times. Certainly, when I think of my wife and children, I like to try to convince myself against my reason and my judgment. That spark is born in us somehow, and of course furnishes a somewhat fanciful argument, if it's worthy of being called that, to our good friends in the pulpit. I'll concede that much to Carrington's view; I like to hope, but that's all it amounts to. Vanulm, enlighten us."

The brewer shook his head. "Not I," he said promptly; "I don't commit myself one way or the other. In fact, I never could see what difference the whole discussion really made. From one point of view, you argue why there should be a future life. From the other, you argue why there shouldn't. Nobody knows, and you can argue indefinitely. Nobody knows the answer, and there you are. Personally, I'm too busy to waste my time that way, even if I were inclined to, which I'm not."

Norton smiled good-naturedly at Carrington. "I believe I'm going to prove my point, after all," he said. "Lieutenant, let's hear from you."

Osborne flicked the ash from his cigar. "Well," he answered slowly, "you chaps have got me a little out of my depth, I'm afraid, but I was brought up to believe in God, and I guess it's the best way, on the whole. It's the most comfortable, anyway, and saves a nervous fellow a lot of worrying. Yes, I think I'm willing to go on record as a believer in a future state."

Norton laughed aloud. "Good for you, Lieutenant!" he cried. "You've raised the average, anyway. I'm afraid we're a pretty godless crowd here. Now, Gordon, it's up to you to complete the thing. Are you with the wicked majority or the select minority?"

Gordon gave no sign of hesitation, "Why," he cried quickly, "I confess I'm amazed at you fellows. I wouldn't believe you now, if you hadn't said beforehand that you were in earnest. I've always believed that if you throw over religion you're throwing over everything that makes for right and decency and the general welfare. Put me on record with the lieutenant, by all means, and we'll form what you call the respectable minority. You other chaps are a lot of rank atheists. I'm ashamed of you."

Norton clapped his hands softly. "Good! Good!" he cried. "I don't mean your ideas, Gordon, but that you've helped prove my point to perfection. I said that no two people would think exactly alike, and look at the result here. One atheist, one agnostic, one man too lazy not to believe, one too lazy—he claims too busy—to believe either way, and one noble example who goes the limit and believes everything, including, I suppose, that the devil has horns and a tail, and that the whale swallowed Jonah. Isn't that proof positive of my claim? Almost every known variety of belief and disbelief, I should say."

Gordon promptly demurred. "No, not quite all," he said quietly. "I ran across a queer case the other day, if you fellows care to hear about it."

A chorus of assent greeted him, and he began slowly. "It was really rather a queer case, as I just said. I dare say the man isn't quite right mentally. A screw loose somewhere, I should judge. At all events, he's worked out the theory that everything on earth is nothing but a gamble, and that Life—and Death—and Immortality—are merely the biggest gambles of all. His reasoning—he talked to me a whole evening about it, but I'll try to give it to you in brief, and as near as I can in his own words—is this: Every man, if he knew for a certainty that there wasn't any God, would do exactly as he wished; that is, he'd live a pretty free sort of a life, behave about as he pleased, and in general have a mighty good time. On the other hand, if he knew there was a God, he'd probably live as straight as he could for the pleasure of enjoying eternal bliss, and all that sort of thing, afterwards, and keeping clear of the sulphur and brimstone. So there's your gamble, and

it's really a very pretty one. Proceed on the assumption that there is a God, and get along without any fun here, in the hope of making up for it later when you get your harp and crown; or else choose the other end of it, go the pace, and when you die, if you've guessed right and there isn't any Heaven, you're away ahead of the poor devils who've played close to their chests here. On the other hand, if you've been unlucky enough to hit it wrong, you're down and out and bound straight for hell and eternal damnation."

He stopped abruptly amid an attentive silence. Then, as no comment seemed to be forthcoming, he continued even more slowly. "To me, I confess the man's way of putting the thing was undeniably interesting. What I didn't grasp at first was how far the proposition carried you logically. You fellows who profess not to believe in anything don't really act out your disbelief, because somehow in the very bottom of your hearts you feel that there may be a hereafter, and you don't want to take any chances. That is, not to put it too disagreeably, this fellow would consider you, in the slang of the track, a lot of cheap pikers. But suppose you have the courage to follow out his ideas to the limit, and choose one way or the other. You can't kick. Your chance is even, and if you're willing to put up all you've got that there isn't a God, your life becomes nothing but pleasure. Just think of it. You're no longer bothered by any moral law; you're free to indulge your passions and your appetites as you please. You can get drunk every day, if that's your idea of enjoyment, or you can steal your friend's money, or his wife, or both, provided you don't get found out. What odds? In place of the groveling worm the preachers make you out to be, you're Kipling's 'gentleman unafraid,' taking a gentlemanly gamble with a mythical creator. It's a bold conception of life; there's no denying it. The man certainly interested me."

He broke off abruptly. Doctor Norton was the first to speak. "It is interesting!" he exclaimed. "I call it a first-class sporting proposition, and he's dead right on one point. We don't any of us, when you come right down to it, try to be good or to do good just for the love of it; it's really only selfish prudence, sort of a credit account against a rainy day. But on his main proposition I should say your friend must have something wrong with his upper story. A man's good from reasons of prudence, or he's bad because he's got what we call criminal instincts, but no man in his senses would sit down and reason the thing out as this fellow has."

"Why not, Doctor?" demanded Carrington quickly. "It's all logical enough, as Gordon says, if you've only got the nerve. But most of us haven't. It isn't pleasant to think of your finish if you chose the sporting end of the thing and then there turned out to be a God after all. I claim there's something magnificent about it, though. Is he going to live out his theories, Gordon?"

Gordon shook his head. "I confess I don't know," he answered; "he's a queer chap, and I didn't like to ask him point blank whether he was in earnest or not. Personally, though, I believe he was, and that sooner or later he'll choose what you call the sporting end."

Gradually the conversation swung back to less serious channels, and in another half hour the little party broke up.

Leisurely enough Gordon strolled along on his homeward way. It was a perfect summer night, the park lying bathed in the mellow light of the full moon riding high in the peaceful heavens. Perhaps it was but the effect of the moonlight, but his face seemed to wear an expression very different from that of the man who had declared his faith so boldly an hour before.

"The old, old riddle," he muttered to himself; "worthless, and yet worth so much." And, after a pause, he added meditatively: "The sporting end."

CHAPTER III

THE FLATFOOT

South of the park, sloping away towards the east, lies the residential section of the city, highly respectable and always in its conduct a model of propriety. Across the park, to the north, lies the shopping district; and adjoining it, to the westward, is the great business section, with the Stock Exchange, the Markets, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Government Building. Turning north again, we come to the bay itself, dotted with steamers and sailing craft, and edged about with huge piers, where the great ocean liners dock, and busy wharves, the goal of the hardy fishermen, as they come driving home across the foam, lee rails awash, deep laden with their spoils hard won from the open sea.

So far, indeed, one may journey with naught save admiration and respect for civic pride; but farther to the northeast, across the bay, there lies a region of a far more doubtful sort. Here, dark

and dreary and sinister, begins that inevitable portion of a great city, at the mention of which women are wont to raise their eyebrows, and men—of a certain stamp—to shrug their shoulders and smile meaningly. Here is the abiding place of those who for many varying reasons prefer to live in a district unhampered by the authorities; a place where each is a law unto himself alone; where the red blood pulses more swiftly through the veins, and where the primal passions of men and women hold freer sway.

To this wilderness in the otherwise well-ordered city, from time to time wander men of birth and breeding from the opposite end of town. Some of them come from real love of vice, due perchance to some inherited taint, perchance to some flaw or weakness in themselves. Others, for the most part younger men, fresh from school or college, come with a vague idea that they are thus seeing life, and earning for themselves the right to be classed as men of the world. A few, indeed, come out of mere curiosity, mere slummers, pleased and risen in their own estimation to find others so much wickeder and more miserably off than themselves.

The great majority, however, desirous of standing well in their own circle, deem it wise to let the district severely alone, for in the faintly Puritanical atmosphere south of the park to have it known that one has even been seen north of Fulton Street means always a possibility of ill-natured gossip and even of unpleasant scandal.

Therefore, on the night after the dinner at the Albemarle, if any one of Gordon's friends had chanced to follow him as he crossed the park, they would have had good cause for surprise, for, instead of following the avenue, or turning sharp to the west, he kept straight on northward, past the cove, past Fulton Street, almost to the bridge, and then, with one quick glance behind him, swung around to the east in a wide half-circle, finally turning up a little, narrow, unfrequented side street at the very limits of the city, beyond which the broad salt marshes stretched away until their outline was lost as they merged with the flats that bordered the broad tide-river flowing peacefully onward towards the sea.

A good place, one would have said, for carrying on some business not quite within the pale of the law, and so Jim Bradfield evidently thought when he chose the spot for the establishment of his gambling-house. Not that at the present time there was any great danger of a raid, the city, following one of its periodic "citizens' movements," with its accompanying spasm of virtue, having suffered a violent relapse, and fallen again into the hands of the spoilers, who, with a praiseworthy desire to make up for much valuable lost time, had issued orders near and far that everything was to be run "wide open."

Bradfield, however, shrewd and far-sighted, had never been over-anxious for that down-town notoriety which was sure to result in a flourishing business during the reign of some particular "boss" or "machine," and then, when the forces of reform again had their little day, was equally sure to mean a quick decision between an immediate change of climate or an involuntary visit to the handsome new prison across the bay. Rather, he desired to keep his trade quiet, safe, and, above all, sure, realizing the manifest advantages of a business which needed for stock-in-trade only his modest house, a good supply of liquor, a complete gambling outfit, and last, but not least, the patronage of a score or so of the city's beautiful and accommodating lights-o'-love. His creed was equally simple, philosophical and sound. Often, indeed, he was wont to observe: "Most trades run too much to seasons and fashions, but I figure mine pretty sure. Year in and year out men are going to gamble, they're going to drink rum, and they're going to run after the girls, and if I'm willing to take a chance on combining the three of 'em, and giving every sport a run for his money, why, where's the kick coming?"

The readiness with which Gordon ran up the steps and pressed the bell seemed to show that he was no stranger to his surroundings. A short, broad-shouldered, burly man, built ideally on the lines of a rough and tumble fighter, stepped to the iron grating in the thick oak door, peered sullenly out for a moment, and then released a spring, allowing the ponderous door to swing slowly back. Rather a needless amount of precaution, perhaps, in times of peace and ample police protection, but Bradfield, as we have seen, was a believer in system, and took no chances. Hence his enviable record for immunity from raiding parties, and his steadily accumulating balance at the bank.

With a nod to the guard, Gordon mounted the stairs, turned sharp to the right, and entered the café. It was still early in the night, and not more than a dozen or so of the little round tables were occupied. The men, as a rule, were sleek, well-fed, prosperous in appearance, with a tendency towards flashiness in their general get-up; the women were of the type to be expected in such a place, or rather, perhaps, on the whole, somewhat above it. All were young and well-dressed, many were pretty, and in some cases it needed a keener second glance to detect that inevitable hardness of expression and that trace of artificiality in their somewhat too obvious high spirits which mark the world over the calling of the lower-class courtesan.

Over in the corner by the window, however, half hidden in the shelter of a huge palm, sat a young girl of a type entirely different from the rest. Seated alone, the chair opposite her tipped forward against the table as a sign that she was not anxious for company, she sat with elbows on table, chin in hands, gazing with a look of bored indifference at the evidently only too familiar scene. Slender, blonde, possibly a shade too pale, her dress of filmy black lace, her dainty black gloves, her big black picture hat with its sweeping black ostrich plume, all showed an instinctive sense of good taste conspicuously absent in the costumes of her companions. So much for the

first general impression. Coming to the girl herself, on closer examination one discovered with some surprise that she was undeniably beautiful. Her features were flawless, her pretty light hair was tastefully arranged over her low forehead, her blue eyes flashed a dangerous gleam from beneath her long lashes, and her red lips seemed framed in a perpetual challenge to the daring of mankind. More than this, one could not rid oneself of the impression that the girl's face, in spite of everything, was somehow a good face; the face of one who, if sinning, did so all but unconscious of the sin.

As Gordon entered, she leisurely assumed a more conventional pose, while he, with a quick glance in her direction, threaded his way across the room, and with a word of greeting dropped into the vacant seat.

It was evident from the whole manner of both that the meeting was no mere casual one, but that it had been planned for some definite purpose. Any doubt of this, indeed, was dispelled by Gordon's first words.

"Well," he queried, leaning forward across the table and lowering his voice a trifle, "did you get what we wanted?"

The girl, with evident complacence, slowly nodded. "I have found out," she said, "the whole story. He may be a very shrewd man in some ways, but in others he is—well, let us say vulnerable."

Gordon drew a deep breath of relief. "Good," he cried softly; "I didn't believe you could do it, Rose; and if you'd failed, we might just as well have given up the whole thing. It seemed like an awfully long chance, too. I don't see now how you pulled it off."

The girl made a little grimace. "It was not pleasant," she said. "Incidentally, the man is hopelessly vulgar and brutal. On the whole, I hope the information is worth all you think it is. The entire experience was a disagreeable one. In fact, it was disgusting."

Gordon seemed scarcely to heed what she was saying. "Yes," he said absently, "I imagine so," and then sat silent, lost in thought, unheeding the laughter, somewhat over loud, as new arrivals constantly added themselves to the noisy throng; not seeming to hear the hum of voices, now loud, now ceasing altogether, from the gaming room adjoining the café, whither the evening's play was now beginning to draw the crowd; undisturbed even by the young college boy who sat at the piano, dashing off ragtime with a brilliant touch. At length he looked up.

"Well, you've got us our start, anyway," he said; "that's sure. Without that, we were nowhere. Now, to get down to the details. I suppose he only talked generalities, or did he happen to let slip anything definite about prices?"

The girl smiled as she drew a tiny piece of paper from the palm of her glove and slowly unfolded it. "Not less than twenty-five cents," she read, and then paused. "I wrote it all out afterwards," she explained, "although I could have remembered it perfectly well. I knew you wanted it exact."

Gordon nodded impatiently. "Of course, of course," he said. "Never mind that. Go ahead with the figures. That's what I want now."

"Oh, very well," said the girl, somewhat piqued; "where was I? Oh, yes. Not less than twenty-five cents, and very likely twenty-six or higher. Some well-informed men even talk of thirty. The price will hold for two years, at least, and very likely for three. In fact, it is very doubtful if it ever goes below twenty cents again. Finally, there has been an agreement, not for publication, of course, between the Consolidated, the Octagon and Michigan, and the Wood-Kennedy interests. So, if a poor, friendless girl wanted a chance to make a few dollars in 'coppers,' why, it's possible that things might go off sharply the last two weeks in October on rumors of over-production and a hidden supply of the metal, and that's the time she might buy a few shares of some good producing mine, because about the first of November these rumors might be flatly contradicted, and there might begin the biggest bull market in 'coppers' the country has ever seen. There, does that suit you?"

Gordon's face betrayed no sign of emotion, but the smoldering gleam of excitement in his half-closed eyes had grown steadily as the girl read on, until, as she ended, he could scarcely repress an exclamation of mingled pleasure and astonishment.

"Rose," he cried, "you must be an enchantress to have got that out of him. We've got practically every card in the pack now. Why, good heavens, girl, the thing's a cinch. Properly played, what you've just told me means a fortune for us both."

The girl glanced at him shrewdly. "But for us to get it properly played," she said; "I take it that's where the rub comes."

Gordon nodded. "It comes right down to this," he answered; "in two months from now, at the latest, we've got to have at least a hundred thousand dollars. After that, everything's plain sailing. But getting the hundred thousand; there, as you say, is just where the rub comes."

"I suppose," queried the girl, "that between us we haven't the tenth part of that?"

Gordon shook his head. "We might have had it, and more too," he said, "if I'd only known a year ago what I know to-day; but I didn't, and instead of making a fortune, I came within an ace of bankruptcy instead. Well, there's no use in post mortems. We've got to get that money somehow. You remember the scheme I spoke of?"

The girl lowered her voice as she bent towards him. "Oh, Dick, not that," she murmured.

Gordon raised his eyebrows the veriest trifle. "I don't see why not," he rejoined. "I've been busy looking it up, and as far as I can see it looks first-rate. He's just the same as he ever was, and between the two, as I told you, we're sure to land him. Of course, what he'll do afterwards no one can tell, but I think we can count on his doing what's right, safe enough."

The girl wrinkled her pretty forehead. "I can't make myself like it, Dick," she answered. "It seems like taking so many chances. If there were just the two of us, I wouldn't mind so much, but right at the start we've got to get some one else—some older woman—and there's a risk right away. I can't think of any one I'd trust."

Gordon considered. "There must be some one," he said at last. "How about that Wilson woman?"

The girl shook her head. "Too stupid," she objected promptly.

"Wouldn't Helen Russell do it?"

"Not old enough. She isn't more than five years older than I am, and we'd have to go light on anything like make-up. There are risks enough anyway without adding one."

"Well," cried Gordon impatiently, "there must be some woman that can do it and will do it. You must be able to think of some one."

The girl reflected. "There's Annie Holton's mother," she said, half doubtfully, at last. "I think she'd do, but I don't like the risk of getting mixed up with Annie. She'd like nothing better than a chance to do me a bad turn, as you know, Dick."

Gordon frowned. Annie Holton's infatuation for him was such matter of common knowledge about Bradfield's that there was no use in making light of it, and the girl's rabid jealousy of Rose Ashton had been the occasion of many a prophecy as to what might happen some day if the occasion should serve.

"I don't know why that should make any difference," he said at last. "Mrs. Holton's a very clever woman, and she'd look the part remarkably well. Besides, getting at her doesn't mean telling Annie, especially as I don't believe from what I hear that there's much love lost between them nowadays. If it comes to that, it would be easy enough to get Annie away somewhere for a week. That's only a matter of detail, anyway. You'll find we can get some one. But the point is that we've got to try the scheme, whether you like it or not. I can't borrow what we want. Money's been tight as the devil for six months now, and I think I begin to see why. No, this looks to be the only chance, and I forgot to tell you one thing more that makes it a little better; I've just found out that he's engaged to be married."

The girl looked doubtful. "I don't know whether that makes it better or worse," she said at last. "Of course it makes a difference in one way. It would help a lot—afterwards; but—it might spoil the first part altogether."

Gordon laughed cynically. "You don't know Harry as well as I do," he quoted. "Getting engaged doesn't make a man grow wings all at once, especially a man that's led the life he has. Think of the inducement, too. No, I'll risk the first part for a certainty, and I guess the second is about as good, too."

Both were silent for a time. The noise from the adjoining room grew louder. Every table in the café was filled. The piano tinkled unceasingly. Still they sat unheeding. Finally the girl leaned forward, speaking with deliberation.

"Dick," she said, "I'll grant that it isn't impossible. We might pull it off all right, and the whole scheme really does you credit. But you've got to own up to the risk. It's one of those things where every move has got to come off just as we've planned it, and just on time. If any one of a dozen possible things happens, we're done. In a word, it's something we really ought not to try except as a very last resort."

Gordon nodded a trifle impatiently. "That's it, exactly," he acquiesced. "We don't differ a particle about it. But at the present moment I can't for the life of me see what other chance we've got. I'm afraid it isn't a matter of choice at all."

The girl hesitated a moment; then asked, apparently irrelevantly, "Have you any money with you, Dick?"

Gordon nodded again. "Bridge winnings," he said laconically. "About three hundred, I think."

"Three hundred," repeated the girl. "That would be enough. The wheel here is run straight, isn't it?"

Gordon glanced at her keenly. "Absolutely," he answered. "But I hope you're not planning to raise our hundred thousand that way, because I'm afraid it might take a long time."

He spoke in a tone of mild amusement. The girl smiled faintly. "No," she answered, "hardly that. I've seen and heard enough of 'systems' to know they're all impossible. But sheer, blind chance is always open to every one, and I'd like one try just to satisfy myself before we try your scheme. Let's chart the wheel thirty-eight times, then pick one of the numbers that hasn't come, and play it flatfoot three times running. If we lose, three hundred won't kill us, and if we win, you know what you told me about your friend McMurtrie and his black colt."

Gordon laughed, then shrugged his shoulders. "If you call my scheme a wild one," he said good-naturedly, "I wouldn't dare say what I think of yours. Still, it's possible. Everything's possible, for that matter, and, as you say, a few hundred won't be fatal. On the other hand, if we should win, I'll say frankly that I take considerable stock in old McMurtrie. He's crazy over racing, and knows the whole game, too, from A to Z. He'd never have told me what he did about his long shot if I hadn't made twenty thousand for him in two days shorting steel common. His gratitude for that took the somewhat doubtful form of this tip of his. I can't even remember the colt's name now, but I could find out to-night, I suppose—if we have any occasion to."

The girl rose. "Come on, then," she cried. "Fate's going to be kind to us, Dick. I feel it. We're going to win."

The man gazed at her curiously. "Fate, instinct," he muttered to himself, as he rose. "I wish I could feel sure—"

He broke off sharply, and together they left the café.

In the gaming room they found a good sized crowd around the roulette table, and a smaller group gathered at the faro lay-out farther down the room. Gordon bought the little stack of yellow chips, handed them to the girl, and stood beside her, pencil and note-book in hand, jotting down the swiftly recurring numbers as the croupier called them in his even, expressionless tones.

A half hour passed. Once the croupier, glancing at Gordon and noticing his occupation, smiled very faintly. There was no law or rule against the use of paper and pencil at Bradfield's; rather inventors of charts and systems were gladly made welcome. Their money, as Bradfield had once with some dryness observed, was just as good as anybody else's.

At last Gordon turned quickly to the girl. "They haven't run very even," he said hurriedly. "Here's your choice. These numbers here."

The girl glanced hastily at the ten numbers out of the thirty-eight left blank, and instantly made her decision. "Thirty-five, Dick," she whispered, and as she spoke she placed five of the counters on the chosen square. Momentarily heads were turned in her direction, and then the wheel was started once again. Bradfield's croupier wasted no time. "Do them now," might have been his motto. Even as Gordon leaned forward to get a better view, the ball stopped abruptly. "Seven," called the croupier, and Gordon smiled ironically at the folly of the whole proceeding. Once more the girl placed her bet on the thirty-five, once more the ball revolved, slackened its speed as the wheel spun more slowly, and stopped—in the single zero. Gordon turned to his companion with a laugh. "How about your presentiment?" he queried.

The girl shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, we've a chance still," she answered, "and I rather think this is the time we win."

Down went the last five chips on the thirty-five. "Bets are closed," cried the croupier, and the little ball spun merrily away again on its accustomed journey. Gordon's eyes were fixed eagerly upon its progress—now slower and slower spun the wheel, more and more gently the little ball moderated its pace, hesitated, paused on the lip of nineteen, hung there, balanced, and then, as if with the faintest possible remaining effort, rolled on, and dropped—

"Thirty-five," called the croupier sharply. "Red wins—," and the rest was lost in the quick buzz of excitement, for at Bradfield's hundred dollar flatfoots were rare. The croupier leaned forward across the table. Thirty-five hundred was quite a sum to lose, but he knew that it would make talk, help trade, and doubtless eventually come back. So he even smiled deferentially. "I think I'll have to send for Mr. Bradfield on this," he said. "We're not prepared for quite such heavy plays, as a general thing. Will you have bills or a check?"

"A check, please," said Gordon half mechanically. "We'll be in the next room."

It was not until they were again seated at their table in the window that he was able to make the whole occurrence seem a reality. The girl was laughing half hysterically, the bright color in her cheeks making her prettier than ever. Gordon gazed at her in admiration.

"Well, Rose," he cried, "I'm not so smart as I thought I was. I guess the laugh's on me, or on Bradfield, I don't know which. Now for McMurtrie. I know just where I can locate him this very

minute."

The girl bent across the table, her eyes bright, her whole attitude expectant, alluring. "To-night?" she murmured. "But I thought to-night—"

Gordon met her glance squarely, his eyes ablaze with passion. He leaned forward in turn until his hand touched hers. "In just one hour," he cried. "And an hour—can seem like a thousand years."



He leaned forward until his hand touched hers. Page 44

CHAPTER IV

THE ESSEX HANDICAP

Handicap Day, and true Handicap weather. A warm sun shining from a cloudless sky, a light cool breeze blowing from the west, a track in perfect condition—what more could the heart of horseman desire on the greatest day of the horseman's year?

As early as twelve o'clock the long procession began to wind its leisurely way toward the track. By automobile, by coach and carriage, by steam yacht and railroad train and electric car, even by bicycle and on foot the crowds surged and flocked and fought their way, until by two o'clock thirty thousand people crowded grandstand and betting ring and paddock, keen, alert, active, on tiptoe with eagerness to see the Essex run.

High up in the grandstand Major McMurtrie, a trifle flushed, more than a trifle excited, eloquent in the extreme, seated himself beside Rose Ashton and Gordon, and with a wealth of gesture fought and refought for their benefit the bygone Handicaps of twenty years.

"The race of the year, my dear boy, the race of the year," he repeated for perhaps the fiftieth time. "No race like it, sir, for the true lover of the racehorse, and a more perfect day for it, sir, I have never seen."

Rose, looking up from her race-card, nodded assent. "Forty thousand dollars to the winner," she said thoughtfully. "It's a tremendous sum, isn't it?"

The Major shook his head vigorously. "No, no, my dear young lady, you mistake me," he cried. "It isn't the money value of the race that makes it. Forty thousand is a snug little sum, of course,

but the Metropole is worth fifty, and the Belleview upwards of seventy. But it's the public sentiment, not the cash, that makes this race what it is. The Essex isn't any six furlong scramble for two-year-olds; it's a mile and a quarter for three-year-olds and upwards. It's none of your get-away sprints; it's a horse-race, from start to finish. And more than all that, it's our oldest stake race, with its records for thirty years filled with stories of courage and speed and daring and skill; it's part and parcel of the turf history of the country. Yes, by gad, sir—I beg your pardon, Miss Ashton, I do, indeed—the Essex Handicap's a part of American history itself."

Gordon, himself no mean authority on the history of the track, nodded affirmatively. "True, every word of it, Major," he cried. "Why, away back in '78—"

The Major fairly caught the words from the younger man's lips. "'78!" he exclaimed. "Yes, sir, Kingstreet's year. The greatest sire this country has ever known. I saw him win, sir, by three lengths, in 2:07½. Think of it, sir, for those days: 2:07½! Eleven years that record stood the test, until Contender's year. Ah! Miss Ashton, he was a race-horse. Gentle and kind and true. Home he came that year—'89, wasn't it? Yes, '89—home he came, simply romping in, fighting for his head, and the time 2:06 flat. Ah, there was a race-horse for you. And all the others, too. '96, Gordon, you can remember that; that finish between True Blue and the Florentine. Forty races the mare had to her credit, and, by gad, sir, that was the greatest of them all. A slow first half, and then how they fought it out to the wire. Won by a short head, and she came within a quarter second of the record at that. She went lame afterwards, poor thing, and never faced the flag again. A game, true little mare was the Florentine."

He paused reflectively, and Gordon, seeing the girl's evident interest, again touched the tinder to the flame. "Two years ago, Major," he began.

It was enough. The old man, in his eagerness, half started from his seat. "Yes, yes," he cried, "Custodian! Gordon, that horse, when he was right, was the king of the track." Then, turning to Rose, "Custodian was his name, Miss Ashton, a four-year-old then, black as the ace of spades, and ugly as the devil himself. He had his set days for running and his days for sulking, and nobody but himself could ever pick the days. If it was one of his off days, he'd be last in a field of selling platers; if he made up his mind to run, he was a whirlwind, a thunderbolt, whatever you want to call it, something more than human, anyway. The day of the Essex he started badly, four lengths behind his field, sulked to the quarter, and everybody who'd backed him was properly resigned to walking home, when all of a sudden he took it into his crazy head that he'd mistaken the day, after all. Run! Nobody ever saw such a mile before or since. He nipped Disdain and old Yarboro' a furlong from home, never let up at all, and came under the wire, as if he were just starting to run away, in 2:03¾! The point has never been settled to my knowledge, but it is my solemn belief"—he lowered his voice confidentially—"that if that horse had ever been driven to it, really hard pressed, you understand, he could have made the distance in two minutes flat. Well, I must get down to the paddock. Good-by, Miss Ashton; good-by, Gordon; look for my black to come under the wire in the lead."

He left them, and Rose, half bewildered, turned to Gordon. "It's a world by itself, isn't it, Dick?" she said. "I never thought men followed it that way. It's all Greek to me, I'm afraid."

Gordon laughed. "The Major's certainly an enthusiast," he answered, "but it isn't so mysterious, after all." He held his race-card that she might see, checking with his pencil as he talked. "There, here's the description of the race, and the money value, and all that. Here are the entries down here. The Cynic's the favorite. He's a four-year-old who's had a great record this season; very speedy and one of the most consistent horses in training; he's quoted at 3 to 1 against. Here's Rebellious, one of the best of the three-year-olds, 5 to 1 against. He's a good one, too, but I believe they think a mile and a quarter's a bit too far for him. Old Yarboro' here's campaigning for his fifth season, and pretty near as good as ever, too. He's third favorite, 8 to 1 against. These two here are a couple of 100 to 1 shots. Here's our friend Highlander, 30 to 1 against, and here's—" he broke off suddenly; then, after a moment, added in a very different tone, "Well, of all the remarkable coincidences—"

"What's the matter?" asked the girl quickly, struck by the unusual surprise in his manner.

For answer Gordon passed her the race-card, his pencil under the name of the last starter in the race.

"Palmer's got a horse entered," he said, still in amazement. "I remember now his saying something a while back about starting a string."

The girl glanced at the card. Sure enough, the last entry was Henry D. Palmer's bay mare, Lady May, carrying one hundred and seventeen pounds.

"Well, that is unexpected!" she exclaimed. "Named for his fiancée, too, I suppose. Wouldn't it be strange if she should win?"

She seemed scarcely to realize the import of her words. Gordon nodded grimly. "Very strange, indeed," he assented dryly. "I rather think on the whole it would be better for our friend Palmer if she didn't."

The girl gave a little cry.

"Why, I never thought of that," she exclaimed. "If Lady May should win—oh, but she won't Dick, will she? She can't beat Highlander."

Gordon shrugged his shoulders. "The Major doesn't think so," he answered; "but I suppose Palmer's trainer thinks no one can beat Lady May, and The Cynic's owner is sure he's the only horse in the race, and even the rank outsiders have somebody here who honestly believes they're going to win, even at 100 to 1. That's what makes racing. A fool born every minute, they say, or they couldn't keep it going."

The girl shivered. "Oh, Dick, don't frighten me," she cried. "If only the Major is right. Did you get the money all on, finally?"

Gordon nodded. "Three thousand, at 30 to 1," he answered. "I suppose McMurtrie's done considerably better. I understand he began to back the colt way back in the winter books. If he did, he's probably averaged as well as 40 to 1. If the colt's half what he thinks, I should say 10 to 1 would be nearer right. We'll know all about it in another ten minutes, anyway."

Even as he spoke, an expectant thrill seemed suddenly to run through the crowd. All eyes turned in the direction of the paddock. A big, red-faced man seated next to Gordon half started to his feet. "There they come!" he cried.

And then, walking up from the paddock in the dignified, time-honored procession before the race, the nine horses filed slowly by the grandstand on their way towards the start. The Cynic, a bright bay, third in the line, his jockey gorgeous in the blue and gold of the Highcliff stables, walked somewhat soberly along, but the glance from his big, kind eyes seemed to say, "I don't show off beforehand like some of these youngsters, but when the flag drops, then watch out." Even more sedate was old Yarboro', the veteran of a hundred races, to all appearance as fit as ever, but looking as if he considered he had fairly earned the right to an honorable discharge from active racing and a peaceful retirement to the big green pastures of some quiet farm. Farther back in the line Lady May, sporting the red and white of Palmer's stable, was doing her utmost to pull her jockey's arms off, and her dainty hoofs seemed scarcely to touch the track as she pranced and curvetted by the grandstand.

Gordon gazed at the mare in admiration. "She looks awfully fit," he muttered. "Good enough to take a lot of beating."

The girl, not hearing, laid her hand on his sleeve. "Oh, Dick," she cried softly, "look at Highlander. Isn't he the darling!"

The black colt, bringing up the rear of the procession, was undeniably a beauty. His glossy coat shone like satin in the soft sunshine, and he looked to be in the very top-notch of condition, lean and hard and wiry, and yet not overfine, but as if he had plenty of speed and strength in reserve. On his back was Bowman, the colored boy, known the country over as the "Kentucky Midget," McMurtrie's first string jockey, resplendent in the gorgeous crimson jacket that made the Major's entry by far the easiest to distinguish of the field.

Back to the barrier, a quarter of a mile away, walked the horses; then came that trying, nerve-racking five minutes of jockeying for position, cautioning of riders by the judges, fretting of the high strung horses, and then, just as it seemed as if the strain were growing unendurable, all at once the barrier leaped upward, the red flag flashed, and the great crowd gave vent to its pent-up feelings in one mighty roar as the nine thoroughbreds leaped forward through the faint haze of dust to a well-nigh perfect start.

Then fell silence, far more eloquent than any mere din of voices could have been, as thirty thousand pairs of eyes were strained to watch the flying racers as they tore down the track. Past the stand they came, Firefly, a rank outsider, running wild a length or two in the lead, then The Cynic, Rebellious and Lady May, bunched close, then Yarboro', a length and a half back, with Highlander at his girth, and the others already tailing, for Firefly had carried the field along at a tremendous clip, the watches catching twenty-four and three-fourths as she flew past the quarter.

Too fast, indeed, for the light-weighted filly, and at the half she had fallen back, leaving The Cynic and Rebellious in the lead, Lady May dropping back a half length and Yarboro' and Highlander moving up almost on even terms with the mare. Forty-nine seconds for the half, and still the five ran true and strong, with no change in the long, steady, machinelike strides. Past the five furlongs, past the three-quarters, and then, as if riding to orders, the jockey on Rebellious for the first time raised his arm and brought it down once, twice and again. Nor had he to wait for his answer; with a mighty bound the game colt shot forward, and in a trice a clear length of daylight showed between him and The Cynic.

A cry burst from the crowd. "Rebellious wins! They'll never head him! The favorite's beat!" The big, red-faced man snarled like a wild beast. "The fools," he muttered savagely. "A half mile more to go. They've spoiled his chance now."

Gordon nodded in mute assent, but for the next furlong it looked as though the crowd was right. Away and away drew the colt, crazed with the joy of feeling the choking pull released from his tender mouth; two lengths, three, four, and then—still he strove, still he seemed to run as fast

and free as ever—but the four lengths remained four, and rounding the turn, just before coming into the straight, the colt, suddenly tiring, was thrown for a moment from his stride, and when he swung into the stretch, The Cynic's head was at his shoulder and it was a fresh horse against a beaten one.

And then, as the field squared away for home, old Yarboro' made his challenge for the lead. Out from the ruck he came, past Rebellious, past The Cynic, the long gray head just for a moment showing clear in the lead, and then, with a rush, fresh and strong, The Cynic again shot by, and the old hero of a hundred races, game to the core, disputing desperately every inch of the way, fell slowly back, beaten by a younger but not by a better horse, the old, remorseless, inevitable story of youth and age.

Long afterwards some horsemen dubbed the Essex of the year "The race of surprises," and surely it merited the title. For now the chestnut colt showed clear in the lead, only a furlong from home, and the sight had brought the multitude to its feet, wild with delight, already shouting itself hoarse in anticipation of the favorite's win. And now the mighty roar for just an instant died away, only to burst forth again in redoubled volume as a gleam of crimson and black flashed like lightning, and McMurtrie's colt, the pride of all Kentucky, shot forward like a thunderbolt and challenged the leader in his turn. And this time it was not old Yarboro' who was to be shaken off. This time it was youth against youth, strength and speed and spirit the same, the same brave blood of racing sires surging and pulsing in their veins, the same fleet limbs and mighty hearts opposed, and now it was the black, and now the chestnut, that seemed to gain.

Gordon sat motionless, his face showing no sign of emotion, but his race-card was torn in his hands, and his nails were gripped deep into the flesh. The girl, her lips parted, her breath coming in little gasps, oblivious of everything else, sat with eyes riveted on the flying Highlander, Bowman's crimson jacket gleaming, as the little jockey, riding far forward, brought into play the last ounce of skill and cunning for which he was famous as, nearing the wire at every stride, he lifted his willing mount along. Only a hundred and fifty yards to go, but half a lifetime seemed crowded into those few brief moments. Now, both jockeys crouched low over their horses' withers, at last gone to the whip and riding like demons, the two thoroughbreds came tearing down the stretch, locked stride for stride, Highlander not only holding his own, but gaining inch by inch, the crimson showing clear ahead of the blue and gold, and the win only a hundred yards away; and then—suddenly, hugging the outside rail, a flash of red and white caught the crowd, and Palmer's mare, nostrils distended, eyeballs bloodshot, glaring, with a mad burst of speed, bore down on the struggling leaders, caught them twenty yards from the finish, and flashed under the wire a scant head to the good, queen of the turf, and winner of the fastest Essex ever run.

CHAPTER V

THE TRAP IS BAITED

The dilapidated little engine, with its train of two battered cars, puffed despondently away around the curve, and disappeared in the forest, leaving Rose and Gordon standing alone, the sole occupants of the small station platform.

Everything about the place spoke of desolation. With each gust of wind the weather-beaten door swung to and fro on its rusty hinges; the two cracked windows stood open; beneath their feet the rotting timbers sagged creaking; around them, on every side, the tall black pines towered upward against the sky, save where the narrow ribbon of the little single track stretched away a stone's throw to right and left before losing itself among the winding curves of the forest wilderness.

The girl, glancing about her with much disfavor, gave a shiver of repulsion. "You must be fond of shooting," she said, "if you can stand coming here for it. It's worse even than your description."

Gordon smiled. He remembered vividly his own first impressions of the place, and his wonderment that such a spot could exist only fifty miles from civilization.

"Oh, well," he answered defensively, "it isn't exactly Fulton Street, of course. This is the worst of it, though. Wait till you've seen the island, and you'll change your mind."

For twenty minutes they followed what was by courtesy known as the road, and then, turning abruptly down a narrow wooded path, plunged ahead straight into the heart of the huge pines. To the girl, after the ceaseless roar and tumult of the city, the silence was almost appalling. No

sound echoed from their footsteps as they trod the carpet of fragrant pine needles and velvet moss. About them all was dark, and solemn with the hush of the great forest's majestic repose. Far overhead the sun appeared to shine less brightly and the blue of the sky seemed infinitely far away. Ahead and to the right a bluejay screamed. A squirrel poised a moment on the top of a stump before darting away in headlong flight. The girl, subdued and silent, kept close to Gordon's side. "I wish I hadn't come," she sighed, half in jest, half in earnest. Gordon, less imaginative, thoroughly familiar with his surroundings, smiled at her mood. "Just you wait," he kept repeating encouragingly; "you'll see."

At last the trees grew less thickly together. Bushes, higher than one's head, began to appear, and tangled vines stretched themselves underfoot. Occasional gleams of sunlight lay quivering across their path. Faintly, as if from far away, a swamp-sparrow's song rang sweet and clear. Chickadees bustled and scolded in the branches. And then, on the instant, Gordon and his companion turned straight to the left, and the lake burst on their sight.

The girl uttered a sharp cry of delight, and Gordon, smiling, stood and watched her in silence. Far away, seemingly to the utmost limit of the eye, the blue waves danced and sparkled before the westerly breeze. Far away to the north, the distant shore eluded the vision with the unreality of a mirage. To east and west, the low black line of the pines stretched on and on till they too melted away against the dark blue of the water and the fainter blue of the sky. Half a mile or so from the shore, a little island, pine-covered, also, like its parent shore, lay sleeping in the afternoon sunshine, and the girl's glance, slowly withdrawn from the sweep of the distant horizon, fell suddenly upon it.

"Oh, that's it," she cried. "It's beautiful, Dick."

Gordon smiled a brief self-satisfied smile, not altogether pleasant to witness. "Yes, isn't it," he answered; "and I think useful as well. You really couldn't find a better place for duck shooting—or for other things."

Instantly the girl's expression changed, and her face clouded. "Ah, don't, Dick," she said. "Let's not spoil our day while we're here. There'll be time enough later to talk of that."

Gordon's expression hardened a trifle. "As you please," he rejoined coolly; "only don't forget that we're here primarily on business, and not for pleasure. If you don't care to discuss things as we go along, I shall take it for granted that you'll at least keep your eyes open."

The girl nodded as if relieved. "Of course," she rejoined, "I'll do that anyway. But out here, on a day like this, to be deliberately planning—well, I can't put it in words exactly, but you know perfectly well what I mean. It's too—cold-blooded—that's the word I want. I've got to get back to Bradfield's before I'll be any good at scheming."

Gordon made no reply, but busied himself with launching the boat. Five minutes later, lying back at ease in the stern of the little rowing skiff, the girl watched the island grow steadily larger and larger as the boat shot forward under Gordon's long, steady strokes. As they approached more nearly, she could see that the whole southern side was guarded by gray cliffs rising sheer from the water's edge, but as they rounded the eastern point they shot into a quiet little cove, narrowing as it ran inland, and ending in a short stretch of smooth gray sand. Here they beached the boat, and walked slowly up the pebbled pathway to the house. Gordon fitted the key to the lock, threw open the door, and stepped back to allow his companion to enter. The girl moved quickly forward, and then paused on the threshold with a soft cry of pleased surprise.

Built square and low, with its back against a huge gray boulder so that winter northeasters might thunder overhead in vain, the shooting-box was little more than the one huge living-room and dining-room combined. To the right were two bedrooms and to the left the tiny kitchen and pantry, but it was on the living-room that Gordon had lavished all his care. Everything was in keeping: the big center-table of dark oak, the enormous fireplace with its store of logs, the heavy rugs on the floor, the guns and shells in their racks, the shooting and fishing prints upon the walls, all combined to make up a room ideal to the sportsman and charming even to the girl's more critical eye.

Crossing swiftly to the cushioned window-seat she tossed hat and coat aside, and with a deep sigh of contentment threw herself back among the cushions. A pretty enough picture she made, and Gordon, gazing at her a moment, crossed the room, and seating himself by her side, drew her to him and covered her face with kisses. Yielding herself to him, the girl suddenly lifted her face to his and clasped her arms around his neck. "Let's not go back," she whispered; "let's stay here for good and all."

Gordon smiled, humoring her mood. "All right," he answered, "I'm agreeable. I suppose my customers might miss me a little, though. And you," he added, a trifle maliciously, "I know they'd miss you at Bradfield's."

The girl's face flushed, and she drew herself from his embrace. "I hate it, Dick," she cried passionately, "I loathe it more and more every day. Nobody can be happy leading a life she was never meant to lead. You know that yourself. And every word I've told you about Bradfield's is God's own truth. What was I when they started me going there? Fifteen years old. Nothing but a

baby, Dick. I swear I never knew what it all meant. And now I've met you. Oh, Dick, if only you'd marry me, and let us have a little home somewhere, I'd be so happy. I'd make you the best wife in the world. I'd see to it—" She broke off quickly, with a laugh mirthless, almost of self-contempt; then added, in a very different tone, "but there's no use in saying all this. No man that ever lived can know for a minute what real love—or what a real home—means to a woman. We might as well forget it, I suppose, and go on as we are."

Gordon's face had seemed imperceptibly to harden as she spoke, but his tone, as he answered her, was kindness itself, as one might try to soothe a too insistent child. "I do know," he said, "and I think you're right about it; entirely so. And you know how much I love you, Rose. Just let us get this one thing out of the way, and I give you my sacred word of honor I'll get out of this sort of thing for good, and we'll buy the finest little home in the state, and settle down to farming, or anything else you want. Or we'll go around the world in a steam yacht, if we hit things right. Just which you'd rather. But we can't quit the thing now. It looks too good. After we pull it off, I promise you anything in the world in return, and I shall be very proud of my wife."

He rose quickly, and then, as if to forestall a reply, added with an entire change of manner. "Well, we mustn't get too serious over things, Rose. You were the one that didn't want our day spoiled. So we might as well get down to the point while daylight lasts."

Reluctantly enough the girl rose, with a vaguely dissatisfied feeling of having once more been put off from a definite decision on the unwelcome plan. Gordon's mood, on the contrary, was cheerfulness itself. Taking down his favorite little sixteen-bore from the rack, he snapped it open, ran his eye lovingly through the glistening barrels, tested the safety-catch, and caught up a box of shells from the table. "Come on," he cried, with boyish enthusiasm, "ducks for supper, unless I've forgotten how to shoot."

Leisurely enough, in all the glory of the crisp autumn air just tempered by the pleasant warmth of the mellow, waning sunlight, they made their way down towards the point. Gordon, in a mood entirely different from any the girl had ever seen him display, eager as a boy set free from school, kept constantly calling her attention to one thing and another as they strolled along. Here he pointed out the hollow in the rocks where he had lain all through the great northeast gale of two years before, when the frightened wildfowl, storm driven, low sweeping to the southward, had passed over his head all day long in countless flocks; there he showed her the little cove where he had stalked the Canada geese, and, nearing the point, he made her shudder as he pointed to the treacherous quicksand beyond the clump of pines where, in reckless pursuit of a wounded duck, he had come within an ace of losing his life.

Twenty minutes later found them in readiness, safely hidden in the gunning box sunk level with the ground on the pebbly point of land which stretched far out to the westward of the island. Before them, the little flock of wooden decoys, moored in the lee of the point, nodded and dipped gaily to the rising breeze. The girl's eyes were bright with excitement. "Will the ducks really come, Dick?" she whispered.

For answer Gordon pulled out his watch for the twentieth time; then nodded reassuringly. "Of course they will," he answered. "In fact, it's pretty near—there, look! There they come now!"

The girl peered through the screen of bushes that fringed the box. Sure enough, off to the southward, a flock of ducks was flying swiftly towards them. A moment more, and they swerved farther to the west. She heard Gordon swear softly under his breath, and strangled a hysterical desire to laugh. Then all at once the birds caught sight of the decoys. Just for an instant they seemed to hang motionless against the sky; then, with set wings, came on straight for the blind. The girl felt her heart leap with excitement; for, all in the same breath, she saw the flock wheel quickly, and Gordon rise to his knees. The little sixteen-bore cracked spitefully once—twice—and two of the flock, doubled up in mid-air as if struck by lightning, fell stone dead among the decoys, the others, towering high into the air, made off far to the westward and safety.

Gordon, obeying the wild-fowler's first instinct, swiftly slipped in fresh shells, then turned to his companion, his eyes bright with the triumph of the hunter, his whole bearing alert, eager, confident.

"Well," he queried briefly, "what do you think?—Look out, there they come again!"

A second flock, larger than the first, was bearing down upon them. Just in time to escape detection, Gordon sank into the box. Again the birds swung, again Gordon rose, and again two ducks fell dead to the quick right and left of the little sixteen-gage.

Twenty minutes passed. Fainter and fainter grew the light, until the sun sank low behind the pines, and the laughing blue and white waves turned sullen and gray. Together they left the blind, and, walking along the beach, Gordon began to gather up his spoils. Poor little wild ducks, there they lay, rising and falling as the tiny waves splashed gently against the shore, as if vainly seeking to rouse them once more to flight. No, they would never fly again; quietly enough they lay there, their bright, glossy feathers stained with a faint crimson, their wild, bright eyes closed in death.

With a swift revulsion of feeling the girl knelt over a mallard duck and drake, the little brown

mate by some trick of fate, with her dusky head lying across the neck of her bright-plumed lord. "Oh, the poor darlings!" she cried pitifully. "Oh, Dick, we can't wish them alive again."

Gordon stood silent. The faint afterglow still hung in the fading west, but elsewhere all was dark. A star or two shone far up in the blue. The wind, erstwhile such a jolly companion, seemed graver now, as it moaned through the swaying tops of the dark pines. Suddenly the world became a solemn place, sad, unfriendly, vast. Gordon's face set hard as he looked at the kneeling girl and the two little dead wild ducks. "No," he said, with a world of meaning in his tone; "no, we can't wish them alive again," and together they turned toward home.

CHAPTER VI

COUNTRY COUSINS

The breakfast room, flooded with October sunshine, was such a pleasant place that Palmer, leisurely glancing through the columns of the morning paper, deliberately lingered as long as possible over his toast and eggs. Finally he laid the paper aside, slowly poured out a second cup of coffee, and with an expression of good-humored resignation glanced across the table at his secretary.

"Well, Morton," he said pleasantly, "let's have it. What have you got to bother me with to-day?"

The secretary smiled deferentially, as it behooves one to smile when one is earnestly desirous of keeping an easy, gentlemanly position, with little work and good pay.

"There's really very little this morning, Mr. Palmer," he answered. "There were the usual number of begging letters, which I answered in the usual form; a notice of the annual meeting of the polo club; one or two dinner invitations; a letter from Mr. Gordon asking you out to his shooting-box, and the check from the racing club for first money in the Essex."

Palmer chuckled. The winning of the Essex had been one of the never-to-be-forgotten incidents of his life. "Gad, Morton," he cried, "we hit it that time, didn't we? I can see the mare coming under the wire now. Traveling! I'll bet she was traveling! By rights I ought to make the check over to her. She deserves it, if any one ever did. Well, there's nothing very exciting in that mail outside of the check, is there? Nothing immediate, anyway."

Morton smiled faintly. The last three words embodied Palmer's whole philosophy of enjoying life to the best advantage. To live calmly, without haste; to know what was coming in time to enjoy it in anticipation; to be able to put off unpleasant tasks until the latest possible moment—that was Palmer's creed. Some men, nervous and high strung, when the final moment of life itself has to be faced, pray for a sudden death. To Palmer, that would have appeared highly undesirable. Rather, he would infinitely have preferred to have the whole matter indefinitely postponed. So the secretary smiled.

"No," he said, "nothing really immediate, except Mr. Gordon's note. Shall I read it?"

"If you please," answered Palmer indolently, and the secretary read in his even, pleasant voice,

"MY DEAR HARRY:

"Do you recall that you were going to put in a day's shooting with me this fall? I write to tell you that the ducks are just on their flight. I killed over forty in two hours' shooting one day last week, over half of them redheads. Can't you meet me at my office at three to-morrow, and run out for the night?"

"Your sincere friend,

"RICHARD GORDON."

Palmer set down his cup of coffee untasted. "By Jove!" he exclaimed, "that's really very decent of Gordon. I didn't know the ducks were flying like that. Yes, Morton, telephone him I'll go with pleasure. And, Morton, get Smith to pack my shooting things, and look over my gun, and put in

about two hundred shells, number six shot. Yes, by gad, I'll go."

Deep down in his heart, although he would not have admitted it, and indeed was perhaps hardly aware of it, Palmer had an immense admiration for Gordon, doubtless based on the fact that Gordon did those things best which Palmer himself would most have liked to do well. Palmer's game of bridge was mediocre. Gordon's was masterly. Palmer played a passable game of golf, sometimes brilliant, always dangerously erratic. Gordon's steadiness had won him a rating among the first dozen on the state handicap list. Palmer could always bring home a fair bag of ducks, shooting being perhaps his greatest enthusiasm, but Gordon's clean right and left kills were little short of wonderful in their precision. Of course, as regarded popularity, Palmer had by far the greater number of hangers-on, retainers, satellites,—friends, he chose to call them—for when a genuine multimillionaire turns out to be a lavish spender as well, the combination furnishes unusual opportunities to those wise in their generation, and yet somehow the men whose friendship Palmer would most have liked, while always civil to him, never seemed to treat him in just the same way they did Gordon.

Thus the prospect of a day at Gordon's shooting-box, sure of good shooting and a pleasant time generally, startled him a little out of his usual calm, and three o'clock found him at the door of Gordon's modest office. Gordon came forward to meet him, his face troubled, a telegram in his hand.

"Confound it, Harry," he cried, as he shook hands, "I'm afraid I've done an awfully stupid thing. About a month ago I got a letter from an old lady up country, one of my mother's oldest friends,—awfully good to me when I was a boy, and all that—saying that she and her daughter were going to run down here for a little trip some time this month. Of course I wrote back, as in duty bound, and told her that I should be out at the shooting-box then, and that she must surely let me entertain her there. I never gave the matter a second thought, and here I've just got a telegram—delayed, of course,—saying they're due in town about half-past two, and will come right over to the office. I suppose they'll be here any minute. I'm infernally sorry. I never meant to let you in for anything like this."

Palmer made a not over successful attempt to conceal his disappointment. "Well, never mind, Gordon," he said reluctantly. "Can't be helped, of course. Better luck another time."

Gordon crumpled the telegram in his hand, and threw it into the waste-basket. "Confound it all!" he cried; "I wouldn't care so much if it wasn't right in the middle of the flight, but this is the very top of the season for redheads and widgeon. The wind's been fresh to the westward all day, too, and now it's just starting to haul out to the north. If it holds there, I'll bet we could kill twenty-five to-night, and God knows how many to-morrow morning at daylight. I don't want you to do anything you don't want to, Harry, but I wish you'd come along just the same. You needn't see anything of them, and, anyway, they're not a half bad sort. The little girl gave promise of being quite a good looker the last time I saw her, three or four years back. I really think you'd better come along just the same, and not mind them at all."

Palmer looked uncomfortable. "Oh, thanks, no," he said, somewhat hastily. "Country cousins, you know, and all that. Not much in my line, I'm afraid."

Gordon laughed. "Well, I don't blame you," he said, "only I feel ashamed of myself to have mixed things up so. I can't help the—"

A knock on the door interrupted him, and the office boy appeared. "Two ladies to see you, Mr. Gordon," he announced, and close upon his heels an elderly lady, clad in sober black, came bustling into the room. Her plain, spectacled face fairly beamed with pleasure as she advanced toward Gordon, both hands outstretched in greeting.

"Well, Dick, my dear boy," she exclaimed, "I am glad to see you again. And how well you're looking."

Gordon took her outstretched hands, and shook them cordially. "The same to you, Aunt Dora," he cried; "I declare you've positively grown younger. And where's Marian?"

Mrs. Francis turned toward the door. "Why, she's here," she answered, "I expect I got ahead of her, I was so anxious to set eyes on you again. Here she is now."

Gordon could hardly repress a start of surprise as he glanced up at the girl standing hesitatingly in the doorway. A prettier picture, he thought quickly, he had never seen. Possibly the simple white muslin dress, with its band of crimson at waist and throat, spoke a little of the country girl on her holiday visit to the city, and the girl was evidently a trifle shy and embarrassed, but these small defects only added to the general impression of freshness and charm. Evidently, too, her shyness was not the shyness of *gaucherie*, but of becoming modesty, and as she raised her blue eyes at Gordon's greeting there was a sparkle in them eloquent of plenty of spirit and humor to be disclosed on closer acquaintance.

"Why, Marian," he exclaimed, "I'd never have known you! You oughtn't to surprise a man like this. I'll swear you were wearing short dresses the last time I saw you."

The girl blushed and laughed. "Don't be silly, Dick," she protested. "Three years is a long time,

and we're awfully glad to see you again."

Gordon turned quickly to Palmer, who stood staring at the girl with a surprise evidently greater than Gordon's own. "Where are my manners?" he cried. "Aunt Dora, my friend Mr. Palmer. Marian, Mr. Palmer. Harry, my oldest friend, Mrs. Francis, and her daughter, Miss Marian Francis. I call Mrs. Francis my aunt principally because she isn't. I was just trying to persuade Palmer to go with us on our little trip, Aunt Dora, but he's obdurate. I wish you would try your hand."

The older woman turned to Palmer with much cordiality. "Why, I wish he would," she cried. "Please do, Mr. Palmer. Dick will be bored to death anyway with two women on his hands to entertain. We'll look after the housekeeping, and you men can have all the shooting you want. I'll guarantee one thing, too. I can cook a duck with any woman in the county."

Gordon nodded in vigorous assent. "I'll back that up, Palmer," he cried. "Leaving out of consideration all question of the pleasure of Aunt Dora's society, her cooking is an inducement no sane man ought to think of refusing. I believe you'll go, after all."

Palmer wavered. The "country cousins," one of them especially, were far from being the curios he had imagined. And the thought of the shooting—he could see in imagination the long lines of ducks fighting their way up the lake against the stiff northerly breeze, swinging to the decoys, with set wings—and yet he hesitated—

"Come, Marian," cried Gordon gaily, "try your hand. Apparently Aunt Dora and I have failed. We've promised him plenty of good shooting and plenty of good cooking. What can you offer to make him change his mind?"

The girl blushed charmingly, but her eyes, nevertheless, met Palmer's squarely. "You see," she murmured demurely, "I don't really know Mr. Palmer's tastes."

Gordon roared. "But you'll do anything you can," he cried broadly. "Well, that's fair. There's a challenge direct, Harry. Do you dare refuse now?"

Palmer's face reddened a trifle. His eyes had scarcely left the girl. "Go?" he cried, "of course I'll go. I was only afraid I might be in the way, but since the ladies are so kind—"

Gordon clapped him on the back. "Good boy," he cried, "and now we mustn't lose any time. Just a half minute till I leave word where I'm going."

He pressed a button, and almost immediately the office boy appeared. "Oh, John," he began, and then caught sight of a yellow envelope in the boy's hand. "What's that you've got there?" he asked sharply.

"Telegram for you, sir," answered the boy promptly. "Just came this minute."

Gordon caught the envelope from the boy's hand, and hastily tore it open. Then, as he read it, his face clouded with vexation. "Well, if this isn't too bad," he cried, "I never knew such luck. Here's a telegram from the one man in the world I can't afford to offend. The biggest customer I've got. Says he reaches town at five and wants half an hour kept absolutely free for business of great importance. I guess that means there's no getting out of it for me. It's too bad, though; I hate to see our plans spoiled like this."

Mrs. Francis was the first to speak. "Why, Dick, what nonsense!" she exclaimed. "We know the way perfectly well. It was only three years ago Marian and I were there, and I don't believe things have changed a great deal since then. We'll go ahead and get everything ready, and you can come out on a later train. That's a great deal better than our staying here or going to a hotel, isn't it, Marian?"

The girl, thus appealed to, glanced quickly at Palmer. "I think you forget, mother," she said quietly, "that we ought to consult Mr. Palmer. He may not care to escort us out there without Dick, and I'm very sure I wouldn't care to go through those woods alone."

Palmer rose gallantly to the occasion. "Not care to?" he cried. "Indeed, I shall be honored, Miss Francis. We'll show Gordon here how well we can get along without him, and I'll have all the shooting to myself. Go? Of course we'll go!"

Gordon turned to him gratefully. "You're awfully good to take it this way, all of you," he said, "and I'll surely be out a little after eight. You'd better be starting, though. You haven't but just time. Oh, and Aunt Dora," he called after them, "you don't change at Fairview any longer the way we used to. Remember not to change. Good-by. Good luck. I'll be there about eight."

As the door closed after them he dropped into a chair with a sigh of relief. "Thank God that's over," he muttered, "so far, so good!"

CHAPTER VII

THE TRAP IS SPRUNG

The tickets secured, the baggage safely stowed away, Mrs. Francis and Marian fitted out with papers and periodicals, Palmer began thoroughly to enjoy his trip. Mrs. Francis insisted on a seat by herself, and an uninterrupted chance to read the October *Bazaar* and Palmer, in the seat behind with Marian, inwardly blessed her literary taste. Not only did the girl's obvious beauty attract him, but as their acquaintance developed, he found her in every way a charming companion; as he himself would more probably have expressed it, "A ripping fine girl."

Thus everything went well until Fairview was reached. Here Mrs. Francis roused herself from her magazine, and turned around to Palmer. "Didn't Dick say we changed at Fairview?" she demanded.

Palmer shook his head. "No, Mrs. Francis," he answered, "I think not. I understood him to say that was just what we didn't do."

Mrs. Francis glanced around her apprehensively. "I was sure he said to change," she replied, "I know we always used to change here. This train waited five minutes for the connection. I'm going to ask the conductor, to make sure."

Palmer started to rise, when the girl laid a detaining hand on his arm. "Please don't bother," she whispered. "Mother's always like this when she's traveling. It wouldn't do any good for you to go. She'll have to find out for herself before she'll be satisfied. And I hate being made conspicuous. So please don't trouble yourself, really."

Palmer perforce kept his seat, and they saw Mrs. Francis walk down the car aisle, and then out on to the platform. The girl laughed.

"I can't cure her," she declared. "She's the best mother in the world, but to travel with her is a nightmare. I've been going through this all day yesterday and part of to-day, so I believe I'm getting a little hardened to it."

Palmer smiled in sympathy. Then, suddenly, as the engine whistled and the cars began to bump and grind, he started to his feet with an exclamation of surprise. "By Jove," he cried, "isn't that your mother coming out of the station? She'll get left, as sure as fate."

The girl glanced hastily from the car window. Sure enough, Mrs. Francis, evidently determined to get her knowledge at first hand, had ventured too far from the train, and had succeeded in getting left behind. Even as they watched her, she began to run awkwardly, waving her umbrella. Her mouth seemed to Palmer to frame the words, "Wait! Stop!" and then, as their speed increased, they turned the curve, and Fairview and Mrs. Francis were left behind together.

Fully expecting a burst of tears or a scene of some kind, Palmer turned apprehensively to his companion. But to his surprise and to his infinite relief, the girl, meeting his glance, suddenly burst into a fit of uncontrollable laughter, and his own revulsion of feeling was so great that involuntarily he joined in her mirth.

"Oh," cried the girl, "I beg your pardon, Mr. Palmer. I oughtn't to laugh, but the humorous side of this awful trip was too much for me. A friend of my mother's was going to escort us yesterday, and he was taken sick at the last moment and couldn't come. Then Dick got that telegram, and now my mother's lost the train. It's like the rhyme of the ten little nigger boys. I wonder which of us will drop out next. Please promise you won't desert me without warning."

Her blue eyes sought Palmer's frankly and innocently enough, and yet with just a trace of coquetry. Palmer leaned a little toward her. "I promise," he said, "if you won't run away, I won't."

The girl laughed delightedly. "It's a bargain," she cried. "I think it's really fun. Thank goodness, I have the key to the house. Mother will get the next train with Dick, I suppose, and we can have everything ready for them. We'll have a fair division of labor. You will have to carry all the luggage and row me over to the island, and then you can have your shooting for a reward, and I'll cook the supper. Is that fair?"

"That's fair," acquiesced Palmer. "At least, it sounds fair. But how do I know how good a cook you are."

"Well, I like that!" exclaimed the girl. "And how do I know whether you can row a boat or not? We've got to take each other on trust, as near as I can see."

Palmer laughed. He found his little adventure much to his liking, and more and more, as the train rattled on, he found himself yielding to the spell of the girl's charm.

Down from the little station through the woods to the lake she piloted him, and he made good the first part of the bargain as he rowed the little boat across, in the teeth of a stiff northerly breeze, in a style as good as Gordon's own. Once arrived at the house, she showed him the way to the point, and a few moments later, Palmer, gun in hand, was striding down the path.

Left alone, a curious change came over the girl. The laughter faded from her face, leaving it white and drawn, and she half fell, half threw herself into the big easy chair in front of the fire which Palmer had set blazing.

"God, what a strain," she muttered to herself. "All right so far, though, if I don't break down and spoil everything. But he oughtn't to have asked me to do it. It's too much for any one. Now let me think—"

For ten minutes she sat motionless. Then, with a sigh, she rose somewhat unsteadily to her feet, and busied herself about the room. Comfortably near the fire she placed the round table, and set it tastefully for four. Then for a time she was busy in the tiny kitchen. Finally, returning to the living-room to find it almost in darkness, she struck a match to light the lamp, and, as she did so, a sudden gust of wind from the half open door blew it out in her hands. She stepped to the window and looked out, and then stopped short, struck with the unexpected change that had taken place in the whole aspect of things.

The sun scarcely shone, and the big gray-black clouds were piling up ominously overhead. Below, a strange murky glow spread far out on either hand. The wind drove down the lake in sudden warning gusts. Flock after flock of ducks came hurtling down from the northward before the gale. She heard the crack of Palmer's gun, and with a start she came suddenly to herself. She laughed half defiantly.

"I believe he's right, after all," she murmured. "Everything is chance, and for once it's on our side. Half an hour more, and they couldn't get across, and we couldn't get back. Nothing could be better. We won't need to use any of the second strings now."

With a glance at the progress of the supper, she relit the lamp and stepped into one of the little bedrooms. "Altogether too pale," she frowned, as she glanced in the mirror. "But that's easily remedied. He isn't the observant kind, evidently." From the closet she took down an evening gown of black velvet, glancing somewhat dubiously at the low neck and short sleeves.

"It's a question, even now," she muttered thoughtfully. "He may think it's a queer rig for a country girl, and get wise, but I don't really think so. It's worth the risk, anyway. Men are such fools. It seems a shame."

Half an hour more and darkness had fallen over the island. Outside the northeaster roared in rising wrath. Within the fire blazed cheerily, and the soft lamplight cast a pleasant charm over the cozy room. Suddenly her heart beat quicker as she heard Palmer's footsteps. An instant, and he entered, buffeted and beaten by the gale, staggering under a load of ducks.

"Well, what do you think of this?" he cried. "Ducks! No end of 'em. Gordon missed the time of his life. But what do you think about it? They can't get across to us, can they?"

The girl shook her head. "No, not possibly," she answered, "and what's worse, we can't get across to them."

Just for a moment Palmer looked grave. Then he laughed boisterously. "Well, this is a go!" he cried; "I never thought I'd come to play Robinson Crusoe. I suppose we must just make the best of it. How about that supper? By Jove, you look as if you'd been working."

The girl laughed, glancing down at the blue checked apron that enveloped her from head to foot. "Supper," she echoed, "the sportsman's first thought. Well, it's all right excepting the ducks; I have them prepared, and I'll give you exactly eleven minutes to get ready in. That was Dick's last word on cooking them. Eleven minutes, provided the oven was right, and I believe it's perfect."

She deftly cleared the table of the two useless places, slipped the much talked of ducks into the oven, and brought two bottles of champagne from the ice box. At the end of the allotted time Palmer appeared, and the girl placed the smoking meal on the table. Then she glanced at him, smiling.

"I know you don't want to eat with the cook, do you?" she asked, and before he could protest she deftly threw off the concealing apron, and stood before him in all the glory of womanhood, a 'delicate flush in her cheeks, her eyes bright, the low cut, somber gown setting off to perfection the rounded whiteness of her neck and arms. Palmer, in admiration, gazed at her until with a laugh she broke the spell.

"I wanted to surprise Dick," she said simply. "He's always making fun of me for living in the country, and I thought I'd show him I knew something about dressmaking, anyway. Do you like

it?"

"Like it?" the young man exclaimed fervently. "Like it? Why, by Jove, I should say I did. You're simply ripping, you know. You're—"

Words failed him, and by way of relieving his feelings he began a savage onslaught on the ducks.

As the supper progressed, better and better grew his humor. Everything was delicious, and his third glass of champagne found him gazing at the dainty figure opposite through a mellow haze of sentimental content, until, finally, when she rose and held the match for his cigar, he somehow found the little hand which hung so invitingly at her side, and held it close until she gently withdrew it.

"You mustn't," she whispered, with heightened color. "Won't you please fix the fire? It's half out."

He rose reluctantly to obey, and in that instant she poured the contents of a tiny phial into his glass. Then, as he turned again towards her, his face flushed, his eyes gleaming, his throat working convulsively, she raised her own glass in laughing challenge. "One more," she cried daringly: "To our better acquaintance!"

Palmer touched his glass to hers and drained it at a gulp. "To our better acquaintance," he echoed thickly, and, putting down the glass, he came unsteadily toward her, and, before she could move, had seized her in his arms.

The girl struggled faintly. "Oh, don't," she cried piteously, as she strove to free herself from his grasp; "please don't, Mr. Palmer! Let me go!" But her strength was as nothing compared to his, and with all her seeming shrinking, one would have said that her lithe form clung even more closely to his.

Suddenly Palmer released her, raising both hands quickly to his head as he staggered back. "God," he cried, in a strange, choked voice, "it's all dark! I can't see!"

Then, with a last conscious effort, he reeled towards the window and fell heavily face downwards on the cushioned seat.

CHAPTER VIII

GORDON PREVENTS A SCANDAL.

"Exactly," said Gordon. "Yes, I understand. I trust I shall be equally so. In about fifteen minutes, you think. All right. Good-by."

With a smile he hung up the receiver, and turned again to his work. Ten minutes more, and Harrington, his confidential clerk, entered, a puzzled expression on his face. He bent over the desk and spoke a few words to Gordon in a low tone. Gordon nodded.

"Certainly," he said, "show him in. And, Harrington," he added, "I'm not to be disturbed until I ring; not by any one, you understand. If Rogers should telephone, I'm out of town but expected back any minute, and I'll ring him up as soon as I get in. Remember, I'm not to be disturbed for any reason whatsoever, unless I should ring. All right, now. Ask him to step in."

The clerk nodded and withdrew, and Gordon, rising, stood waiting by the window, outwardly calm, inwardly exerting every atom of self-control to keep down his rising excitement, as the crucial moment in the game drew near. Even as he listened, a hurried step sounded in the corridor without, and Palmer burst into the room, flinging the door to behind him as if to shut out some threatened pursuit. His unshaven face was pale and haggard, his eyes bloodshot and wild, his clothing awry, his whole demeanor as unlike that of his every-day, placid self as could by any possibility be imagined. His eyes sought Gordon's face, half in relief, half in fear.

"I've come straight here," he cried hoarsely. "I thought I might have missed you if you'd gone to the island. Gordon, there's the very devil to pay. Have you heard what's happened?"

Gordon, his face set and hard, nodded silently. He motioned to a chair, and seated himself at his desk, his voice, when he spoke, sounding low and constrained.

"Yes, I've heard," he said; "I was just starting for the island when Mrs. Francis got me on the 'phone. Poor woman, she's half out of her mind." He paused, and then his seeming emotion mastered him, sweeping away in an instant his effort at self-control.

"For God's sake, Palmer," he cried aloud, his eyes fixed on the other's face, "how did you come to do it? I can't believe it yet. You! A man of your position! My guest! Great heavens, Palmer, it can't be true! Tell me the whole thing's a lie."

The younger man sat silent with head bowed and eyes fixed on the ground; his hands clenched, his body drawn back as if to avert a blow. Once, twice, he tried to speak, swallowing with difficulty and moistening his dry lips with his tongue. Then unwillingly he raised his eyes to Gordon's face.

"It's true enough," he muttered thickly; "I've been a fool, that's all, and now I suppose there'll be the deuce to pay. Wine and women, damn them both! they've got me into trouble enough before this, but this time I guess they've just about done for me."

Gordon's lip curled contemptuously. "Oh, so you're the one to be pitied," he said at length with slow irony. "Really, Harry, I'll admit that that's the last view of the matter I expected you to take. Why, don't you realize, man, what you've done? Things may be bad enough for you, of course; probably they will be; but can't you think for a minute of that poor girl. What's your trouble compared to hers?"

A tinge of red showed in Palmer's pale face. "Of course I'm sorry for her," he said sulkily. "It was hell coming back from the island. I'm terribly ashamed of myself, and all that, and I'll do anything I can to square things with her. But I can't help thinking about what's going to happen to me, just the same. We've all got to look out for ourselves first. That's human nature."

Gordon gazed at him from half-shut eyes. "Yes," he admitted, "that's human nature, I suppose, beyond a doubt." He paused a moment, and then continued: "Very well, then, if it suits you better, we'll eliminate the girl altogether, and look at things just from your end of it. I suppose the first point is whether the thing becomes known or not. If it does, I imagine there's no question that it will hurt you tremendously. In society in general, it surely will. In your clubs I don't know that it would make so much difference."

Palmer threw back his head with a gesture of uncontrollable agitation. "Damn all that part of it," he cried angrily; "that isn't what I mind. It's what May's going to do if she hears about it. I can't have her know, Gordon; she's the best girl that ever lived, and she's devilish particular about such things. She'd break our engagement in a minute, just as sure as fate, if she knew."

Gordon nodded. "I imagine she would," he said drily. "When you come to think of it, Harry, it is rather a difficult thing for you to explain to her satisfactorily. A man just engaged to one of the most eligible girls in town; supposedly swearing all the usual vows of eternal constancy, and all that; and then, a week or so later, taking deliberate advantage of an unexpected opportunity, and ruining a young girl placed in his care by a friend who had every belief that the man was in all reality the gentleman he seemed. If it comes to that, Harry, and we're to consider anybody's position in the matter except poor Marian's, just think of mine for a moment, and what I'm to say to Mrs. Francis. The dear woman blames me, and in a sense she's perfectly right. I vouched for you, Harry, as my friend and guest, and this is what you thought was due me in return. It's a terrible thing you've done; terrible for Marian, terrible for yourself, terrible for all of us."

Palmer sat with head bowed, shoulders drooping, eyes fixed on the ground, the embodiment of despair. "I admit it," he cried; "I couldn't have done a worse job for everybody concerned if I'd tried. But that's all done with. Now, I want to know what's going to happen next."

Gordon, his hands clasped about his knee, his forehead wrinkled doubtfully, gave himself up to reflection.

"Well," he said at length, "of course it's already occurred to you that some moralists would insist that you marry the girl."

Palmer started nervously. "I know it," he cried; "but it's impossible, Gordon. I couldn't do it. The girl herself wouldn't want that. No girl would."

Gordon shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, I don't know about that," he answered. "I imagine some girls, the ambitious, designing kind, would jump at the chance. Still, fortunately for you, Marian, of course, is a girl of a very different type. No, as a matter of fact, I don't think, in all candor, she ever wants to set eyes on you again. I suppose you can rest easy on that score."

Palmer glanced up with the first signs of hopefulness on his haggard face. "Then why can't the thing be hushed up?" he asked eagerly. "Why isn't that the best way out of it for every one?"

In spite of the gravity of the occasion, the faintest suggestion of a smile played around Gordon's mouth. "That's human nature," he quoted ironically. "It's best for you, and so it must be best for everybody else. The reasoning's no good, of course, but I'm not sure, though, but what in this case it does happen to work out so. I've been trying to think it over fairly, and consider your position as well as Marian's and her mother's. I suppose, from Marian's point of view, there's

nothing to be gained by publicity. The girl's life is practically ruined, Harry; she's completely crushed by what has happened, and I don't think she's got spirit or ambition enough left to wish to make trouble for any one."

Palmer nodded eagerly. "I'm mighty glad she takes it so sensibly," he cried. "I don't see, then, why everything can't be hushed up. I'm certainly willing to do anything at all to make things right."

Gordon shook his head doubtfully. "It isn't as simple a matter as you think, Harry," he said. "I dare say everything could be smoothed over if you had only Marian to reckon with, but you forget her mother. You might not guess it, to see them around together, for Mrs. Francis isn't what you'd call a demonstrative woman, but Marian is the very apple of her eye. She fairly worships the ground the girl treads on, and she's nearly out of her mind with grief. I don't want to worry you unnecessarily, Harry; things are bad enough already; but I suppose it's only right to tell you that she was going to see Miss Sinclair this morning, and I had a pretty bad half hour before I managed to dissuade her. Even at that, I imagine it's only a temporary respite. Sooner or later she's bound to go to Miss Sinclair with the whole story, and, to be frank, I don't suppose we can blame her for a minute."

Palmer groaned. "Oh, God!" he cried, throwing back his head as if in physical torture; "what a fool, what an utter fool I've been! Here's my whole life, my whole happiness ruined, and all for the sake of an evening's cursed pleasure. Gordon, get me out of this damnable mess somehow, and I'll do anything in God's world for you; anything you ask; anything you want."

Gordon shook his head again. "I wouldn't talk that way, Harry," he said more kindly. "You're losing your grip on yourself. There's nothing you could do for me, and if there was, I'd never take advantage of a time like this to try to get you to do it. I hope I'm not that kind of a friend. No, it's a bad outlook, Harry. There's no getting away from that."

He paused a moment, then added doubtfully:

"There's just one possibility I can think of, but it's one I hardly like even to suggest."

Palmer glanced up quickly. "What is it, Gordon?" he cried. "For Heaven's sake, don't torture me! If there's any possible way out, tell me what it is."

Gordon hesitated. "Well," he said reluctantly, "I don't like to speak of money even indirectly in connection with an affair of this kind, because it has a sort of savor of blackmail about it. But I think—mind you, I don't know—I think I know why Mrs. Francis is so terribly wrought up over the whole affair. It's like this with her. Her husband, when he died, left her in charge of a big farm that she's been trying to run herself, I imagine without much success. I guess the place is mortgaged up to the handle; she hasn't been able to sell, and it leaves her practically tied down to her work there. You know what a country neighborhood is; a pretty narrow circle of interests, and consequently a perfect hotbed of gossip. Now, I think the real dread she's got is that somehow this story may leak out, and that she and Marian will be disgraced and looked down upon for the rest of their lives. That's what I gathered, anyway, from the talk I had with her this morning, and I'd hazard a guess that if a purchaser for the farm could somehow be found, and she could be left free to leave home for good and start life over again for Marian, away out west somewhere, she might be made to listen to reason. I may be all wrong, though, and, as I say, it's with the greatest hesitation that I speak of it at all, because it involves money, and I suppose quite a considerable sum—seventy-five to a hundred thousand dollars, I should say off-hand—so perhaps, after all, we'd do better to let her go ahead and see Miss Sinclair. I dare say Miss Sinclair would take this better than you imagine, anyway. She doubtless understands a man's nature."

Palmer laughed mirthlessly. "Understand!" he cried; "Heavens! You don't know her, Gordon. Her mind's as pure as snow. Why, if she knew this, she'd end everything in a minute. No, we've got to keep Mrs. Francis away. That's all there is to it. I'll buy her farm, or a dozen farms, if she's got them, if she'll agree to keep quiet. But if she says she will, can I trust her, Gordon?"

Gordon nodded assent. "Absolutely," he answered. "If she agrees to anything at all, she'll stick to what she says. You needn't worry about that. She's the soul of honor."

Palmer rose abruptly. "I must get back home," he said, more in his usual manner. "I look like the very devil. Ring her up, Gordon, and have her come down here and get the thing settled up, that's a good fellow. I'm half wrong in my head myself over the thing. Get it settled right, Gordon, and I'll never forget it." He hesitated a moment, and then continued awkwardly. "And I'm devilish sorry, Gordon; I really am. And I wish you'd tell the girl so when you see her. I hope you won't lay this up against me. I never meant to do it, and I never would have done it if I hadn't lost my head altogether. I'm sorry. That's all I can say."

Gordon held out his hand. "Harry," he said, "you've done an awful thing, but God forbid that one man should sit in judgment on another. A higher power than ourselves must do that. As far as I'm concerned, I forgive you the wrong you've done, and I'll do all in my power to help you."

Palmer eagerly took the proffered hand. "Gordon, you're a brick!" he said gratefully. "I wish to God I were half as good a chap as you are." And, turning on his heel, he left the office.

CHAPTER IX

PALMER HAS A VISITOR

Eight—nine—ten—eleven— The little clock on the mantel chimed the hour musically and significantly, and Palmer jumped quickly to his feet, pulling out his watch as he did so for confirmation. Then, with a laugh and a shake of his head, he thrust it back into his pocket again.

"No use, May," he said; "I've lost track of an hour somewhere, and it doesn't seem to be the clock's fault. I suppose I'll have to blame you instead."

May Sinclair smiled. "I find, Harry," she said slowly, "that being engaged makes awfully irresponsible creatures of us. You wouldn't think that it would change people who ought to have arrived at years of discretion so that they act and talk and feel in a way their common sense tells them is ridiculous, and yet a way so pleasant that they wouldn't have it different if they could. I find my most settled tastes, habits, plans, everything, all completely changed. And I guess, Harry, you find it a good deal the same way, too."

She had risen as she spoke, and stood beside him, slender, delicate, womanly, altogether charming. With no assumption of coquetry, she laid a detaining hand on his arm, and raised her brown eyes wistfully to his.

"I don't want you to go yet," she whispered. "You can stay till half-past eleven, Harry. Honestly, I'm not a bit tired to-night."

Palmer stooped and kissed her. "Mustn't try to tempt me, May," he answered, "after you've got doctor's orders to take things easy and have plenty of rest. If you'd only give up your beloved settlement work, then it would be a different thing altogether. You wait till we're married, and I'll make you give it up, whether or no. You'll find I'm enough to reform, without your having to bother your head with those bums from the slums. Gad, May, how's that? One of these regular eppy—what-you-may-call-'ems—Bums from the slums; really, now, I call that rather clever."

The girl shook with laughter. "Oh, Harry, Harry," she cried, "your sense of humor will certainly kill me some day. It's so very—well, obvious—to say the least. But—" and she drew closer to him—"I love you, dear, in spite of it."

Palmer slipped his arm around the girl's slender waist, and kissed her again and again. "You don't know, May," he whispered, "what it means to me to hear you say that. It makes me feel awfully proud, and yet at the same time, you know, it makes me feel awfully ashamed of myself, too. I never ought to have dared to ask you to marry me in the first place, May. That's the whole trouble. You're a million times too good for me. Sometimes, you know, I get to thinking lately I'm a deuced poor sort of a chap, after all."

The girl laid a protesting finger on his lips. "Stop!" she commanded; "I can find fault with you all I please, but I'm the only one. You're not to say a word against yourself, because I won't let you. I wouldn't want you to be any different, my dear, in any possible way—if only you wouldn't make fun of the settlement. That really makes me discouraged, Harry."

Palmer raised his right hand. "I solemnly swear," he cried, with mock seriousness, "that if it bothers you, May, I'll never make fun of it again. Only—and I'm really in earnest about this—I always have believed that there's trouble enough coming every one's way before they've finished the game to keep them busy, and yet here you deliberately go out hunting for it. That's what I can't get through my head."

The girl in her turn grew suddenly grave. "Oh, but Harry," she protested, "we don't have any real troubles, you and I. If you could know some of the things we come across there at the settlement. Just think, last night I heard about the little O'Brien girl, the brightest, prettiest little thing in the whole club; she isn't a day over seventeen, and some brute of a man got her to go off with him in an automobile, and there was wine, of course, and now—now the poor thing's in trouble. Just think of it, Harry. You can't imagine the temptation and all that part of it for girls that haven't good homes. And most men are such beasts. Oh, I've thanked God, Harry, more times than you've ever guessed, that I'm to marry a man that's big and strong and clean and honest. I'm so proud of you, Harry, you don't know how proud."

Fortunately for both, the dim light masked the expression on Palmer's face, and the girl did not mark the sudden spasm of pain that contracted it. Somewhat hastily, it seemed to her, he

stooped and kissed her again.

"I'm a brute myself," he said with a faint attempt at humor, "keeping you up till almost midnight. To-morrow night, dear. No, don't come down. Good-night, May, good-night."

Once outside the Sinclairs' home, Palmer strode away down the street, for the first time in his life, perhaps, in an agony of self-abasement. Up to now, his fears and worries had been purely selfish ones. He had done something of which he was ashamed, and in which he did not wish to be found out, and in spite of the payment of hush money and solemn protestations of secrecy in return, he had felt that he was treading on the edge of a slumbering volcano. Now, however, May Sinclair's parting words had for once awakened his dormant moral sense, and he flushed hotly at the thought that the kisses he had given the pure girl who believed him all that was true had been but a short twenty-four hours before lavished in a mad burst of passion upon another.

With all his faults, Palmer was kind. Horses and dogs were his friends. Small children, oftentimes to his great embarrassment, made much over him. Kind—and weak, he was never cast to play the villain in life's drama; betrayals of friendship, premeditated deception, even injury to the feelings of another, none of these things was natural to him, and his love for May Sinclair, all unknown to him, was working and striving to rouse the finer sense sleeping within him far beneath the crust of ignorance and selfishness and sloth.

Thus, in repentant, self-contemptuous mood, he reached the entrance of his big house on the avenue, and in moody silence unlocked the door and entered the quiet hall. At once, to his surprise, a silent figure came forward to meet him, and, peering through the half-light, he recognized the figure of his secretary.

"Hullo, Morton," he exclaimed in surprise, "what's the trouble now?"

The secretary advanced with an air of caution. "There's a young woman waiting in the reception-room to see you, sir," he said in a low tone. "She's been here since ten o'clock, and she seems to be an uncommonly determined sort of person. In fact, she was too much for me, altogether. I couldn't get rid of her. She insists she's got to see you."

Palmer frowned, possibly with well-merited apprehension, for a girl to see him might mean any one of half-a-dozen disagreeable alternatives. With a sigh he drew back the portière and entered, closing the door after him as he did so.

The girl who rose to meet him was fashionably, even expensively gowned in a closely fitting black walking dress, cunningly designed to display to the best advantage the obvious attractions of her figure. Her face was so heavily veiled that her features were hardly to be distinguished, but to Palmer's relief, she was evidently an utter stranger to him. The lateness of the hour and the fact that she was alone did not seem to disturb her self-possession in the least; in fact, she even seemed faintly amused at Palmer's scrutiny.

"No," she said, as if in answer to his unspoken question, "you don't know me, Mr. Palmer. I don't think you've ever laid eyes on me before."

Palmer bowed courteously. "Then you will pardon me for saying that this is a rather unusual time for a visit," he rejoined. "Perhaps I may venture to ask your name and business."

The girl, without waiting for Palmer's invitation to do so, had resumed her seat. "You certainly may," she answered. "You're really very good not to throw me out through the window. I suppose I deserve it. My name is Annie Holton; my profession perhaps you can guess without my shocking you; my special business with you is that I've tumbled to something that ought to interest you a lot."

Palmer looked at her with the closest scrutiny. "Perhaps," he suggested, "if this is very important, you could call at ten o'clock to-morrow morning. I shall be at leisure then."

The girl laughed. "You probably think I'm crazy, or else that I'm an anarchist or something like that," she rejoined good-humoredly. "I'm sure I don't blame you a bit. But I'm neither one nor the other, and I can assure you I wouldn't be here at this hour if it wasn't worth it—for both of us, I hope. In the first place, I know about the little difficulty you're in."

Palmer shook his head. "I'm afraid there's some mistake," he said blandly. "You'll excuse me for reminding you—"

The girl cut him short with an impatient gesture. "Don't bluff!" she cried. "You ought to be able to see I'm no fool. I'm giving this to you straight, and you might as well go straight with me, too. I know half the story, to start with, and there's another quarter that's not very hard to guess, and you can fill in what's left, if you feel like it. Does that sound right?"

Palmer frowned. To him it sounded as if the pledge of secrecy had been violated almost as soon as made. "All right," he rejoined resignedly, "fire away!"

The girl hesitated a moment, then began, speaking slowly and with care.

"Well, here's the story," she said. "There's a man that you know named Gordon, who seems to be a pretty smooth proposition. He's been doing the Jekyll and Hyde act for two or three years now, and nobody's ever got on to him so far. Now, for some reason that I don't know, he's got it in for you, and puts up a game on you. It's all done very smooth, indeed. Two women—same profession as myself—are worked into it, one to play Miss Innocence, 'Her golden hair was hanging down her back,' part, you know, and the other to be the loving mother. Then there's—"

Palmer raised a protesting hand. "You can stop right there," he cried. "This is nothing but foolishness, and waste of time. I don't know who's been telling you all this rot, or what his object was, but one thing I do know, and that is that you've been most completely taken in. The only thing you've happened to get right is that I know a man named Gordon, and it also happens that he's one of the best friends I've got in the world. So any stories you're bringing me about him are just waste of breath."

The girl gave an impatient little sigh. "My dear Mr. Palmer," she said, "there's no use in our going on at cross purposes like this. I tell you once more I'm not easy to fool. I've seen my bit of the world, and I wouldn't be here wasting my time and yours if I didn't know what I was about. I don't ask much. Just give me five minutes to tell my story without interruption, and then, if you don't believe it, I'll go like a lamb, and leave you to be buncoed in peace, if you really enjoy that sort of thing. Isn't that fair?"

Palmer leaned back in his chair with an air of resignation, pulling out his watch as he did so. "Pardon my rudeness," he said ironically. "I'm unfortunate enough to be feeling a little tired. You may have your five minutes, free from interruption, and then I fear we shall have to say good night."

The girl nodded. "Thanks," she said briefly, "that's all I wanted. And I guess I won't waste any time, either. Now, as I was telling you, this Gordon is a pretty smooth kind of a guy. He goes into this thing right, from the breakaway. Stage setting, lights turned down, soft music, the whole show. Now, the play is to get you compromised with this girl, and then bleed you for all they think you'll stand for, so they get you off on an island somewhere alone with this girl—I don't know if it's really an island, or whether that's just a name they've got for it. Gordon's out there now, I believe; but, anyway, they get you there alone with the girl. Well, I suppose there's no need to go into details. I take it, though, that there's some play with knockout drops, or something of the sort. That's only a guess, though; you know what happened better than I do. Anyway, the point is that between them they got you dead to rights, and now they've started to bleed you. What they want, or how much they've got you for, I don't know, but it must be good and plenty, because the woman who played the smallest part of all flashes a roll as big as your arm, and, if a super gets that, what do the star and the leading lady get? I don't know, but I guess you do, all right.

"Now, they're two things more. One, how do I know all this? Because the woman who did the loving mother is a friend of mine, and she gets full up at my house last night, and tells me the whole yarn, or mostly the whole of it; enough so I can see you're being done for fair. Two, why do I come to you about it, instead of holding them up for money? Because I hate Gordon and his crowd, and I want to see you get back at them, and because if you can make them give back what they've stuck you for, it's worth your while to pay me well for putting you on. That's business, isn't it? There, I guess that covers it, and I guess I'm within my five minutes. So what do you say now? Is it 'Good night,' or is it 'Won't you stay a little longer'? Is it go or stay?"

Palmer's air of bored indifference had long since vanished. Now he sat silent, motionless, while the ticking of the clock was the only sound to be heard in the room. A minute passed, two, three. Then, with a quick intake of his breath, he leaned forward in his chair.

"It's stay," he said.

CHAPTER X

THE CRISIS

The sun still hung an hour high above the horizon. No faintest breath of wind was stirring, and the tall pines along the island's shore stood mirrored in the broad lake's placid calm. The wildfowl, true to their custom, were bedded in huge flocks far out towards the center of the lake, and what few ducks there were stirring, kept for the most part warily out of range of the point.

Gordon sat in the blind alone, and for so keen a sportsman the poor shooting seemed to

trouble him but little. On the contrary, his thoughts, which were of the pleasantest, had strayed far away from ducks and duck-shooting. He had played a difficult and a dangerous game, and had played it boldly and well. Rose and Mrs. Holton had acted their parts to perfection, and Palmer had behaved exactly as they had hoped he would. Gordon permitted himself a quiet smile of self-satisfaction. That was true enjoyment, after all. The ability to handle one's fellow-men; to humor them, to learn their weaknesses, and then to turn these weaknesses to one's own account; in that there was true satisfaction, in that there was the feeling of getting something really worth while from the game of life. So much for the past, and now for the future a hundred questions lay waiting to be solved. The problem as to whether a partner would be desirable, the best and quickest way of finding the right mine, the advertising campaign, the gaining of the public confidence, surely there were many things to be thought of yet, before the victory should be won.

At last, as the sun sank lower still, the folly of waiting any longer for the wildfowl to fly became apparent, and Gordon, rousing himself, was already beginning to gather up the decoys, when he caught sight of one of the little rowing skiffs putting out from the mainland. An instant feeling of uneasiness crept over him. "That's queer," he muttered to himself. "Vanulm isn't due till to-morrow, and he wouldn't be rowing at that rate, anyway. I wonder who it can be."

The boat was certainly approaching at high speed, the long furrowed wake stretching away behind, and a little curl of white foam showing under her bow. As she passed out of sight around the easterly point of the island, Gordon gave a sudden start of surprise. "By God," he muttered, "it looks like Palmer. I wonder what's gone wrong now."

He had not long to wait for his answer. Five minutes passed, and then down the path, walking rapidly, came striding a man now easily recognizable as Palmer. Straight on he came, and Gordon, as he watched him, felt his heart suddenly begin to beat loud and fast.

Palmer's face was flushed to a dull, angry red, his eyes were glaring, his upper lip was drawn upwards from his teeth, and his whole face was working convulsively. He was still some distance away when he began to speak, his voice pitched high in an ecstasy of rage.

"Damn you, Gordon!" he shouted, shaking his clenched fist. "You dirty blackguard! You blackmailer! You canting hypocrite! I've got you to rights now, you skulking hound!"

He laughed a strained, unnatural laugh as he paused a few feet away, fairly trembling with excitement. Then he went on: "You smooth, dirty villain. You pretty nearly did for me, didn't you? But, by heavens, I've got you where I want you now. I've blocked your pretty little game. It's state's prison for you, you and your precious gang."

Gordon stood staring at him, while an expression of utter amazement came over his face. "Harry," he cried, "what do you mean? What are you talking about? Are you going crazy, or am I?"

Palmer laughed sneeringly. "Good," he cried; "she told me you'd try to bluff it out somehow." Then, with sudden change of tone, he added fiercely, "Drop it, Gordon. It's no use. Don't be a fool. I tell you the thing's up. Did you ever hear of a girl named Annie Holton?"

An instant change came over Gordon's face, followed quickly by a look almost of relief. "Know Annie Holton," he cried. "I should say I had reason to. The most unprincipled woman on earth, and one who hates me as much as one human being can hate another. What lies has she been telling you, Harry?"

He spoke frankly and fearlessly, and for the first time an expression of doubt came over Palmer's face, but he did not hesitate.

"No lies," he exclaimed, "but a lot more truth than you'll care to have known, I'll warrant. I know now that those charming relations of yours were women of the street, got up for the occasion. I ruined a young girl, did I?" He roared and shook with unwholesome laughter. "I was made a fool of by one of your mistresses. I was—"

Gordon took a quick step forward, his eyes blazing with wrath.

"Stop it!" he cried sharply, and his voice rang with the tone of absolute command. "Another word, and I'll kill you in your tracks. I won't stand it, Palmer. I won't take such talk from you or from any man living. You're either drunk or crazy, man. You're out of your mind."

Palmer hesitated, cowed in spite of himself. "I don't believe you," he said sulkily. "And you've got to come back with me now and face the music. If I've slandered you or any one else, I'll make it right, and if I haven't—" his voice rose again, "I'll make you pay the piper for the fun you've had."

He stopped abruptly, and for a moment both men stood silent. Gordon was thinking hard and fast. The game was up; that much was obvious. Rose had been right. One little slip, she had said from the first, would ruin everything, and now, just as it all seemed safe and sure, just as the game was all but won, that slip had come. Somehow Annie Holton had got the story from her mother, and had gone straight to Palmer with it. The mischief was done, unless—

Mechanically, as one does the most trivial things in the moments of greatest strain, he went on putting away the decoys. Suddenly he straightened up, and looked Palmer squarely in the face. "Harry," he said more quietly, "this whole thing is an awful mistake from beginning to end, but we certainly won't make things any better by standing here quarreling. I won't say one word in criticism of your action in coming on to a man's private property as you've done, and using the language you've used to me, for I can understand the provocation you think you're laboring under. On the contrary, I'll go back with you with all the pleasure in the world. All I want is to have you bring that Holton woman before us, and have her dare repeat a word of that story. That's all I ask. But in the meantime, Harry, remember we've been friends a long time, and let's both try to act a little more like gentlemen, at any rate."

The unnatural flush had slowly receded from Palmer's face, leaving him deathly pale. Evidently the strain upon him had been terrific. He nodded shortly. "All right," he said, his voice sounding hard and unnatural, "that's fair enough. But back to town we go to-night. I can't stand this much longer. I've lived through hell to-day. So it's back to town to-night. Is that understood?"

Gordon nodded. "Certainly," he assented readily. Then with apparent irrelevance, he added, "How did you know where to find me? Ring up the office?"

Palmer stared at him sullenly. "I don't see what difference that makes," he said; "but if you want to know, your friend the Holton girl told me."

"Ah, yes," said Gordon, "that was it, of course. I might have thought. Stupid of me."

Slowly they walked along toward the house, until suddenly, near the little cluster of pines, Gordon stopped. "Look here, Palmer," he cried, "I don't want to ask favors of you when you're naturally impatient and worked up over this thing, but on the other hand, my conscience is clear, and half an hour more or less won't make any difference, anyway. The last two nights there's been a big flock of Canada geese trading by the point here, and I'm keen to get a crack at them. In fact, that was what I came over for to-night. If it isn't too trivial at such a time, do you mind letting me try them?"

Palmer hesitated, and Gordon hastened to add, "Unless, of course, you're anxious to get to the station earlier for any other reason. I suppose, though, you left word at your office or your home where you'd gone, so that you don't really care particularly when you do get back."

Palmer shook his head. "No, I didn't," he answered. "This thing broke me all up, Gordon, and I posted right out here to see you. If you really want to try the geese, go ahead. I suppose it won't make any difference as to the train, anyway."

"No," Gordon assented; "that's true. There's no train we can get for two hours yet. A worse little branch road, I suppose, was never run anywhere. That station agent's going to get fired one of these fine days. He's never at the station when I come out."

"He wasn't there to-day," growled Palmer. "You've got the damnedest, out-of-the-way place to get to I ever saw. Your ducks aren't worth your trouble."

They had reached the edge of the little grove as Palmer finished speaking. Gordon's whole bearing seemed to have changed entirely. His eye was watchful, his step alert, as he snapped the sixteen-gage open and quietly slipped in a couple of shells. "We'll only wait a few minutes," he said. "Sometimes they come straight from the north. Would you mind looking out that way?"

Palmer obeyed, staring moodily out across the placid surface of the water. The sun had set, and in the faint, gathering dusk the brooding silence of the lake had about it something sinister, unearthly, threatening. Man, and his petty passions, his childish hopes and fears, seemed somehow strangely dwarfed into utter insignificance in the midst of nature's impassive, inscrutable calm. Involuntarily Palmer shivered.

"I'm afraid it's too late for them, Gordon," he said slowly. "I don't really believe—"

The sentence was left unfinished. With a motion quick as thought, Gordon threw the sixteen-gage to his shoulder, pressed the barrel to Palmer's back just below the left shoulder blade, and pressed the trigger.

At the muffled report the murdered man's arms flew out and up as if grasping for support, his head twitched back sharply, and like a log he fell. A horrible choking sound issued from his distorted lips, his body twitched convulsively once or twice, and he lay still, his head twisted to one side, the bared teeth grinning upward from the mouth contorted into the ghostly semblance of a smile.

Mechanically Gordon leaned his gun against a tree; then looked fearfully about him. Still, calm, motionless, the lake lay before him. No wind stirred the pines. The silence was the silence of death. A sickening faintness crept over him. He stifled an impulse to shout for help, and set his teeth sharply together. "God!" he muttered, "God!" Then, with averted face, he picked up the ghastly, inert thing that had been Harry Palmer, and, staggering with it to the very edge of the quicksand, cast it from him with all his strength. A moment, and it had disappeared from sight.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE FIRELIGHT

Before the fire in the big library May Sinclair sat gazing into the leaping flames, the book she had taken from its shelf lying unopened in her lap, her thoughts far away. Pleasant, indeed, must have been the land through which they were journeying, for a smile played about her lips, and the little sigh that escaped her as she nestled more closely in the big arm-chair was but of content.

"Everything in the world," so ran her thoughts, "everything to make a girl happy." Her bluff, soldierly father, masterful enough with others, but tenderness itself to her; her mother, kind, loving, watchful, ever apprehensive lest some harm might befall her; her home; her friends; her work at the settlement; her wealth, prized not for itself, but for the use she could make of it for others; last of all—and she smiled at her own self-deceit, knowing that she had purposely kept it to the last that she might be free to dream on and on without interruption—last of all, her lover and the thought of their wedding-day, now distant but one short month.

The clock struck nine. Momentarily she wondered what might be keeping him, and then the spell of the future, insistent, not to be denied, drew her on and on, and again she was lost in fancy's realm. She could picture the wedding ceremony in the big church on the avenue, and at the thought of the ordeal she shivered a little, half in pleasure and half in fear. Then the honeymoon—and here she gave a sigh of utter rapture—for with all her dreams of working and doing for others, she was but human. To think of it! Six months abroad! England, France, Italy, Switzerland, and all with Harry alone to herself. To think of it; and she blushed and laughed as she found herself wishing that the month would hasten swiftly by. Then the return, to find herself mistress of Harry's mansion, hostess to all of his friends, sole ruler over all the vast domain of housewifery. So much they had to do! How could they find time for it all, for it was not to be all entertainment and fun? She must keep on with her reading and her studying, and she must make Harry more interested in such things, so that they could feel that they were doing everything together. Then there was the settlement work. Her clubs and classes—those must be kept up—for of what use were learning and culture and refinement if they could not in some manner be used for those less favored by fortune than herself? Here was the only real difference of opinion between them. Strive as she would, she could not manage to interest Harry in her cases at the Settlement House. He would escort her there, and call for her again, but to get him inside the door, for that even her skill would not suffice. That, however, would doubtless be somehow arranged. There could be no disagreement between people who loved each other as she and Harry did. What a busy life they were going to have. And then, some day, she supposed, she hoped, and her pure heart leaped with joy at the thought, there would be babies to love and care for,— she closed her eyes and for one rapt instant strove to pierce the veil, to gaze upon the deep, strong, mighty current of life, flowing steadily, swiftly, resistlessly—who knew whither? Face to face in that one tense moment she looked upon all the mystery of existence, the Sphinx's riddle, the problem of the ages, huge, illimitable, vast,—birth, life, death, so real and yet so unreal, actualities and yet but fancies, and only fixed and certain Fate, God, Eternity—

She gasped suddenly for breath and opened her eyes with a little start of fear. The clock on the mantel struck ten. With a quick gesture of disappointment she rose. "I'm sure he said to-night," she murmured, "well, he'll explain about it to-morrow." Then she snatched Palmer's picture from its place and pressed it to her lips. "Life is so beautiful, dear," she whispered softly, "and all because I love you and you love me."

Over across the city, far away to the northeast, on a quiet side street near Bradfield's was Annie Holton's tiny flat. To find its occupant at home at nine o'clock in the evening was a rare occurrence, but on this particular night, for perhaps the first time in a fortnight, she had not gone to Bradfield's, but sat alone in front of the fire, whose leaping flames furnished the only light in the little room.

She, too, was busy with her thoughts. It was not often that a thing as big as this came her way. Sheer luck it had been from the first. A suspicion that her mother had been a little over eager in urging her to go on the motor trip with the warm hearted western millionaire, a suspicion confirmed on her return by a chance word incautiously let fall; then her unlooked-for good fortune in getting the old woman gloriously drunk, and finally the startling discovery of the whole story, and her instant visit to Harry Palmer. With him, too, it had been touch and go. What if she

had not been able to persuade him to listen; what if she had failed to convince him of the truth of her story? Gordon's game had been a good one. In spite of her desire for revenge, she felt a fierce admiration for his cleverness; just that one flaw, the picking of Mrs. Holton for one of his helpers, risking the taking on of a woman once notorious as a drunkard, and still given to occasional lapses. That one fact had meant Gordon's defeat and her own salvation.



The struggle between her old infatuation for Gordon, and her hatred of Rose Ashton had been bitter, but brief. Hatred had triumphed, and yet to-night her exultation meant regret as well. The thought of holding Rose in her power made her clench her shapely hands, and brought a tigerish gleam to her bold black eyes, and still the afterthought would come that it was Gordon, after all, who would suffer most. Gordon was the one man she had ever cared the snap of her fingers for, and to harm him—and yet, since she had had the bitterness of seeing him desert her for Rose, there was a fierce pleasure in knowing that she would be sending him where she would never again know the agony of seeing him under the spell of the girl she loathed with all her heart.

And her own future? Five thousand dollars. What could she not do with that? First, clothes, of course. She would be the best dressed woman at Bradfield's. Jewels, too. And a little laid up for a rainy day, for Annie Holton was level-headed, and saw with grim philosophy the fate of the poor, tawdry, painted things of the street, who served to point the moral, when youth and good looks have fled.

"I'm lucky," she cried aloud challengingly, "I'm one of the lucky ones. I'm—"

She broke off sharply with a little cry of disgust. "You fool," she said, in a very different tone, a tone of the bitterest self-contempt, "you poor, weak fool! You know you're miserable. You know everything's a sham. You know your life isn't worth sixpence to you. And all because you're such a fool, with a dozen men crazy after you, you can't be satisfied because you can't have the one you want."

The clock chimed the hour of ten. For a moment she sat silent, and then slowly nodded her head. "It oughtn't to be so," she said with conviction, "but it's the truth, just the same. A woman can get along if the man she's stuck on is stuck on her—and if he isn't, she's better dead."

In the parlor of her pretty little home on Dalton Street Rose Ashton was pacing restlessly to and fro. Finally, with a sigh of weariness, she flung herself down on the sofa, and lay quiet, gazing into the dying embers with wide-open, unseeing eyes.

Wave after wave, a flood of bitter, remorseful thoughts swept over her. What a weak thing, she mused, a woman is, after all. "To know the right and still the wrong pursue," she quoted to herself. "That's what I'm doing now, and that's what I've done for a year. Perhaps, before that, I wasn't to blame, but since I met Dick it's all been so different. Now I know, and yet three times in

a year I've lowered myself to depths of which no decent woman would even dream. And perhaps I've got more shame before me still. And yet I do it—hating it, protesting, drawing back, almost refusing,—and then doing it, because he tells me to. I might as well be honest. I've damned myself for a man who's using me to help himself, and I've done it just on the hope that he's going to be honest with me and do what he's promised. I've done it because I'm weak, I've done it because I couldn't help myself, I've done it—because I'm a woman."

She sat silently watching the last embers die. The clock in the square boomed the hour of ten. With a sigh of utter weariness she rose.

"Life for a woman," she murmured, "is safe—monotonous, perhaps, but safe—until the man comes along. And then, the old life and all its memories are gone for ever in the twinkling of an eye, and the woman's true life begins. And perhaps, after all, the old life was the better, for the new may be Heaven—and it may be hell."

CHAPTER XII

THE FINAL OBSTACLE

Mechanically Gordon rowed across to the darkening shore; mechanically he traveled the path to the road, and followed the road to the station; mechanically he boarded the train and sat quietly in his seat, to all outward appearances calm and indifferent, until the city lights gleamed a welcome through the dark, and the train clanked and bumped its way over the drawbridge, and passed from the silence of the night into the bustle and roar of the noisy, smoky station.

Outwardly composed, but his brain was all the while in a turmoil, so that some thought for which he was seeking would not come to his mind, but seemed constantly to keep just beyond his grasp. Far back in his brain a ghastly, haunting something still lurked and mocked him, and yet, seated there in the train, filled with its freight of every-day prosaic passengers, the stout conductor roaring the indistinguishable names of the numberless little way-stations, that terrible quarter of an hour on the island seemed fantastic, unreal, impossible of truth. He waited almost expectantly, thinking every moment to awaken as if from a nightmare, to feel some friend's hand laid upon his shoulder and to start suddenly back to life again; perchance even to see Palmer himself enter the train, and to tell him, laughing, of the curious dream.

Palmer! He pulled himself together sharply. This was no time to let his brain play him such tricks as these. Now, when he needed every atom of good judgment and cool daring at his command. Palmer himself—God! Somewhere back on the deserted island, sucked down and down into the depths of the earth, was that mangled, grinning, wide-eyed thing that had been careless, irresponsible Harry Palmer, across whose limited vision real thoughts of life—and death—had scarcely so much as passed.

With a sudden intense effort he tore his mind free from its clinging fancies. For good or ill—the meeting on the island had been real. For good or ill—the murder was done. And now, what next? How best to carry through the game, begun selfishly, recklessly perhaps, but with no plot or even thought of bodily harm to any one, and now, almost at its ending, grown suddenly desperate and black with tragedy.

Annie Holton—he wished now that he had been more deliberate, and had asked Palmer more questions—first. And yet, in doing that, there might have been greater danger still; suspicion might have been more keenly aroused, and even as it was, the situation, indeed, seemed tolerably clear. Somehow, the girl had managed to get the story from her mother, and had gone straight to Palmer with it. Would she have told any one else? Obviously not. It was to her interest only to possess and to impart the information to Palmer. And now Palmer was out of the way—and Annie Holton was left. So much for to-night, but to-morrow—ah, that was the thought that had been eluding him—tomorrow she would know of Palmer's disappearance, and she was the only person in the world who knew that when Palmer had left the city he was bound for the island. The deduction was only too obvious. Not alone his fortunes and his liberty, but his life itself, hung in this girl's power. To-night then, at any cost, he must see her; and to-night, somewhere, somehow, her silence must be assured.

Somehow—ah, it was just there that the problem lay. By what means, then, could he gain his end? His old relations with her, once so tenderly intimate, so fraught with reckless passion, could he once more recall the past, and make it live again? No, scarcely that. After deserting her for Rose, and after her betrayal of his secret; hardly, it seemed, could the breach between them be healed. And even if it were possible, there again would be Rose to reckon with. Unconsciously he

frowned and shook his head. No, the way out did not lie there.

What else, then? Money? The promise of that she must already have had, and, indeed, if the question came to be one of money, if that were all, though he might beggar himself to his last cent, still all that Palmer's friends would have to do would be to double or treble any offer that he himself might make.

No, there was no hope there. The game was going badly. The cards lay all against him, unless—unless—

A feeling of repulsion, almost of physical nausea, crept over him—and yet, must he give up thus early in the struggle, for lack of courage and nerve? Because somehow he shrank—because, somehow, in spite of all, he pitied the lips that had known his kisses. A curse on the whole wild venture. Was there then no way out? No way but *that*? Yes, one other way, indeed, there was, but only one. And which of the two to choose. Logic, clear, straightforward thought and argument, led but one way; and now it was plain to him that that was the way he must take. And then, in spite of him, again that ghastly memory would come; and, life and logic contending, life and logic inevitably at odds, the issue once more was blurred. Not *that*. Whatever else, no more of that.

Thus, over and over, his thoughts, ranging in a circle, seeking an outlet where no outlet lay, swung back at last, repulsed at every turn, to the same starting point. For once baffled, perplexed, uncertain, now firmly resolute, now tremblingly terrified, now wholly despairing, he sat in his seat and railed, first at Fate, then at himself, then at the other pawns that moved hither and thither across the board—blindly perhaps—perhaps directed by the Master's hand. Thus he sat and pondered, until the train, with a grinding and jarring of brakes, came to its final stop, and threading his way in and out among the alighting passengers, he left the station and mingled with the crowds that thronged the street.

For a little distance, quickly and surely he made his way, and then, all at once, amid the familiar scenes, the light and the noise and the bustle of the crowd, for just a moment of time the tense strain on body and mind relaxed, and on the instant, like a flood, the inevitable reaction swept over him. Suddenly, without warning, he found himself gasping for breath; something tightened, like a band of iron, about his throat; his knees trembled under him; and shudder after shudder shook him from head to foot. Deathly faint and sick, he clutched at a near-by railing for support, and for a moment or two that seemed age-long, stood helpless, powerless, until the attack to some extent had passed, and, shaken, weak and exhausted, he came again to himself. Then, after a moment, with an intense effort at self-control, he loosed his hold, and managed, dizzily enough, to make his way into the first saloon that lay in his path. The pallor of the face reflected in the mirror fairly startled him, and three times he had to moisten his lips with his swelling tongue before he could order the drink he craved. Once, twice, thrice he drained his glass before his weakness passed, and then, in a flash, his heart began to pound, and the life blood all at once seemed again to stream riotously into every pulsing vein. It was not until a half hour later that he left the saloon, and then the man who swung out again into the night was a man with head held high, with steadied nerves of steel, and with a brain again crystal clear—perchance too clear. Only one thing now—one thing in the way—one thing to be done—and the entrance to his life—his splendid, glorious, mighty life—would lie open before him. No time now for other thoughts of what was past—past, it seemed, long, long ages ago—now, at the instant, but one thing remained—only one thing.

Along the familiar route he passed, now by the park, now along Fulton Street, now through the sinister, deserted byways on the borderland of the city, and now at last he neared the quiet side street, two blocks away from Bradfield's, where Annie Holton lived in her tiny flat, a street as unfrequented and inconspicuous as that on which the gambling house itself was built. To his relief, for the last half dozen blocks he had met no one, not even a casual pedestrian like himself. Perhaps a trifle more inattentive and preoccupied than was his wont, he had failed to notice, almost at his journey's end, that he had been an object of interest to at least one person. For a young man, hidden in the shadow of a doorway across the street, had watched him as he ran quickly up the steps, and then, when he had disappeared, the watcher, in the most casual way, had strolled to the corner, crossed over, and taken up his stand in the doorway next to Annie Holton's home. And now he stood there, quietly waiting.

Gordon ran quickly up the stairs, silently extinguished the flickering gas jet in the hall, and knocked softly on the door. There was a moment of suspense, then a faint noise from within, and in another instant the door was opened, and Annie Holton, her light wrap drawn closely around her, stood before him.

Dim as was the light within, it was far brighter than the darkness in the hallway, so that for a moment the girl could hardly distinguish the tall figure, muffled in the long overcoat, that stood without. Then Gordon took a quick step forward. "Annie," he cried, and at the sound of the well-known voice the girl gave a little cry, partly of wonder, partly of fear.

"Dick," she gasped, and the blood seemed suddenly to leave her heart, "what are you doing here?"

There was a moment's silence. Then, without speaking, Gordon crossed the threshold, brushing the girl aside as he did so, and closed the door quickly behind him.

It was not until long after midnight that the door again opened and Gordon stepped out. Slowly, almost inch by inch, he came forth into the darkness of the hall; slowly, hesitatingly, as if in deadly fear, he crept down the flight of stairs that led to the street. In the silence of the hallway, the quick, gasping intake of his breath could be distinctly heard. His step faltered, and the hand that gripped the railing of the stairs shook as if with palsy. Surely a strangely altered man was Richard Gordon. Down the stairs he passed. Then, for a long time he stood in front of the outer glass door, listening anxiously for any sound or movement. Finally, as if summoning all that was left of waning strength and resolution, he opened the door and stepped forth into the street.

His hurried glance to right and left showed the way to be clear. Then suddenly, half-way down the steps, his heart gave a quick leap of fright, as the door of the adjoining house opened quietly and a young man emerged. "Good night, Bill," he called gaily to some one within, "see you tomorrow," and with a casual glance at Gordon, strolled off, whistling, down the street.

Gordon drew a long breath of infinite relief. "God!" he muttered; and then, with hands clenched, walking as if every step cost him infinite effort, he left Annie Holton's flat, with all its many memories, behind him for ever.

In the little room up-stairs, the firelight, slowly dying, fell softly on the slender figure in the armchair, lying there peacefully, quietly, as if in sleep.

PART II

THE GAME

CHAPTER I

AN AMBITION IS ATTAINED

To the press, the total and unexplained disappearance of a well-known millionaire and young man about town came as a golden opportunity, and flaring head-lines and extra editions followed close upon the heels of the tragedy. Indeed, for several days in succession, the Palmer case managed to hold the center of the stage. Theory after theory was advanced by the police, by the private detectives called in on the case, and by the papers themselves; and then, nothing transpiring to clear up the mystery, the attention of the public was in turn distracted by a railroad horror, a prize fight of national importance, and the scandal caused by the head of the pork trust running away with a chorus girl; and thus, before the excitement created by this sequence of events, the Palmer case, save to a very few, ceased to be an object of interest for all time.

Verily, the world moves rapidly these days, and human life—always excepting one's own—is but cheaply esteemed. Men are plenty, and one more or less—still, of course, always excepting one's self—what difference does it make, anyway?

Overshadowed by the importance of the Palmer case, the violent death of a woman of the underworld on an obscure street near Bradfield's attracted little attention, and by the papers the affair was disposed of in a few brief lines of the smallest type. Suicide seemed to be favored as the cause of death, and despondency and weariness with life the reason therefor.

That Gordon should be questioned both by Mrs. Holton and Rose was inevitable. Not that Mrs. Holton, with hazy memories of talking too freely while the wine had worked its spell upon her, altogether regretted that Providence had seen fit to intervene, or that Rose, after her work was done, was deeply concerned with Palmer's subsequent fate, but to both, knowing the situation as

they did, the sequence of events seemed, though lacking the faintest shadow of proof, beyond all question to implicate Gordon. To both he made the same answer. He admitted that Palmer's disappearance, coming just at the time it did, was a remarkable stroke of good fortune for all of them, but as to any knowledge of it, outside of the theories advanced by the papers, he blandly professed entire ignorance. That Annie Holton should have come to her death on the night of the same day on which Palmer had disappeared, he further acknowledged to be a most remarkable coincidence, but so far as he could see, nothing more than that. And with this they were fain to be content.

To Rose, indeed, the succeeding weeks brought a vague sense of injustice and disappointment. Constantly Gordon had referred to the getting of the money from Palmer as the turning point in their fortunes; the first real step towards the culmination of their plans; as marking the time when he should have leisure to be constantly at her side; and now, so far from this being so, she found as the days went by that she saw less of him even than before. Moreover, on the rare occasions when he did dine with her at Bradfield's or call at her rooms, he was preoccupied, inattentive, distraught, his mind only too plainly upon other things.

And in truth, Gordon for a time had found himself more perplexed than he would perhaps have cared to own. Even with sufficient capital, and a practically certain knowledge of the future course of the metal market, the problem still remained to him how best to make use of his point of vantage. The first move in the game successfully accomplished, the second was yet to be made.

At length, after long deliberation, he went to young Bob Randall, floor broker for Parkman and Brooks. Randall's father, old Sam Randall, the big cotton man, had just emerged victor from a desperate fight with the Parker-Moorfield interests, the loudest bellowing and highest tossing of all the great cotton bulls, in which battle, besides the prestige gained, he was incidentally reported to have cleaned up something over two millions on the sharp break in July cotton. Young Bob, besides having money back of him, was one of those gifted mortals who seem always able to carry others with them in whatever they choose to undertake. With a national reputation as an athlete while still at school, in college he had played end on the football team, and then made the crew, both with the same ease with which he had been chosen president of his class, and called out as first man on the Alpha Chi. In addition, in his few leisure moments he had worked enough, as he had himself expressed it, to "somehow get by," so that at last, infinitely to his friends' surprise, and somewhat to his own, he found himself, at the end of his four years, entitled to his sheepskin, and perchance with somewhat mingled feelings of regret for lost opportunities of learning, and of satisfaction at more substantial and worldly-wise success, heard himself, together with three hundred of his mates, welcomed by the venerable president in his class-day address to "the fellowship of educated men."

To young Randall, then, over the coffee and cigars in a private dining-room at the Federal, Gordon broached the subject.

"Bob," he said abruptly, "do you want to make a barrel of money?"

Randall nodded. "Sure thing," he answered briefly. "How?"

Gordon did not at once reply, and when he did, it was to answer the query with another.

"What do you know about coppers?" he asked.

"Soft," answered the younger man readily, "and going lower, too. There's a big surplus supply of the metal stored somewhere, or at least so everybody says."

Gordon leaned back in his chair, gazing at his companion from beneath half-closed eyelids.

"Just one more question, Bob," he said; "don't think it's an impertinence. About how much are you getting now?"

"Three thou," answered Randall promptly. "And now give me a turn. What in the devil are you driving at, anyway?"

Gordon hesitated the veriest instant, as if choosing which course to pursue. Then he answered, speaking with the utmost earnestness.

"Here's the story, Bob. I've got a great chance; the kind that only comes once in a man's lifetime, and of course I'd be a fool if I didn't want to make the most of it. It's perfectly true that coppers are soft; it's perfectly true that they're going lower, but that there's any accumulation of the metal I know to be absolutely false. And more than that: I can almost name the precise day when there's going to be launched the biggest copper boom this country's ever seen. A boom that's going to last, barring the absolutely unforeseen, for several years, and that's going to provide the speculative opportunity of the century. Now my proposition is just this: Leave Parkman and Brooks at once; get your father to advance you a hundred thousand dollars, and then start in partnership with me. I'll put in a like amount, and this information, which I'll absolutely guarantee, against your ability to bring your father and some of his crowd in as customers, to say nothing of your own following among the younger set. Nothing succeeds like success. We'll do well by our customers, and incidentally we'll make our own reputations and our

fortunes beside. Bob, it's an absolute cinch, and I don't mind letting you know that I started with a list of twenty men as possibilities, and eliminated one after the other until you were left as the man I wanted for a partner. Now, what do you say?"

Randall had allowed his cigar to go out, as he sat listening to Gordon's words.

"It sounds good," he said at length, "but, Gordon, tell me one thing. I know your reputation on the Exchange, of course, and I know you're a bully good judge of the market, but the information you're giving me is away out of the ordinary. I think you ought to be willing to tell me where and how you got it."

Gordon smiled. "I can tell you where," he answered readily, "but not how. Is this good enough for you?" and, leaning forward, he whispered a name known the world over.

Randall started slightly, and then gave a low whistle of astonishment. "The devil you say!" he exclaimed. "Well, you have struck it rich. I didn't know you stood in with him."

Gordon smiled again. "It isn't a thing that's generally known," he said softly, "and of course you realize I'm trusting a great deal to your discretion in talking so freely, but I feel so sure you're not going to let the chance slip, Bob, that I thought it was the best way to let you know the whole situation and keep nothing back at all. Do you feel reasonably satisfied now?"

Randall nodded. "I'll have to see the governor, first, of course," he answered; "but I guess it will be all right. That's just the kind of thing he rather likes, you know. I'll dine with you again day after to-morrow, if you say so."

Thus it was that they met again two days later, to sit discussing plans and details far into the morning, and thus it was that a month after, in their big new offices in the Equitable Building, with a generous bank account, with the hearty backing of old Sam Randall, and with every prospect of success, the stock brokerage firm of Gordon and Randall was formally launched.

CHAPTER II

THE ETHEL CLAIM

The sun, sinking low, for an instant shone through the gap in the distant hills in one splendid blaze of light, enfolding in its radiance, as if in friendly farewell, the little cabin which lay so snugly nestled away on the towering slope of Burnt Mountain.

Abe Peters, gaunt, unkempt, kindly of face and gentle of manner, turned for a moment from his methodical washing of the supper dishes to glance down and away far over the distant valley.

"An' there's another day gone," he said slowly, "an' there's old Ph[oe]be once again tellin' us good night. All sorts of ways she comes up over the mountain in the morning, and all sorts of ways she goes down behind the hills at night, but that's the way I like to see her set the best; sort of nice and peaceful like and calm."

He turned to the other occupant of the cabin. "But there," he added, after a moment, "I expect it seems kind of all-fired lonesome to a city man, don't it now? I expect you find us folks out here live pretty common."

Frost, short, stout, pleasant of face and manner, turned from the window. "No, sir," he said heartily, "not a bit of it. I'm a city man part of the time, but the other part I have to spend just knocking around the world, here, there and everywhere. And after all, Abe, four walls and a roof, a fire and a bit to eat and drink; that's all a man's got a right to expect, and that's all he needs, too."

Peters nodded in pleasant assent. "Yes, sir, that's right," he answered, "but it ain't every one that thinks the way you do. Most of 'em are crazy for somethin' they can't get; money mad, or liquor mad, or minin' mad, or somethin' of the kind. Speakin' in general, it ain't what you'd call a contented world, no ways at all."

Frost laughed. "Abe," he said good-humoredly, "you're a real philosopher. You've got about the same ideas concerning things that I have, and that's why I respect you and esteem you as a man of intelligence and good sense."

Up the path, standing out in shadowy relief against the fading afterglow in the west, a figure

strode past the cabin window. Frost turned idly to his host. "There goes a late worker, Abe," he said. "I wonder if that might be Harrison you were telling me about."

Peters stepped to the window, shading his eyes with his hand as he gazed out into the fast gathering twilight. "No, that ain't Harrison," he replied. "Jack would be steppin' out sprier'n that. That must be the old man, I reckon. Yes, that's him, for sure."

Frost turned from the window, and, seating himself by the log fire, began leisurely to fill his pipe. "So we see the gentlemen to-night, do we?" he asked.

Peters nodded. "That's what we do," he answered, "and, Mr. Frost, I'm givin' this to you straight. I'm a friend of Jim's and I'm a friend of yours, and I want to see you both come out of this thing right. And the way to do it's for you to buy a half interest in the Ethel. That's best for him and it's best for you, too."

Frost smiled. "So you think half a loaf's better than no bread, do you?" he said. "Well, that's right enough sometimes, but where a man wants to buy the whole blamed bake-shop, why, then it doesn't quite seem to fit. Yes, I've got to do my best, anyway. And I wonder, Abe, which is the real man I ought to get next to here, Mason or Harrison."

Peters put the last dish away on the shelf, and in turn drew up his chair and, fumbling in his pocket, drew forth and lighted a grimy pipe. He shook his head doubtfully.

"That's more'n I can tell," he answered, "but we've got half an hour yet before we start, an' I can give you the story, anyway; then you can figure things out for yourself, an' you won't be blamin' me. How's that suit?"

Frost blew a beautifully rounded ring of smoke, and leisurely watched it float upward. "Fine," he assented. "Just what I was going to ask. I'm all attention, Abe. Let her go."

For some minutes Peters puffed in silence; then took his pipe from his mouth and began.

"In the first place," he said slowly, "Jim Mason's an all-fired smart man. He wa'nt born and brought up here, like I was. He used to live down Octagon way. Soon as he left school, he went to copper minin'. I've heard him tell about it fifty times. 'I began,' he says, 'at the bottom o' the mine an' the bottom o' my trade, an' I worked pretty well up to the top in both of 'em.' An' it's the truth, too. He was one o' the best surface men at the lake, an' earnin' good money; layin' it away, too, an' that's more than a lot of 'em can say. Then he gets married an' settles down, an' then damned if a while after that an epidemic o' typhoid don't hit the Octagon camp, an' Jim's wife takes it an' dies in a week. Well, that breaks him up complete. After a while he finds he can't stand it round home no ways, so he takes his little girl an' moves up here to Seneca. Always he's claimin' the Onondaga lode hits here somewheres after it dips. So he fools around for a while, an' then, after a year or so, he stakes out his claim, names it the Ethel after his little girl, hires a gang o' men, an' goes to work. Four years he's fitted out for, an' blamed if they don't turn out to be four hard luck years. First he strikes tough rock, then the price o' labor goes up on him, then he gets sick himself, an' it's most a year before he's right again; it's one thing here and another there, so finally he has to let his gang go, an' by that time he's so plumb crazy over his claim that he goes on workin' her by himself, everybody but him knowin' he couldn't do nothin' that way if he lived to be as old as Methusalem. Still, he don't seem to care, an' goes right on pluggin' away alone.

"Now here's where Harrison comes in. Jack's a pretty likely young man, an' he'd got to be Jim's foreman, an' was mighty sweet on the little girl. No blame to him, either. She's as pretty as a picture, an' smart as chain lightnin', but let to run wild like a colt. Long as she gets the old man's meals, an' keeps the house cleaned up, he don't care a mite what she does the rest o' the time. I guess, though, the girl's got discontented like, an' she'd be mighty glad to have the old man strike it rich, so's she could get out o' here for good an' move off to the city somewheres. Well, when the rest o' the gang goes, Harrison says he won't leave, but he'll work along a spell with the old man, an' if they strike things rich Jim can treat him any ways he thinks is right. Course, though, it ain't the old man or the mine Jack cares about; it's Ethel he's after, an' as I say, small blame to him.

"So there you are. The old man's the legal owner, but Jack's got a kind of a say-so about the mine, too. The old man's sensible enough about everythin' else, but half crazy about the mine, an' Jack's sensible enough about everythin' else, an' the mine, too, but he's half crazy about the girl. So that's the story, an' there you are."

Frost, rising, nodded. "I guess," he said slowly, "the old man's the one I want. I can tell better after I've seen 'em, though. What's the use of waiting, Abe? Let's go along over and size 'em up."

For answer Peters rose and put on his coat, and a moment later they had left the cabin.

Meanwhile, over at Mason's, Jack Harrison had come slowly up the path, the stoop of his broad shoulders and the slight stiffness of his usually springy gait showing that there are limits beyond which the strongest muscle and sinew can not with safety be driven. Entering the kitchen and seeing no one, he stepped out on to the broad veranda which surrounded the house, and came suddenly on the girl he was seeking, seated alone and gazing idly out over the broad sweep of the darkening valley.

To find Ethel Mason in an attitude even suggesting meditation was an occurrence so rare that the young man was fairly startled. "Hullo, Ethel," he exclaimed, "anythin' gone wrong?"

The girl started to her feet. Slight of figure, slender and graceful as a deer, the brown curls clustering around her pretty face made her at first sight seem little more than a child in appearance, an impression, however, no sooner formed than at once dispelled by the soft curves of her figure, and the poise and self-reliance of her manner as she answered him.

"Yes," she cried rebelliously, "there's plenty wrong. I'm just sick and tired of the way things are going on. He doesn't give me enough a week to keep house for a dog; I haven't had a cent to spend on myself for a month; and then last night there's a dance over at the Hall, and every girl in the county can go but me, and I haven't a single thing to my name I can wear, and so I have to stay at home. Cook the meals, wash the dishes, clean the house; if that's all the life I'm ever going to have, I'd a lot rather be dead."

The young man's face showed his dismay. "Don't say that, Ethel," he cried. "I'm sorry things are goin' so bad. It's Jim's fault, partly, and it's mine, too. I'm afraid I'm gettin' as crazy over the lode as he is, and pretty nigh forgettin' everythin' else. I'm sorry, Ethel. It is tough on you, and no mistake."

The girl shrugged her shapely shoulders. "Oh, it's all right," she said indifferently. "Everybody's got to have their troubles; and I wouldn't start telling you mine if it wasn't so's you could see what things are getting down to. You know what I think about you, anyway. I think you're a fool to stick around here. The old mine's never going to be any good, anyhow."

Harrison smiled grimly. "You know right well it ain't the mine I'm holdin' on for," he answered, a gleam of passion in his eyes. "It's for what goes with it when we strike the lode. And the man that's waitin' for that ain't got no cause to be called a fool."

The girl, not ill-pleased, tossed her head coquettishly. "You aren't sure of either of 'em," she cried, "the lode or the girl. We aren't regular promised, Jack. Maybe some day a better looking fellow with more money'll come along, and then you'll get left."

The young man's face grew dark with anger, and he took a quick step forward. "Don't you dare say that!" he cried fiercely. "If I thought you meant that, Ethel, I'd kill you! By God, I would!"

The girl shrank a little before the storm she had unwittingly raised. "There, there," she cried, "don't be so foolish, Jack. I didn't mean it. You run along and fix up, and don't bother me. I've got to get supper. Where'd you leave the old man?"

Even before Harrison had started to reply, the door swung open and Mason entered, stooping, unkempt, weary, but with eye still bright and his whole expression alert and aglow with the lust of battle.

"I knew it, Jack!" he cried. "I told you the farther we worked to the eastward, the richer that fifth level was going to open up. Look at this! And this! And this!" and he tossed the chunks of rock on the piazza table.

Harrison, a trifle shamefaced, picked them up and nodded. They were in truth splendid samples, fairly blazing with copper.

"I tell you," Mason went on, "if we haven't really struck the lode, and I believe we have, we're right next door to it, anyway. Perhaps I haven't mined that rock year in and year out for ten years without finding out a little something about it. Perhaps I don't know the look of it and the feel of it, and pretty near the taste of it. I'll bet you anything you want, Jack, that inside a month we'll strike as rich copper as ever was mined at the lake."

All through supper he talked on in a like strain. Ethel and Jack listening in silence. Then, after the supper dishes were cleared away, and the old man had settled down, pipe in mouth, in front of the kitchen stove, Harrison had his say.

"Look here, Jim," he said abruptly, "I did somethin' last night that I suppose is goin' to get you mad. I met Abe Peters walkin' home, an' he tells me he's got one of those eastern sharps stayin' with him, investigatin' likely claims, Abe says, with the idea to buy 'em if they comes up to standard. Abe says he starts to tell him about the Ethel, an' the man seems to be better posted than Abe is himself. Anyways, we fixed it up that Abe's goin' to bring him over to-night after grub, an' we'll have a little talk with him. Can't do no harm, an' the way things is goin' now ain't right to none of us; not to you nor to me nor to the girl here, neither. So you want to treat 'em civil when they come."

The old man straightened up in his chair with a glare of resentment, and banged the table with his clenched fist.

"No, sir," he exclaimed, "I won't see him or have nothing to do with him, and neither will you. I'll have no man nosing into my claim, or talking of buying it, either. It ain't a mite of use, Jack. The claim ain't for sale, and I won't have 'em coming round bothering me about it. You can get rid of Abe your own way, but I don't let him set foot in this house, him or his mining sharp or

anybody else. I won't do it, Jack, for you nor no man."

Harrison's jaw set with a resolution quieter, perhaps, but every bit as determined as Mason's.

"Jim," he said, "that talk don't go. I've stuck to you and the mine for two years now, fair and square, and it looks like I'd got a right to some say about what we're going to do. Now, I've been figuring it out pretty careful, and this is just about the way we're fixed. Supposin', just for argument, we strike the lode to-morrow, why, even at that we can't ever develop that mine alone. It stands to reason we've got to have an awful pile of money back of us. Give us all the men we want, and all the machinery, and God knows what else, and then it's goin' to take two years and more to make her a dividend payer. No, sir, we've got to have money, Jim, and the only way to get it's to hitch up with some one like this cuss that's out here now. We can look out for our end all the time. You hold out for a big lot of stock, and getting yourself appointed superintendent, and me assistant, and that way we'll be doing right by the mine, and we'll get plenty rich, too. So that's sense, Jim, and nothing but sense, and you've got to talk to this man to-night, or, by God, Jim, I'll get out to-morrow, as sure as we're sitting here, and leave you to go it alone."

Mason, completely taken aback, fairly gasped. Suddenly he had realized, perhaps for the first time, his utter dependence on the younger man. "You—you wouldn't really do that, Jack," he faltered tremulously.

Harrison, more from the old man's manner than from the words themselves, felt that the victory was won. He nodded decisively.

"That's just what I'd do," he answered firmly. "I don't mean to go against you any way at all, Jim, but I know what's common sense, and you'll see it yourself some day, too. I'm not bluffing. I'd hate to do it, but I mean every word just the way I say."

The old man sighed, as if half the joy had suddenly gone out of his life. Then he nodded with resignation.

"All right, Jack," he said, with a trace of bitterness in his tone, "I can't say but what you've used me straight as a string all the way through. Mining's a young man's work, I guess. Maybe you'd act a mite foolish over the old claim yourself, Jack, if you'd wintered and summered with her the way I have. Never mind, though. Have it your own way."

Harrison had started to reply, when heavy footsteps sounded on the path without. "Good for you, Jim," he said quickly, "it won't hurt to talk it over, and we'll be careful we don't make any mistake. I guess that's them now."

CHAPTER III

THE RETURN OF MR. FROST

Gordon, with apparent reluctance, rose slowly from the table. "Rose," he said, "this has been most delightful. If life, now, were all Saturday afternoons and Sundays, with none of this getting back to work again on Monday mornings, what a good time we should have."

The girl forced a smile, though her eyes were troubled. "Yes," she said, "it has been delightful, only—I do so wish things were really settled for good. Can't you begin to tell something, Dick, about how long it will be?"

Gordon made an effort not to appear annoyed. "No," he answered, a trifle coldly, "I certainly can't, and, for that matter, nobody can. For a guess, though, I should think that another six months would see things pretty well fixed. I expect to see Frost this morning, and of course a lot depends on the kind of report I get from him. If it's what I'm hoping for, it's practically the last link in the chain. If it isn't, then it's a choice between waiting or taking a chance on something that may go and may not. So it's really an impossibility, as you can see for yourself, to say just when things will be settled. Still, I can't see but what we're doing pretty well as we are. You're not unhappy, are you?"

The girl's troubled look did not alter. "No," she said, half doubtfully, "not really unhappy, but if I didn't know that this would all be over soon, and that within a year we should be married and settled down, I'm afraid I should be—miserably so. It's no kind of a life to be leading, the way we are now. Do you remember, Dick, the afternoon we went to the island?"

Gordon nodded. No incident connected with his trips to the island was ever likely to escape his memory. "I do, very well," he answered shortly.

The girl nodded in her turn. "Then you probably remember," she continued, "what I said that day. And I've never changed my mind since. Just to be by ourselves somewhere in a little place in the country, and I should never want to be rich or want to see the city again. That would be my idea of being happy, Dick, but of course you've got your ambitions, and I've no right to want to hinder them."



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Gordon laughed. "The eternal feminine," he quoted. "I'm sorry, my dear, but I'm afraid I can't give them up, even to please you. Let me try them first, anyway, and then, if you're still of the same mind, we'll have the cottage and the roses to fall back on in our old age. Well, I suppose I must really be going. Until next week, then."

He stooped and kissed her, and in another moment the door had closed behind him, and he was striding away down the street.

Outwardly, to the casual passer-by, he appeared the very embodiment of content; prosperous, untroubled, self-satisfied. But inwardly, his keen mind was busy forecasting the future, and he was even then dissecting himself, his strong and weak points, his successes and his failures, as judicially and as mercilessly as he might have done if he had been sitting in judgment on some stranger in whom and in whose fortunes he had not a ray of interest.

"Promising to marry her," he mused; "that was the worst mistake. I had to do it, of course, to get at old Pearson, and to get at Palmer, and for that matter I was crazy enough about her for a while to promise anything, but I was a fool not to look further ahead. It's only fools, anyway, who say, 'Let's cross that bridge when we get to it.' I suppose a more dangerous proverb was never coined. In plain English, all it means is that we're too lazy to take a look ahead to see if there's a bridge there at all. Yes, that was my mistake. Given a hundred thousand and my start, I was ready to promise anything, and now there's so much ahead I never dreamed of then, marrying her seems absolutely out of the question. Who would ever have foreseen, though, that she'd develop this spasm of virtue? If she'd been what I thought she was—and what I had every reason for thinking she was—I imagine things could have been fixed up easily enough. I wonder whether —"

Abstractedly, as he crossed towards the park, he had paused for a passing victoria. As the carriage passed, he noticed that its only occupant was a girl, her slender figure clothed in deep black, and glancing up, he was just in time to receive Miss Sinclair's friendly bow. Raising his hat, he passed on and entered the park.

"The devil!" he muttered. "Coincidences are queer things." And with a shrug of his shoulders he turned his thoughts in the direction of the day's plans.

Ten minutes later he entered the Equitable Building, and turned sharp to the left where the doors leading into the big ground floor office suite bore the inscription, "Gordon and Randall; Investment Securities."

Confident in himself as he was, firm believer as he had been from the first in the destinies of himself and his firm, even he still felt a trifle awe-struck at the wonder of it all. Only a few months ago and he had been proud of his little two room and a ticker establishment, proud of the fact that he had a stock clerk, a stenographer and an office boy, proud that he was slowly piling up his modest profits, regarding a five hundred share order with veneration—and now—the huge modern office lay outspread before him, clean, light, spacious, the delicate tracery of steel work taking the place of old-time partition and creaking door. To the right, occupying more than half the whole floor space was the huge "cage," with its ordered ranks of busy bookkeepers, cashiers, order clerks, margin clerks, telephone operators and messengers; in front, the pleasant room reserved for the firm's customers, where the casual investor might drop in for a moment to read at a glance the long rows of quotations on the board, and where the leisurely professionals gathered daily from ten to three to sit and smoke in the big cushioned armchairs, basking pleasantly in the sunshine, and listening to the whirring tickers as they sang their two songs, one merry and cheerful—up, up,—click, click,—up, up,—the other sorrowful and full of discouragement,—down—click—down, down—click—away, way down, more margin, quick,—click, click,—down, down, still further down, down—and out. To the left lay the private offices of the firm; first, the luxurious ladies' room; then, in sequence, the room for ordinary private business, then Gordon's and Randall's private consulting-room, and last of all, the holy of holies, Gordon's own special office, cosy and homelike, where he could retire when he pleased and be as safe from intrusion or interruption as though he were a thousand miles away. All in all, it was small wonder that Gordon stood still for the briefest of moments, looking quickly to right and left with the glance of the general marshalling his forces in review before going into action. Then, with a momentary glow of just self-satisfaction, he turned into the first office on the left and hastened to his desk.

Field, his private secretary, had just finished sorting the mail, and stood waiting by the window while Gordon quickly ran through the letters that were left, checking, penciling, laying aside, with speed and despatch, and yet with due consideration and without haste; then he called Field to his side.

"Well, Bert," he said affably, "they seem to be mostly routine, don't they? These you can attend to, if you'll be so kind. These go to Mr. Brown, and these I wish you'd give to Sumner, and ask him to look them up sometime before noon. I'll take them up with him directly after lunch. Now, how about Mr. Frost? Can he manage to get over here this morning without inconvenience?"

Field nodded. Latterly he had noticed that upon request people generally found that they were able without apparent inconvenience to get over to his employer's office at almost any time. "Yes, sir," he answered promptly, "I managed to see Mr. Frost personally, and he said that he'd be here sharp at half past ten."

"Thank you very much, Bert," said Gordon. "That's very good indeed. I think there's nothing more just now. I may ring a little later if I want you. If you will just keep on the lookout for Mr. Frost, and as soon as he comes show him right in."

Field nodded and withdrew, appearing again at the end of fifteen minutes to usher in Mr. William D. Frost, widely known as one of the three highest-priced mining experts in the United States. Mr. Frost, as usual, was true to his word, for the clock struck the half hour sharply just at the moment that his spectacled, benevolent face appeared in the doorway.

Gordon rose quickly. "My dear Frost," he cried, "I'm delighted to see you back. You look as fit as possible. Come right in and make yourself comfortable."

Frost shook hands, followed Gordon into the inner office, and took the proffered arm-chair which Gordon drew up in front of the pleasant warmth of the open fire. He was a short, stout man, whose round, ruddy face and twinkling eyes gave not the slightest indication of the really remarkable brain within. One might perhaps have classed him as a traveling man, possibly as a prosperous manufacturer, as a long shot one might even have risked the guess that he had about him something of the magnetism of the successful politician, but the part of the mining expert scarcely seemed to fit. Leaning far back in his chair, legs crossed, the finger-tips of either hand touching one another, he threw Gordon a quick glance of inquiry. "All ready?" he queried, and then, as Gordon nodded, he began with characteristic directness and precision to speak.

"A," he said, much as if his whole subject had been neatly typewritten and docketed in his orderly brain, "Preliminary recapitulation, if we may so term it. And subdivision one of same, my part in the enterprise."

He paused for an instant, and then continued. "Six months ago you intrusted me with what we might designate as a kind of roving commission. My task was to locate for you, within the limits of North America, a genuine gold, silver or copper mine, or rather, to be perfectly explicit, not exactly a mine, but a claim or prospect, with such excellent possibilities attaching to it that one might easily make of it, with proper development, a first-class producing and dividend paying proposition. In a word, what you wished me to find for you was a mine in embryo? Am I so far

correct?"

Gordon nodded. "Absolutely correct," he answered good-humoredly. "No lawyer could state the facts more clearly, or more concisely."

Frost checked on the fingers of his left hand. "Subdivision two," he continued, "your responsibility in the matter. You were to pay all necessary expenses, give me a salary of two thousand dollars a month, and in addition, if I so desired, you were to allot to me one-fiftieth part of the capital stock of the company, if any such company was ever formed. That, I take it, is also correct?"

Gordon again nodded. "To the letter," he answered briefly.

Frost, with his left hand, made a little gesture of dismissal, as if mentally telling the stenographer that she might now return the papers to the safe.

"Very good," he said, "and now for part B. Written report of my investigations."

From his inner breast pocket he drew a packet of papers, and handed them to Gordon. "One," he said, "itemized expense account. Two, bill for services. Three, typewritten report of work done, one hundred and thirty-nine pages; and, four, condensed summary of results attained and conclusions reached, eleven pages. All of these, of course, to be gone over by you at your leisure, after which I shall be glad to discuss any points or to answer any questions you may care to ask."

Gordon laid the papers carefully on his desk. "Most excellent," he cried. "If all the world had your ideas of system, Frost, it wouldn't be such an infernally haphazard sort of place as it is. You've been more than good to take so much trouble. And now, as I'm apparently in for a pretty busy week, suppose we take advantage of the opportunity, and, entirely apart from your report, have you give me in a general way a little account of how things have gone."

Frost nodded his assent. "I anticipated that you would in all probability make such a request," he answered, "and we may accordingly"—he tapped the third finger of his left hand—"proceed to C, brief verbal summary of my investigations."

He paused, with the cautious hesitancy of a man given to much thought before putting his ideas into words, while Gordon perforce restrained his impatience as best he might. At length Frost broke the silence.

"Of course, Mr. Gordon," he said, "you understand that mining forecasts are about the most uncertain things in an uncertain world, but, so far as I can tell, I've had really rather remarkable success. You'll find all this in the report, of course, but the situation, in just a word, is this: During my trip I've looked into over two hundred claims and prospects. In all but fifteen or twenty I found, right at the start, some radical defect; something wrong in the size or the location of the mine, or in the quality of the mineral. Of those remaining, I made, of course, a far more extended examination, and the result is that I have three propositions on which I am quite willing to stake my professional reputation. One is a copper mine in Arizona, one is a silver mine in British Columbia, and the third is a copper mine at the lake."

Gordon's eyes gleamed. "Three!" he exclaimed with enthusiasm. "Well, that's certainly good enough. And which of the three do you consider the one best bet?"

Frost's forehead wrinkled doubtfully. "Not to be too discouraging, Mr. Gordon," he answered, "I ought to say that in the case of all three there are certain disadvantages to be considered, and certain obstacles to be overcome. Take the Arizona mine. The price is exorbitant, to start with; there's a large amount of construction work to be done under unfavorable conditions; I'm not sure but what, considering that it's a low grade proposition, at best, the cost of production would run fairly high; and then, too, there seems to be a possibility of serious labor troubles out that way before long, which, while probably not a determining factor, ought still to be reckoned with."

Gordon laughed. "Yes," he said, with irony, "just to start with, that does sound a little discouraging. Haven't you anything better than that to say for the others?"

Frost sighed. "Better—or worse; I don't know which," he answered. "The silver mine has really caused me a great deal of anxiety. The deposit itself is wonderfully, almost incredibly, rich. One of the most interesting problems, purely from a geological standpoint, that I think I have ever seen. The truth about it is that it's totally undeveloped, and it's practically an impossibility to predict anything about the depth and extent of the deposit. As a straight mining proposition, it's easily the biggest gamble of the three, but really nothing more than a gamble. If, however—" he paused for a moment, and then continued apologetically: "This is, of course, entirely outside my province, but if the mine is to be looked at at all from the stock market point of view, and not entirely on its intrinsic merits, then the extreme richness of the surface deposit is so spectacular that I should judge that would be a strong point in the mine's favor."

Gordon smiled. "Sometimes," he said softly, "even in the case of a perfectly legitimate enterprise like this, people will insist on looking at it merely as a market venture. It's a curious thing, Frost, isn't it?"

Frost, feeling sure that he understood Gordon perfectly, smiled also. "Yes," he assented, "it is. So many people nowadays want to live without working, and, as a result, they get worked."

Gordon laughed delightedly. "That's good, Frost," he cried, "very good, indeed. I must remember that. But to get back to business, how about the copper mine at the lake?"

Frost at once resumed his wonted gravity. "The copper mine at the lake, if we could get it, Mr. Gordon"—he lowered his voice confidentially—"I believe to be far and away the best of the lot. It's really exceedingly interesting. You know, yourself, of course, that the only ground at the lake not already taken up is south of Octagon County, down where the Batavian and the Anona and all those properties are located, or else north as far as Seneca. Mining men have always disagreed, and still do disagree, as to what becomes of the Onondaga lode when it dips. Personally I have always believed that somewhere about the locality of the Batavian was the place to strike the lode, so, on my way west, I stopped there first of all, without, I must confess, finding much that interested me. The Seneca theory I've never been a believer in, and I hardly think I should have stopped there at all except that I wanted to do a thorough job. As a result, however, I'm afraid I've got to admit that I've been wrong, and that Paine and those other fellows have been right. It happened like this: I got in with a man named Peters out there, and got to know him pretty well, too. His own claim is a rather fair one; nothing startling; just a good, likely claim; but the one adjoining his is the jewel. They're all talking about it out there, and I got information enough, and saw samples enough, to convince me that that's the mine we want. But—and I'm sorry to say it's a big But—the claim is owned by an old fellow named Mason, a man of character and intelligence, but half crazy over the mine. It's meat and drink, body and soul, wife and child, to him, and he's absolutely fixed against parting with it, even though it's clear to every one but himself that he can never develop it alone. So there's where we stand. My advice would be that if you can get Mason's claim by hook or crook, you want it; it's the best of the three. If you actually can't get it, try the silver mine, unless you're unwilling to run the risk of losing your market reputation by getting your friends into a gamble that may go wrong. If you have that feeling about it, think over the Arizona proposition pretty carefully before you decide on it; it's safe, but hardly immensely profitable, I think. Do I make myself clear?"

Gordon thought a moment. "Perfectly," he said at length, "except in one particular. You speak of getting Mason's claim by hook or crook. Just what do you mean by that?"

Frost looked a trifle uncomfortable. "Well," he said at last, "we none of us like to own up to making failures, but I feel that somehow I ought to have done better with Mason. It may be all fancy, but I think the right man could have put the thing through. It's like this: Mason's got a pretty daughter, and there's a young fellow named Harrison who works with Mason who's sweet on her. Now, I guess, when you come right down to it, Harrison's word would go a long way toward deciding the thing with the old man; and I don't think I managed to hit it off just right with Harrison. They're a queer crowd out there, and I believe the man you want to send to clench things had better be the hail-fellow-well-met kind who can keep his end up whether it's drinking whisky, or fighting, or talking copper claims. Those seem to be the three principal industries of Seneca, and you can imagine the impression I made. Whisky always disagreed with me, and I'm essentially a man of peace. You need a man with red blood in him to get on out there; what they term, I believe, from something I overheard supposed to be somewhat to my discredit, 'a good mixer.' The right man can get that claim; I'm confident of it, but, frankly, I'm not the man. You see, I'm really not what you'd call a sport, Mr. Gordon."

Gordon laughed long and heartily. "No, Frost," he said, when he could speak, "your worst enemy couldn't say that about you. But you're a mighty good judge of human nature, just the same, which is infinitely more to your credit. I think I catch your idea perfectly. The only thing now is to get the man, and that may be difficult. I wonder, now, how I would do?"

Mr. Frost gazed at him meditatively. Then his face brightened. "I confess that hadn't occurred to me," he said, "but I can see many points in favor of such a decision. In the first place, you can thus keep the thing quiet, and that, of course, is of prime importance. As to your qualifications, you've been an athlete of distinction; I know you can adapt yourself to all sorts of company, and I believe, further, whether it's to your credit or not, you bear the reputation of never having been known to refuse a drink. The mining details I think I could prime you sufficiently on, but, really, after all, it's the other qualities that are going to carry the thing through." He nodded thoughtfully to himself, then said again, "Yes, I can certainly see many points in favor of such a decision."

Gordon rose. "Well," he said, smiling, "I'm glad to know you think so well of me. We'll take a day or two to think things over, and then we'll have another talk. I'm tremendously obliged to you for all your trouble, and I'll send that check along this afternoon. Right out this door here. Takes you directly to the street. Good day, Mr. Frost. Behave yourself, now. Good day."

CHAPTER IV

GORDON PLAYS TO THE GALLERY

Harrison, somewhat clumsily, held the hotel door open for the stranger, and, as he followed him out into the street, quietly took his measure with a shrewd and appreciative eye.

Indeed, as the two men strolled leisurely along down through the town and out toward the smelting works, there seemed physically little to choose between them. Harrison, big and burly and strong, was the heavier by some twenty or thirty pounds, and yet the easterner, with his broad back, sloping shoulders, powerful, well-rounded chest, and alert, confident step, though evidently lacking the rugged endurance of the miner, looked nevertheless in strength to be fully his equal, and in agility and speed his superior. Both, indeed, were well-nigh perfect examples of their type; the mastiff and the wolfhound might perhaps have been a not inapt comparison.

The stranger was the first to break the silence. "Mighty good of you to take all this trouble, Jack," he said, "I'm getting to feel at home already."

Harrison grinned, with a rough attempt to disclaim any courtesy on his part. "That's all right," he said. "Want to treat a man fair if I can. Anyways a mining man. Too bad it's Saturday afternoon, though. That's a regular half holiday here now. Boys mostly lay around and enjoy themselves. We'll find most of 'em out at the park, I guess, doin' stunts."

The stranger looked at him inquiringly. "Stunts?" he queried.

Harrison grinned. "Athletic craze struck here about a month ago," he answered. "Kind o' funny, too, when you come to think of it, ain't it? Here's a crowd o' big miners slavin' away five days an' a half a week gettin' out copper, workin' like truck horses, an' then when Saturday afternoons come they've got to get out an' work just about twice as hard playin' baseball an' runnin' an' throwin' weights. It's a pretty damn lucky thing they've got Sunday to rest up in, or they'd be one o' these fallin' offs in copper production you minin' fellers tell of."

Gordon's face betrayed his interest. "It does seem funny," he acquiesced, "but I know how it is, just the same. I used to do a little in that line myself once on a time, and pretty good fun it was, too," and he smiled reminiscently as he spoke, as if the memories that came to mind were pleasant ones.

Half a mile or so from town they came to the smelting works, as Harrison had predicted, shut down for the afternoon. Beyond the line of low buildings, a flat open field, the grass burned brown by the sun, stretched away for a quarter of a mile or more. The heat of the afternoon was just changing to the cool of evening, and, in the center of the field, true to Harrison's prophecy, two rival ball teams were playing with all the zest of boys. Nearer at hand a dozen brawny miners were throwing the hammer. Even as Gordon looked, one of them picked up the missile, swung it around his head, and hurled it far out from the circle. The stranger's eyes gleamed. "Rotten form," he muttered under his breath, and then, with apparent irrelevance, he added, "and they say there's no such thing as luck."

They had reached the little group, and Harrison, evidently well known and well liked, was greeted with rough good will. Responding, he introduced the visitor. "Boys," he said, "let me make you acquainted with Mr. Gordon. He's another one o' these eastern minin' sharps, come out on purpose to buy the whole township, if we'll give him a cheap enough rate on it; so you want to look out an' treat him good."

There was a general laugh, in which Gordon joined. "Oh, we easterners are easy, I admit," he said good-naturedly. "Don't soak it to me too hard, that's all I ask. Jack's got no license, though, to go to talking business on Saturday afternoon, just for the fun of getting after me. We're on a vacation now. Let's see somebody throw that hammer again."

"That's right," cried Harrison; "let Bill Martin give her a toss. He's the man can do it."

The others drew back, and as Martin willingly enough stepped forward, Gordon looked him over with undisguised admiration. He was perhaps thirty-five years of age, well over six feet, and a much bigger man than Harrison even. His woolen shirt, open at the neck, showed the play of the corded muscles in his massive throat and neck, and his uprolled sleeves disclosed the arms of a giant. Taking his stand somewhat awkwardly, he swung the hammer stiffly around his head, and then, with one final tremendous heave, sent it hurling a good ten feet beyond the farthest mark.

There was a chorus of good-natured approval. "Put the tape on it," cried three or four at once, and the hundred-foot measure was slowly unrolled until the mark was reached, and then pulled tight. "Ninety-four feet, eight inches," called the measurer, and there was another murmur of satisfaction. Harrison turned to Gordon. "How's that?" he grinned. "Beat that back east?"

Gordon smiled too. "Well, that's a good throw," he answered noncommittally, "a mighty good

throw from a stand, but the real way to throw a hammer's to turn with it; you can get up so much more speed that way."

The little group gazed at him in astonishment. One or two grinned derisively. Old Jim Stickney, with deep meaning, spat upon the ground, then looked up at Gordon.

"Would you show us?" he asked, with mild and deceptive politeness. "We all hail from Missouri here."

Harrison looked distressed. He felt in a way responsible for the stranger. "Oh, hell, Jim," he expostulated, "ain't you got no manners?"

Gordon laughed easily. "I guess it's up to me, boys," he said quietly, and, leisurely removing his coat, collar and tie, he laid them methodically on the ground.

The group eyed him with surprised interest. Stickney grinned malevolently and moved away. "Goin' to git out o' range, boys," he said; "don't want to git hit."

Gordon showed no resentment, but on the contrary nodded with the utmost cheerfulness. "That's a good idea," he said; "it's a long time since I've thrown one of these things. Can't tell what'll happen. I don't know that I ought to be throwing, anyway. My lungs aren't any too strong."

Harrison, in mute distress, dreading a scene, laid a hand on his arm. "Don't let 'em make a fool of you," he whispered; "they'll tell it all over the county; unless," he added, "you really can throw the darned thing."

Gordon nodded in quick appreciation of the other's good will. "Don't you worry, Jack," he whispered in answer; "I wouldn't try it if I couldn't get by. We've got to take the good chances when they come along. They're not apt to turn around and come back again."

Harrison looked puzzled, and a little dubious, but as Gordon took his stand within the circle the miner's face cleared. There was a masterful ease in the way in which the easterner took his position very different from the awkward pose of the others. Once, twice, three times, the hammer circled around his head, and then, like lightning, he spun around in his tracks, once, twice, so quickly that the eye could scarcely follow the whirling missile. Then, in a flash, it leaped from his hands, and Gordon was left standing motionless in the ring, while the hammer shot up and out in a high, graceful curve, sailing along as if on wings until it landed with a thud so far beyond Martin's mark as to make comparison ridiculous.

There was silence, bewildered, complete, absolute. Gordon, not seeming to notice, stepped from the circle. "A little low," he said, with a note of apology in his tone, "and I didn't quite get my weight behind it. A little out of practice, I guess, but the turn's a great thing."

And then over the group swept a sudden revulsion, and there burst forth a mighty roar of laughter. Stickney spat again, but, if the phrase be permissible, with a far different intonation; and then voiced the sentiment of the crowd. "Well, by God," he cried nasally, "all I can say is I'm glad you ain't kept in steady practice, an' I'll say further that you can bet I ain't wastin' a mite of sympathy on them pore weak lungs o' yourn. No, sir, I ain't, an' not by a damned sight, neither."

Bill Martin eyed the stranger with increased respect. "I'd like to know that trick," he volunteered. "Want to learn it to me?"

Gordon nodded. "Certainly," he said; "glad to. Only you can't expect to get it right away. It looks easy enough, but I had to practise it every day for three months before I could get it down right. Here's the idea. I won't throw it. Just to show you"—He picked up the hammer, illustrating as he talked—"See? Pull back from it like this. Keep pulling against it all the time, and when you swing it around your head the third time, turn right on your toes, this way; once, twice, and then let her go for all there is in you. See?"

Martin nodded, and took the hammer again in his hands, while Gordon and the others stepped quickly back. Once, twice, three times, he swung the missile with ever-increasing speed, and then, as he tried to turn rapidly, there ensued a sudden amazing tangle of arms and legs, hammer and man mixed in hopeless, whirling confusion, and two hundred and thirty pounds of bone and muscle and misdirected energy struck the ground with a mighty, jarring crash.

Each man in the little knot of spectators expressed himself according to his temperament. One or two howled their joy aloud, others rolled prone upon the ground. Jim Stickney, holding his sides, the tears coursing down his cheeks, shook his head from side to side in helpless merriment. As a tableau the picture appeared to his delighted eyes too beautiful, too perfect, to spoil with mere words.

Slowly Martin picked himself up from the ground, a flush of anger darkening his face. "Shut up, you damn fools," he growled, "the whole thing's a trick. There ain't no fair test to it. But if any one of you jackasses, when you get through your braying, wants to try and see how strong he is, I'll fight any three of you in succession, and I'll knock the everlasting stuffing out of you, too." He paused a moment, glaring blackly at the group; then, as an afterthought, added with deliberation:

"West—or east. No bar. First come, first served."

His words had a sudden sobering effect upon the crowd. The laughter died away. Gordon felt rather than actually saw all eyes turned curiously in his direction. He hesitated, but only for a moment.

"Oh, the devil," he began good-naturedly, "nobody wants to fight—" but Martin's ill humor was not to be so easily appeased.

"Oh, no," he jeered; "nobody wants to fight, and it's lucky for them they don't. It's lucky for them they're afraid—"

On the instant Gordon stepped forward, an ugly little smile playing around the corners of his mouth. "Meaning me?" he asked quietly.

Martin eyed him malevolently. "Sure," he grinned, with all the disagreeable effrontery he could put into his tone, "meaning you; and why not, I'd like to know."

"Only this," said Gordon in a perfectly level tone; "that you're not the man to use that word quite so freely without knowing first what you're talking about. And you'll apologize to me right away before these gentlemen—or I'll fight you with all the pleasure in life, three-minute rounds, one minute rests, no hitting in clinches, Harrison to referee."

Martin, the lust of battle glowing in his deep-set eyes, breathed a sigh of content. "Come on," was all that he said.

With the readiness born of much experience, Harrison and Stickney in a twinkling had the simple preparations under way. The rough dimensions of a twenty-four-foot ring were paced off; the spectators took their places where corner posts and ropes should have been, and a messenger was despatched to the ball field for the two players' benches there in use. In short order he returned, aided with his burden by many willing hands; behind him trailing some two score eager followers, for in the eyes of the Lake a fist fight still took precedence without competition over all else in the line of true diversion.

There was a moment's silence, and then Stickney, spitting furiously in his excitement, looked at his watch, and nodded. "All ready!" he cried, his voice vibrant with excitement, and at the word the two men, stripped to the waist, stepped quickly forward and shook hands.

Gordon smiled at his burly antagonist. "No ill-feeling?" he queried good-naturedly.

The miner shook his massive head. "Oh, no, not a bit," he said grimly, and his tone and the smoldering wrath in his eyes belied his words.

Both men turned and walked slowly toward their corners; then "Time!" yelled Stickney, and, turning again, they put up their hands and warily faced each other.

Martin stood upright in the center of the ring, body a little thrown back, his left arm held straight in front of him, and his right doubled across his chest. Gordon, standing easily and loosely, with muscles relaxed, eyed his man for a moment, and then suddenly dropped into the more modern fighting pose, crouched catlike, his weight well over his hips, shoulders hunched, both arms held loosely in front of him. Slowly he walked around the miner with quick and cautious steps, Martin pivoting slowly to meet him as he advanced. Nearer, nearer still, they came; imperceptibly the distance between them grew less and less, and then, all at once, like a flash, Gordon jumped in.

Thud! came his right on Martin's ribs, and crack! came his left on Martin's face. The miner's head jerked suddenly back; he gave an involuntary grunt of pain; and from his twitching nostrils there came a sudden dark red stream of blood.

Just for an instant he stood motionless, inert; then, smarting with pain, and half mad with rage, he lowered his head and charged like a bull. Gordon, hard-pressed, gave ground at once, stalling off as best he might the angry giant's reckless charge. Once the miner's right found his ribs, and his face contracted with a sudden spasm of pain, while the angry red blotches showed mottled against the clear white skin. Twice a mighty left swing just missed his jaw, and both times the indrawn breath of the crowd expended itself in a sigh, half of relief, half of disappointment, as they saw the easterner still unharmed.

Thus two minutes of the round had gone, and then all at once there came a change, for by this time it had become evident to Gordon, long skilled in all the craft and science of the ring, that he had opposed to him a man, unskilful, to be sure, but untireable as well, and that the longer the fight lasted the better it would be for the miner and the worse for him. Thus, his mind made up, he summoned to his aid every particle of strength and cunning at his command, and when next the miner rushed, he no longer gave ground, but for an instant met the attack squarely and then again forced the fighting in his turn. Three times he landed straight lefts on Martin's face that should have put an ordinary man away for good, and three times the giant grunted and came on for more. Again Gordon drove home a smashing blow on the miner's gory nose, and then, in trying to get his right to the heart, he left himself for an instant unprotected, and in that instant

Martin, fighting more craftily in his turn and biding his time, landed one of his wild right swings on Gordon's left cheek, just under the eye. Gordon staggered back, reeling; earth and sky blazed suddenly in a mist of swimming red; the wild yells of the miners reached him as the faintest buzzing of a swarm of bees; and, flushed and eager, Martin came on to finish his man. Like a drunken man Gordon blocked weakly, clenched mechanically with the fighter's instinct for an instant's respite, and then as Harrison, pitying but firm, walked between them, pushing them roughly apart and ordering them to take the center of the ring, in that blessed moment the mist cleared from Gordon's eyes, the red tide of life pulsed again through every vein, and brave heart and cunning brain waked again to life.

Fortunate it would have been for Martin had he realized the change, but all unmindful he came gaily on, thrilling with the triumph of the fighting beast. Carelessly, recklessly, well-nigh disdainfully, he started in to demolish his weakening foe, and then—sudden, unlooked-for, amazing—Gordon's left caught him with a lightning jab in the ribs, Gordon's right caught him full on the point of the jaw, and, like a pole-axed bullock, he stood still for the veriest instant of time, and then, crashing face downward, lay motionless on the field.

With the inrush of the crowd Gordon laid a hand on Harrison's arm, lifting his eyes in mute appeal, and Harrison, understanding, picked him up bodily in his arms and got him away to one side. Here, for ten minutes, he lay weakly enough, his head against Harrison's knee, his eyes half closed. Then, somewhat unsteadily, he struggled to his feet, and walked over to his still prostrate foe. Martin's grin, this time, was sincere, and his faint handshake had a friendly pressure.

"All right," he said weakly; "no kick comin'. I know when I'm up against a better man, and you done me fair."

Gordon straightened up, and spoke that all might hear. "Look here, gentlemen," he said, "I'm afraid I've started off badly. I'm out here on business, and I need the good-will of every one of you. Perhaps later on you may be glad of mine in return, but we can't tell about that now. All I want to say is that I didn't look for a fight, but since it came along I'm glad it's over, and I hope we'll all be better friends for it. I'm afraid I only beat Bill here by accident, and I'll bet I feel a good deal worse done up than he does." He paused and drew a fifty-dollar note from his pocket, handing it to Stickney with a smile, "I'm afraid I shan't be with you to-night," he added, "but I want you gentlemen to have a drink on me, all around, and then do a repeat as long as the money holds out, and I never want a better fight than I had to-day."

Amid the general murmur of approval he nodded to Harrison, and together they started back for town. That evening Gordon spent alone in the hotel, in greater pain than he would have been willing to admit; but in tavern and bar-room and store his fame waxed mightily, and the next morning every man, woman and child in Seneca township knew that Mr. Richard Gordon, a "minin' sharp" from the effete East, had suddenly appeared among them, and had most emphatically "made good."

CHAPTER V

A QUESTION OF FINANCE

The three men were seated together in Gordon's tiny room in the hotel. The shades were drawn, and the lamp on the table diffused at one and the same time light, heat, and a reek of ill-smelling oil. A scattered mass of papers, notes, jottings, memoranda, littered the room, and from the midst of this disorder Gordon, flushed, perspiring, for once lacking his usual calm, was seeking to bring about some semblance of system and order. Seated at the table, coat and vest tossed aside, he went through a regular routine, seizing on a paper and reading it through, then either tearing it up and tossing it aside, or transcribing its contents, his fingers flying furiously over the typewriter's clicking keys. Steadily and rapidly he did his work, and steadily the little heap of typewritten pages at his right hand mounted higher and higher still.

Jim Mason, sprawled comfortably in the armchair, smoked in silence, apparently waiting with calmness for the completion of the task. Jack Harrison sat on the side of the bed, awkward and uncomfortable, his troubled gaze shifting from Mason to Gordon and back again with the air of one who wishes to see a puzzling silence brought to an end.

Finally Gordon cast the last discarded memorandum from him, whirled the last sheet of copy from the typewriter, and with a heartfelt sigh of relief pushed back his chair. "There," he cried, "that's out of the way; and now let's see what we've got to show for it."

For a moment he sorted and arranged the typewritten sheets; then, looking up at the others, he spoke eagerly, anxiously, almost with a note of entreaty in his tone. "I hate to rush this thing through this way," he said, "and under ordinary circumstances I wouldn't do it, but you understand the situation as well as I do. This is the time you want to give me a free hand on the stock market end of the deal, just as later on, when you want all kinds of new-fangled machinery and all that sort of thing, I shall have to let you get it, though I won't know whether we need it or not. In other words, it's a mutual affair. You don't know and don't care just the precise moment when the stock ought to be listed, and I don't know and don't care about the difference in the rock on the sixth level and the seventh, but you want to let me run the incorporation and the market end, though you're not especially interested in them, and I want to let you run everything connected with the mine, though personally I don't care half so much about all that part of it as you do."

He paused for a moment, then continued, more slowly, "The point in our settling this thing up quick is right here. It's only about once in every five or six years that there comes a time like this in coppers, anyway. It takes a long time to get the pot boiling; then for a while it boils like the very devil, and then—it boils over; there's a busted boom, and people are left to sit down on their holdings for five or six years more, calling themselves names and wondering how they could ever have been such fools. At the end of that time, such a wonderful thing is the human mind, they've forgotten the past, and fairly tumble over themselves in their anxiety to repeat the process. Right now is the beginning of the biggest copper boom this country's ever seen, and it looks as if it would last for a good long time. Still, you can't ever tell; there are so many things that can happen; and what I want to do is to have the Ethel all incorporated and ready to launch just at the exact moment when the people are so crazy over coppers that they'll buy anything that's even named a mine, let alone a genuine first-class proposition like ours. Then we'll be sure of the mine's future, for we'll be able to make enough legitimate profit in the market to set aside a sum big enough to look out for all the development work we might ever be called upon to do. So the quicker we can get the papers signed, and the quicker I can get back East and have the company incorporated, the safer for all of us. There, that's the whole story, and if there's anything about it that isn't on the square, I want you to say so. How about it, Jim?"

Mason slowly removed his pipe from his mouth. "Sounds all right," he said laconically.

Gordon turned to Harrison. "Any objection, Jack?" he queried.

Harrison shook his head. "Sounds all right," he echoed. "Maybe down on the sixth level me and Jim could give you some pointers, but when it comes to stocks and bonds I guess you're the doctor. I don't see what's wrong with getting things fixed up right away."

Gordon nodded. "I'm glad you both think so," he said, his relief showing in his tone. "And you'll find you won't regret it, either. Now—" he reached for the typewritten papers, "here's the best I could do on an agreement. It's a lawyer's job, but I guess what I've patched together here will hold water, anyway. Stop me if there's anything you don't understand, and if you want to ask any questions, just fire away."

He tilted his chair back against the wall, glanced the papers through for an instant, and began to read rapidly, skipping here and there.

"This agreement, entered into this blank day of blank, between said Mason and said Gordon, witnesseth; said Mason, hereinafter styled the party of the first part, in consideration of the sum of one dollar and other good and valuable consideration, the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged, to him paid—does hereby covenant and agree with said party of the second part —"

He broke off suddenly, letting the papers fall from his hand, and mopping his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Damn the language they use," he said, "it's too much to wade through now. Boiled right down to plain common sense, I give you fifty thousand dollars cash for a half interest in the mine, and you're appointed superintendent for ten years at a salary of five thousand a year, and Jack assistant for the same time at three thousand a year. That's the gist of it, isn't it? and that's plain enough for any one."

Mason glanced a trifle doubtfully at the ten or twelve scattered sheets. "What's all the rest of it?" he inquired.

Gordon slowly lit a cigar. "Well," he said at length, "you know all the stuff that has to go into one of these things. There's nothing of any real importance beyond what I've just said. The other clauses take up provisions as to how the corporation's going to be formed, and all that sort of thing. They don't amount to anything except to get us all mixed up, though, if we start to go into them. Why don't we say that I'll get the whole thing in final shape by to-morrow night. Then we can sign it before a notary, and I can put for home and get things underway without any delay at all. Or do you think of anything else? You're all right as far as the board of directors goes. You'll both be on the board, and any other Michigan man you think ought to go on. The eastern men that I'm going to get are all first-class in every way, and there's no doubt we'll have a strong board. Most of the other things, as I say, are mere matters of detail, so I should think if you could

get around about this same time to-morrow night we could fix things up then, and make our start."

There was a moment's silence. Then Jim Mason again removed his pipe from his mouth. "About what," he said deliberately, "were you calculatin' on for your capital stock?"

From Gordon's manner no one could have guessed that this was the one subject he had feared and dreaded, that this was the one question he had hoped and prayed no one would raise. Indeed, to all appearances, he welcomed the topic with real pleasure.

"Well, where are my wits wandering to?" he cried. "Why, that was one of the things I particularly meant to speak of, Jim, because I knew if I didn't, you might have your breath taken away. You see, times have changed in the stock market, altogether. Where once it was a rich man's game, now everybody plays it. The clerk on his twelve dollars a week reads the stock column with just as much care as the millionaire, perhaps with more. The coachman the butler and the chauffeur, even the maid and the milliner, keep their ears open, and when an employer plunges, he carries a lot of people and a lot of money, of whom and of which he is entirely unconscious, along with him. So a copper stock, to be attractive to the general public to-day, has got to be a low-priced one; and of course that means a larger capitalization. Ten years ago, if you'd asked me the same question, I'd have said, 'Capitalize at ten thousand shares, at a par of a hundred,' and I guess, for that time, that would have been about right. For that time, you understand, but—"

Mason interrupted. "For that time, or for any time," he said positively, "that would have been right then, and it's right to-day, too. I'm agin' these big capitalizations, and that's just why I asked you for the information. Ten thousand shares, and par a hundred dollars. That's my ideas. What do you say, Jack?"

Harrison nodded, with, for him, unusual decision. "I guess that's about the regular thing," he answered, "leastways, in this state. That's what the Orono's in at, and the Hawkeye, and the Iroquois's only got five thousand, but they're a smaller proposition than the others. Yes, I guess for us ten thousand, and par a hundred, just about hits things right."

Gordon shook his head vigorously. "No, no," he cried, "you're wrong, both of you. But it's only because, as Jack just said a few moments ago, you're not in touch with market conditions in just the same way that I am. A big capitalization and a low par are the two things that are going to benefit everybody. They're going to help us make money, and that's going to help develop the mine, and, better than anything else, it's going to give lots of poor devils a chance to get into a really good thing at a moderate price, instead of wasting their good money on the first wildcat scheme that comes along, some kind of a fake mine that doesn't exist at all except on paper. Really, I hope you'll be willing to take my judgment on this; I'm right; I'm sure of it, or I wouldn't say so."

Both Mason and Harrison looked puzzled. There was a moment's silence. Then Mason, asked abruptly, "Well, what do you call right, then?"

Gordon, as he answered, made an effort to speak in a perfectly casual tone. "Why," he said easily, "as I say, I'd make the par very low, say five dollars a share. Then, of course, to give everybody a show, you'd have to have plenty of stock. I don't really care about the exact amount. I haven't given that much thought; but I should say, off hand, perhaps a million shares would be about right."

Mason stared at him in blank astonishment. "A million shares!" he gasped. "You'd capitalize the Ethel at five million dollars. God, man, you're crazy!"

Gordon flushed. "I guess one of us is crazy," he retorted, with some heat, "and I don't think I'm the one. I keep telling you you'd do a lot better to leave the whole market end of this thing to me. Why, half the people that'll buy our stock won't know how many shares there are, won't know what the par is, won't know a single identical thing about the mine except what I tell 'em in my advertisements. What's more, if we offered to tell 'em every single thing we know about the mine, they wouldn't care to take the trouble to listen. They're not buying shares in a copper mine. They're scraping together money enough to take a little flier, on margin, of course, something they mean to hold for a day or a week or maybe a month, and get out of at the first decent chance. The whole damned market's nothing but a big gamble, anyway, and everybody knows it, and what we're offering's a hundred times more legitimate than most of the stock deals people frame up, because, when all's said and done, we've got a genuine mine behind us. Still, we're not taking all this trouble just for our health, and we can use money just as well as anybody else. And the way to get the money, as I'm now trying to drive into your heads for about the tenth time, is to launch our mine with a big capitalization and a low par."

He stopped abruptly. Harrison, indeed, looked somewhat impressed, but Mason shook his head. "No, sir," he said stubbornly, "I know just a little mite about the market myself, and I don't say but what, if anybody's goin' to get skun, I wouldn't rather kinder give ourselves the benefit of the doubt, but five million dollars for the Ethel,"—he straightened up in his chair in his excitement—"five million dollars! Why, that's so damned unreasonable they're ain't no good tryin' to argue about it. When do you expect to pay a dividend on your million shares, I'd like to know?"

Gordon, to all appearances, looked thoughtful, as indeed he was. "Well," he admitted at length, "not right away, I suppose, and I'll own up there's some sense in the way you look at it, if the people were going to buy the stock for a real investment. Why don't we do this? Issue ten thousand shares of preferred stock, at a par of twenty-five or fifty, for the kind of people that want to buy for investment. We could really pay dividends on that, without the slightest doubt. And then, for the crowd that only wants to take a flier, and don't care a continental about the merits of the mine, or its future, we'll issue a million shares of common stock, at a par of five. Then we'll all be suited. How does that strike you?"

Mason snorted. "Oh, hell," he said forcibly, "what's the use of you talking that way? I've lived pretty near seventy years without robbing any one yet, and damned if I want to begin now. I'll wind up in the poorhouse first. What say, Jack?"

Harrison shook his head helplessly. "I don't know," he said vaguely. "Seems a pretty big lot of stock to me. Too big, I reckon."

Gordon laughed, with an attempt to pass the matter off lightly. "Oh, well," he said, "I don't want to do anything that neither of you approve of, of course. Why not let the whole matter of the capital stock drop for the present, and let the full board of directors settle it when we're organized?"

It was a last effort, and a futile one. Indeed, the moment the words had left his mouth, Gordon saw his mistake. Mason laughed a little dry laugh. "Yes," he said, with irony, "and four of the seven on the board are easterners. How'd they settle it, I wonder?"

Gordon's expression was not a pleasant one. With a faint shrug of his shoulders, he arose.

"Well, I'm sorry," he said, "but I don't see what I can do. If I do say it, you're being treated as fair as any two men could ask. You're looked out for in every possible way, and if you choose to spite yourselves, and call everything off, because you can't trust me on one of the minor details of the whole scheme, why, I can't see that it's up to me. I'm sorry, though, sincerely sorry. I firmly believe the mine has a great future."

Harrison's face lengthened perceptibly. The downfall of all his own cherished plans was far from pleasant. Mason, however, got up from his chair, his stern old face set in aggressive lines.

"Dick Gordon," he said, "I've liked you first-rate, up to now; I've tried my best to use you right, an' I've gone further with you than I ever went with any other man concernin' the mine, but I don't like this part of your scheme, an' I never will. It ain't honest. Capitalize her at a million dollars, an' we're with you up to the neck, but if you're goin' to stick to any of these five million schemes, why—you can go plumb to hell for all of me."

He walked slowly towards the door. Harrison rose and, awkwardly enough, followed suit. There was a moment's tense silence. Then Gordon stepped forward and laid his hand on Mason's arm.

"For God's sake, Jim," he cried, "don't let's part this way. We seem to look at this thing differently, but we've been too good friends to start quarreling over it now. Give me a week to think the whole proposition over, and you take the same. Pretty nearly everything in the world can be fixed up by some sort of a compromise. You're sure you're right, and I'm sure I'm right, but I'm not going to quarrel with you and Jack, if we never have a mine at all. And if we find we can't come to terms, and there's anything else I can do, why, I'll be ready, just the same, to help out any time in any way I can."

By good fortune he had struck the proper chord. Almost instantly Mason's face cleared, and with, for him, unusual feeling, he extended his hand. "That sounds more like it," he cried, "we'll sleep on it for a while, anyway, and see what we can fix up." He paused a moment, then added gruffly, "I guess maybe I spoke kind of hasty, too."

Gordon laughed. "Oh, that's all right," he said. "Maybe you're right, and I'm wrong, after all. But let's make an honest try to get together, anyway, and see if we don't come out better than we think. Good night, Jim; good night, Jack; see you again in a day or two; good night."

His tone was easy and pleasant, his expression fairness and cordiality itself, yet scarcely had the door closed behind them when his whole face suddenly darkened and distorted with rage.

"You fool," he muttered; "you damned straitlaced old fool. To have a chance like that, and turn it down because you thought it wasn't honest. Well, you've had your chance, and it won't come again—"

Just for a moment he paused, and then, his eyes gleaming with passion under his frowning brows, he added, with savage, deliberate meaning, "It won't come again, as long as you live."

CHAPTER VI

THE SPINNING OF THE WEB

Bill Hinckley, pallid, unshaven, tremulous with drink, his drooping lower lip destroying whatever intelligence of expression he might have had when sober, blinked across the table at Harrison, and with his tattered coat sleeve wiped the maudlin tears from his staring, bloodshot eyes.

"I'm damn much obliged, Jack," he quavered, "you're good frien' to me always, an' I'll never forget it, never. I thought I was down 'n out for good, 'n would have been, too, 'f 'twan't for you. You're good frien', Jack, an' I'll never forget it, never."

Harrison eyed him with some disgust. "Ah, cut out the thanks, Bill," he said good-naturedly. "This ain't charity; it's business. We need a watchman, an' if you've got sense enough to keep sober there ain't no reason why you can't hold down the job as well as the next man. It ain't my doings, anyway; it's Gordon's. He's puttin' up the stuff, an' he asks me if I've got any friend I think'll be partial to the job. That's how you come in. But you want to get out of this place pretty damn quick. You've got two days to sober off in, an' then it's up to you whether you make good on your job or not. So you want to make a break out of here right away now. Rum shops ain't healthy for you. Get the idea?"

He rose, and Hinckley obediently enough followed suit, although into his drink-sodden brain hardly a word of Harrison's explanation and caution had penetrated. He had a chance at a job, and Harrison had got it for him; those were the two ideas he had absorbed, and those only, and his last words to Harrison were a repetition of his old refrain, "You're good frien' to me, Jack, an' I'll never forget it, never."

The week which Gordon had proposed for the consideration of the question of the capital stock had become first two, and then three, without any definite agreement being reached. The old man stood firm. Ten thousand shares, par one hundred; that he had determined upon as the proper thing, and to move him one share or one dollar in either direction seemed apparently a task impossible of achievement. To Gordon, therefore, fell the lot of yielding gracefully, and while he did not at once abandon his position outright, he did take pains to make it clear both to Mason and to Harrison that any arrangement in reason would be satisfactory to him. Thus complete good feeling was restored among the three, each tacitly assuming that some kind of an understanding would be reached whenever Gordon was ready to say the word.

Certain much needed improvements, indeed, Gordon insisted upon having made at once; for the mine's sake, as he phrased it, and not for his own. Not the least of these was the appointment of Bill Hinckley as watchman, and in Hinckley's welfare Gordon from the first showed a most kindly interest. Not only did he fit him out with a suit of clothes, a cartridge belt and revolver, but further he did what he could to arouse the drunkard's self-respect, smoothing out occasional dissensions between Mason and Hinckley, and sometimes even, when bound towards the mine, taking Hinckley's lunch pail down to him, and stopping for a pipe and a friendly chat.

Small wonder that he soon numbered Hinckley, along with most of the rest of the township, among his devoted admirers. With high and low alike, indeed, throughout the county, Gordon, as time went on, had reinforced his first good impression, gained by force of arms, by showing equal aptitude for the gentler arts of peace. Alike in the town of Seneca, among the scattered mountain claims, and in Jim Mason's little cabin itself, he was soon a welcome visitor, honestly liked, respected and looked up to.

And all this time, for all his different activities, for all the seeming aimlessness of many of his expeditions and conversations, Gordon, far underneath the surface, was working ceaselessly, steadily, relentlessly, toward one desired end; with Jim Mason's cabin as the scene, and the members of Jim Mason's household as the involuntary actors, in the drama whose final act he was seeking to hasten to its end.

With honest, open-minded Jack Harrison he had been on the best terms from the first; with Jim Mason progress had been slower, but progress it had been, for all that. And while the old man's grunts and occasional dry chuckles meant to Gordon little in the way of cordiality or good-will, to Ethel Mason and to Harrison they were a source of constant wonderment, revealing, as they did, depths of good-humor in the crusty old man of which they had never even dreamed. With the girl herself Gordon found his wits kept busy in a spirited warfare of words, for apparently to Ethel Mason his every action was a subject for criticism, his every word an opening for a shaft of wit, barbed for the most part, too, with a sarcasm keen and fine; and yet, for all their contention, under the surface both felt a mutual—perhaps both alike would have paused, at a loss for the precise word—liking, regard, attraction, perchance even a word of deeper meaning still.

From the first, indeed, they had been thrown much in each other's company. Many a long ride Gordon had been forced to take over the winding, solitary mountain roads, and what more natural than that he should ask Ethel Mason to go with him as companion and guide. And then, on days when business did not intrude itself, what again more natural than the transition to rides and walks with pleasure and not business as their aim.

One place especially possessed for Gordon an irresistible attraction,—beyond the pass, down in the lowland between the mountains, where the brown of the marsh, dotted with many a quiet pond and reedy pool, stretched far away on either hand, far as the eye could reach, losing itself at last against the dim, smoky outline of the distant hills. The river, a narrow ribbon of brightest blue, flowing peacefully along through the valley in many a winding curve, spread gradually out, just under the shadow of Burnt Mountain, into a long, shallow, sedgy lagoon, the stopping place for innumerable hosts of chattering wild-fowl, winging their leisurely way along on their journey to the southward. Hither it was that Gordon loved to come, and hither it was, on a crisp fall afternoon, that he and Ethel Mason, driving over the mountain from Seneca, had come, intent upon the evening flight.

The sun still hung, an hour high, above the horizon. A big green-headed mallard drake winged his way lazily from the marsh over toward the pond, noted with pleased interest the little flock of his companions feeding near the shore, turned, set his wings, and glided gently downward through the crisp, dry stillness of the keen October air. A puff of white smoke darted from the clump of reeds, there was a crack like the sharp snap of a whip lash; the drake's head jerked suddenly back over his body, and with a mighty splash fell stone dead into the quiet waters of the pond. The little ripples spread away until they touched the shore, a few feathers floated softly downward on to the quiet surface, the smoke wreathed slowly heavenward, dissolving against the clear blue sky, and all was still again.

Lying back at ease in the little blind skilfully hidden on the shore, Gordon leisurely took the gun from the girl's hand, snapped it open, slipped in a fresh cartridge, and with a slow smile of admiration handed it back to her again.

"Ethel," he said, "you certainly can shoot. I've never heard of a girl killing ducks the way you can. It's really remarkable."

The girl nodded indifferently. "Yes," she answered listlessly; "I can shoot, and fish, and ride a horse, and cook, and keep house, and that's all. That makes a great life for a girl, doesn't it? And all the things I'd really like to do, the things that make any girl's life pleasant, why, I've never had a chance at one of them—and I suppose I never shall."

Gordon gazed steadily at the girl as she sat looking out over the pond, the little sixteen-gage across her knees. For the hundredth time he noted the slender perfection of her lithe young figure, the faultless profile, the delicate, almost childlike beauty of every feature. And he did not take his eyes away.

"The things you'd really like to do," he repeated. "I'm afraid, Ethel, you're just like nine-tenths of the rest of the world, not knowing when you're well off. What could you want better than this?"—he waved his hand toward the quiet waters of the pond, the level marsh beyond, the pleasant valley stretching away to meet the distant hills, and above them the huge mountain towering up against the sky. "And you'd leave the life you're living—for what? Suppose you had all the money you wanted, suppose this very minute you were free absolutely to act as you pleased, now what would you really do?"

The girl gazed dreamily away over the valley. "All the money I wanted," she mused; "oh, I don't know. First of all, I'd get straight away from here. I'm sick to death of it all. I'd go right to some big city, where I could see all the things I've always wanted to see, and buy all the things I've always wanted to buy. Clothes, first, of course, and jewels and things; and theaters, and the opera, and an automobile. Oh, I could spend the money all right; you needn't worry about that."

Gordon laughed. "I believe you," he said. "I'd like to watch you doing it, and I believe I'll have a chance to, some day. I don't know how good it's going to be for you, but if you'll have patience a little while longer, till this deal about the mine goes through, you'll have money enough. There's no question about that."

The girl shook her head disbelievingly. "For the last five years," she said, "I've been hearing about the money we were going to get out of the mine some day. Now I've got so that when I see it—real, true money—I'll believe it; and not a minute before."

Gordon smiled. "This time," he said, "things are really going through. I'm willing to admit that your father is about the toughest proposition to do business with that I've ever come across. I'm used to getting my own way, myself, but I can always see the other fellow's side, and come to some sort of a compromise; but your father—good heavens, he doesn't know what the word compromise means. I've given in to him practically on every detail of the whole agreement, and when, at the very end of everything, there's one little point that I'm anxious to have my way about, why, no, he won't give in on that, either, and if I don't like it, I can go back East without the mine, or go to another place he mentioned. That's compromise for you, with a vengeance."

The girl laughed in thorough enjoyment. "What is it you can't agree about?" she queried.

"Why," answered Gordon, "it's about the question of the capital stock. It's a little technical, perhaps, to explain to you, but the result is that where he wants to make one dollar, I want to make five. Doesn't my way sound the best?"

The girl laughed again, but, withal, glanced at him shrewdly. "Of course it does," she answered lightly, "much the best; but I suppose in the end you've got to give in to him, just the same; that is, if you want the mine."

Gordon sighed. "Yes, I suppose so," he assented, "but don't let him know it, just the same. I'm still holding out on a bluff. But I've as good as made up my mind. The mine's really a wonder; it's too good a chance to let go, even though it's got to be run on your father's somewhat old-fashioned ideas."

There was a moment's silence. Then the girl spoke again. "You've waked them up a little, anyway," she observed. "Didn't Jack tell me you were going to keep Hinckley for a watchman?"

Gordon nodded. "We surely are," he answered. "I did manage to persuade the old man about that. Oh, and that reminds me, too; there's something else I meant to ask him about that. Isn't there another opening of some old claim that comes out near our fifth level somewhere?"

The girl nodded in turn. "Sure," she answered "Abe Peters started a claim before the one he's got now that does come out right on the fifth level, but we bought the land afterwards; it wasn't any use to him. You wouldn't need any watchman there."

"No," assented Gordon; "I guess that's right. I had an idea it was on Peters' land. I don't suppose any one could get down it, anyway."

The girl laughed outright. "Of course they could," she cried; "but they couldn't do any harm to the claim. It seems to me you're awfully green about mining for such a smart man as they say you are."

Gordon did not seem in the least offended. On the contrary, he laughed with the utmost good nature. "I'll admit it," he said; "but I'm not nearly so green when it comes to the stock market end of things, and that's what concerns you most, after all. You wait about six months, and you'll be spending money hand over fist; see if you don't."

The girl pondered. "I don't suppose," she said, at last, "that the old man would let me go off traveling alone. Maybe I'll have the money, but no chance to blow it in."

Gordon laughed. "Of course," he said, with mock seriousness, "what you really need is a husband to take you around and give you a good time. I think I know a man that would like the job first-rate, too."

The girl nodded. "I know of several myself," she answered coolly, "but I suppose you mean Jack, don't you?"

"Yes," said Gordon, "I mean Jack. It's quite evident to any one. Joking aside, though, Jack's a mighty good fellow, and he's been a mighty good friend to your father. It isn't one man in a hundred that would stick the way he has. If your father's made a will, or ever does make one, you really ought to remind him to fix Jack all right in it. It's a curious thing, but as a man grows older, he sometimes forgets things like that altogether."

The girl shrugged her shapely shoulders. "A will," she echoed. "He'd never take the trouble to make a will. He's pretty healthy yet. And as long as you've got it all fixed that I'm to marry Jack, it'll be all right, anyway."

Gordon laughed. He found the girl distinctly amusing. "I wonder," he said idly, "how Jack will like taking a spending trip around the country. Not very much, I fancy. I imagine he's more for the happy fireside act, isn't he?"

The girl laughed, too. "I think you're awfully good," she said, "to take so much trouble over my affairs. I think you're right, too. I never thought of it before. I don't believe I'll take Jack, after all."

"I wonder, now," ventured Gordon, "if any of the others—"

The girl shook her head. "No, not a bit better," she answered. "I'll tell you, though, what you might do. You might break off your engagement with that girl back East you've been telling me about, and then ask me. I'm not sure but what you'd do pretty well. You've got money, they say, and that's a good deal. Of course, you're rather conceited, but then you're not bad-looking. On the whole—"

Gordon cut her short. "I beg off," he cried; "a joke's a joke, but you're rather rubbing it in. I tried to be funny with the wrong person; I'll admit it. Speaking of Rose, though; that reminds me again—I'm going to see if I can't persuade her to come out here soon; it's taking so much longer to get things in shape than I thought it would, and I was wondering—do you suppose you'd mind

asking her to stay with you? The hotel, to be frank, is pretty near the limit, and then there'd be a chaperon, too, while if you invited her—"

The girl nodded. "Sure," she said; "glad to. I'd really like to see—"

She stopped abruptly. A pair of black ducks swung swiftly across the decoys, and like a flash the gun leaped to her cheek. The two quick reports sounded almost as one, and the two ducks struck the water, dead. The girl rose.

"Come on," she cried, "that makes our dozen. We've got to be getting back home."

By the time Gordon had launched the little skiff and brought the ducks ashore, she had deftly harnessed the horse to the old buggy, and stood waiting for him. Tossing the ducks under the seat, he stood back for her to get in, and then, with a sudden impulse, stepped forward again, blocking her path. Very dainty, very charming, she stood there with a little smile of understanding on her lips.

"Ethel," he whispered.

She made no answer. A sudden gust of passion shook him. He took one quick step forward, and clasped her in his arms. "Ethel," he whispered hoarsely, "suppose there wasn't any other girl."

With a glance enticing beyond words, she raised her eyes to his. "Oh, but there is," she answered, and yet she made no move to free herself, and in another moment their lips met.

CHAPTER VII

A DOUBLE BLOW

"Some one," said Ethel Mason, "has to go to town for me this afternoon. There are a dozen things I've got to have right away."

She looked at Gordon as she spoke, but he smilingly shook his head in answer.

"Some one," he said lightly, "doesn't mean me. I've got to drive over to the Iroquois to see Haskins about that smelting proposition, and you know what that means; I shan't be back till supper time at the earliest. Otherwise I'd do your marketing for you with all the pleasure in life."

The girl nodded, and turned to Rose Ashton. "Isn't he clever at excuses?" she said. "Preparing for married life, I suppose."

Rose laughed in answer. A week in the little cabin on Burnt Mountain had changed her a hundredfold for the better. The color in her cheeks and the animation of her whole expression bore witness that her surroundings were to her complete satisfaction.

"I'll go for you, Ethel," she said; "unless," she added, turning to Gordon, "you'll take me with you, Dick. I'd like to go."

Gordon doubtfully shook his head. "I'd like nothing better, of course," he said; "but I don't believe you should attempt it, Rose. You have no idea what these mountain roads are like in places; it's about as rough as an ocean voyage. And as far as that goes, I don't believe you want to walk to town and back, either. It's altogether too far. You'll be sensible to stay at home and rest."

The girl's face showed her disappointment, and she was about to protest, when Harrison spoke.

"He's right, Miss Ashton," he said, "that ride's a tough one for anybody, and the trip to town ain't much better. It's all right goin', but comin' back ain't no joke. I'll go to town myself, an' be glad of the excuse—unless," he added, with a grin, "Jim here wants to go 'nstead of me. If he wants the job, it's his for the askin'."

Mason's look was sufficient answer. The idea of leaving his beloved fifth level for an entire afternoon savored almost of sacrilege. Even the brief trip home for lunch always somehow exasperated him with a sense of time wasted, and an afternoon—a whole long afternoon—

"I'm not a candidate for the nomination," he said drily. "You can go and welcome, Jack. I'll get Miss Ashton to come along with me and take your job down on the sixth level. I'll bet she'd make as good a miner as a lazy cuss like you."

There was a general laugh. Then Gordon turned to Rose. "That reminds me," he said. "Seriously, Rose, if you want to help us out this afternoon, you can. You needn't go to work with a pick, but I do need about a dozen specimens of rock to send East; and if you want to let Jim show you the place on the sixth level, and pick us out the best samples you can find, it would really save time and trouble for everybody. We'll pay regular union wages, too, so there's your chance."

The girl nodded eagerly. Than to help Gordon in any way, real or fancied, she desired nothing better. "Splendid," she assented, "if I won't be in the way."

Mason shook his head. To the surprise of all, he had taken what was for him a great fancy to their visitor from the East. "Not a bit," he said, readily enough; "I'll be proud to have you along," and thus the afternoon's program was settled for all.

Harrison was the first to take his departure, striding cheerfully away down the path on his long jaunt to town, ready and willing to start on a journey a hundred times as far as long as it was only Ethel who said the word. Next, Jim Mason finished his pipe and rose.

"Come on, Miss Ashton," he cried, "got to get to work. Life's short, and there's lots to do."

With a laughing word of farewell to Ethel and Gordon, she hastened to join him, and together they left for the mine.

Fifteen minutes later Gordon climbed into the buggy despatched from Seneca's only livery stable, duly received Bill Hinckley's well-filled lunch pail from Ethel Mason's hand, gathered up the reins, chirruped to his horses, and disappeared from sight around the bend in the road. No sooner, however, had he reached a safe distance from the house than he deliberately brought the team to a standstill, and then, a dark gleam of excitement in his eyes, opened the lunch pail Ethel Mason had given him, drew a tiny bottle from his pocket, and quickly poured its contents into the coffee, still steaming hot in the bottom of the tin. Having rearranged everything as before, he drew up a few moments later at the entrance to the mine, with a word of friendly greeting handed Hinckley the pail, and started in earnest on his long trip across the mountain.

Singular enough, however, seemed his actions, for a man bound on an errand that had for its object the completion of a contract for the smelting of the Ethel's ore. Scarcely five minutes after he had left Hinckley he passed through a small, densely wooded plateau on the mountain's side, and here he drew rein, scanning the bushes on either hand with careful scrutiny, listened a moment, and then, tying the horses, walked straight toward what seemed to be a tangled network of overhanging boughs. Readily at his touch, however, they parted to right and left, for an instant disclosing a narrow path with a clearing at the end, and then closed noiselessly upon him.

Another five minutes passed. Silence everywhere; the stern old mountain sleeping its majestic, ancient sleep in the sober calm of the peaceful, sunlit afternoon. Then from the bushes near the mouth of Abe Peters' abandoned claim a figure emerged, at first crouching, then, as the screen of bushes grew less and less, snakelike, hugging the ground itself, worming its cautious way steadily onward, at length to be swallowed up bodily in the overhanging shadow of the entrance to the mine.

Once secure in the gloom of the old shaft, the man, with a little sigh of relief, rose to his full height, drew from his coat a slender tube of steel, and from his pocket a delicate frame shaped like the stock of a gun, deftly fitted the two together, pulled back the spring, carefully inserted the bullet, and stood armed with a weapon, at close range absolutely to be relied upon, precise, noiseless, deadly. Silently the man nodded his head, and then, slowly, cautiously, with every nerve in his body on the alert, began his dangerous descent.

Down on the fifth level old Jim Mason, his miner's lamp casting its glimmering light on the high walls of rock, plied his heavy pick, not with the fiery enthusiasm of eager, determined, hot-blooded youth, but with the slower, steadier poise of equally determined, and far more patient, age. Rhythmical, effective, machine-like, he bent to his work. Swing—crash; swing—crash; swing—crash; his vigorous old body sent the steel biting into the rock; never a glance to right or left, never a glance behind, on and on he pressed, well satisfied, with an honest content, every stroke bringing him an infinitesimal fraction nearer his heart's desire.

Never a glance to right or left, never a glance behind, or he might have noticed one shadow darker than the rest creeping steadily forward out of the gloom, stopping momentarily only to advance again, until at last it paused but a few yards away and stood rigid and motionless, blending again with the other shadows among the jagged walls, waiting—waiting—

And now the old man tired a trifle. The rock was hard. Rhythmically he had been counting the strokes to himself—eighty-five, eighty-six, eighty-seven—when he should reach one hundred he would stop—stop and rest a while. On and on crashed the pick; ninety-four, ninety-five, ninety-six—the tired muscles cried out for a respite, however brief, but grimly the old man set his teeth and kept on; ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred—with a long sigh of relief he

slowly straightened, and stood for an instant, motionless as a statue, in the sheer physical enjoyment of rest well-earned. The best that was in him he had given for so many long years, the best that was in him of muscle and brain, and now the end—the consummation of all his dreams—was near, so near—

From the darkness behind him came the faintest vibrant twang, as of a spring released. Swift, sinister, relentless as fate, the bullet sped to its mark. Just for an instant of time the old man still stood, motionless; then, the pick slipping from his nerveless fingers went crashing to the floor, and old Jim Mason of Seneca, shot through the head, pitched forward headlong, and lay stone-dead amid the faintly gleaming ore of the mine he had loved so well.

Again silence, seemingly for minutes, in reality but for seconds, and then the dark shadow crept again forward, picked up the miner's lamp, and stole silently to the old man's side. Only for a moment it waited there, and then crept back until it paused at the opening of the shaft which led again downward to the sixth level. Very faintly a sound came up from the blackness below—the sound of a girl's voice singing. Amid the darkness no eye could see the expression on the shadow's face. For an instant it stood poised at the mouth of the shaft; then, quickly and yet with caution, began its descent.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CASE FOR THE PROSECUTION

As the judge rose from his desk he sighed. His face was troubled, his whole manner vaguely dissatisfied. It was the last day of the trial, and from the evidence, from the district attorney's all but completed argument, from the whole manner in which the case had been tried, he felt certain that the jury could come but to one conclusion, and that their verdict would condemn to death the sodden, miserable wretch who now for three days had sat in the prisoner's box, listening, seemingly without comprehension, to what was being said, acting throughout as if he scarcely realized that in all this dramatic spectacle he was the central figure, to watch whose chance for life or death all these people had come day after day to crowd the little court room, sitting enthralled with a terrible fascination as the lawyers for prosecution and defense fought their fight of thrust and parry—with a man's life for the prize. "Guilty" would be the verdict, and doubtless a verdict well justified by the evidence, and yet—and the judge, half unconsciously, sighed again.

The court officer, blue coated, gold buttoned, portly, imposing, threw open the door leading into the court room. "Court!" he cried in resounding tones, and the crowd, rising as the judge entered, with a little flutter of expectancy sank back again into their places as he took his seat on the bench, gazing down through his gold-bowed spectacles at the familiar scene.

The prisoner sat in his accustomed place, a trifle more weary looking, a trifle more pathetically forlorn, than ever. At the tables in the enclosure sat Wilson Carter, the district attorney, a man keen and sharp as a brier, yet fair withal, and universally liked and respected; to his left, pale and nervous with the strain of waging a gallant but losing fight, sat young Harry Amory, assigned by the court as counsel for the accused; and just behind Carter, next to the prisoner, as the parties most in interest, sat Gordon, Harrison, and Ethel Mason, the girl clothed in somber black, Gordon with a band of crape on his left arm.

The judge cleared his throat. "Counsel for the prosecution?" he said inquiringly, and Carter started to his feet. "Ready, your Honor," he replied, and the judge nodded. "You may proceed," he said.

Tall, erect, dignified, Carter stood waiting for just the moment of time necessary to have fixed upon him every eye in the court room. Then, turning to the judge, he bowed. "May it please your Honor," he said respectfully, and then turned squarely face to face with the twelve jurymen.

"Mr. Foreman and gentlemen of the jury," he began, his tone earnest but agreeably informal and conversational, "before the brief summing up which I wish to make, there are two preliminary matters of which in a word I desire to dispose. First, I wish to compliment the members of the jury on the careful and conscientious manner in which they have listened now for three long days to the evidence in the case before them. I wish to say that I, for one, thoroughly appreciate the way in which they have attended to this branch of their duty, and I wish further to say that I shall leave the decision in this case to them with the greatest possible willingness and confidence, and that the summing up which it now becomes my duty to make will, in justice to them, be as brief as is possibly consistent with the grave importance of the issue involved.

"And secondly, I wish to say a word concerning the unfair prejudice—a prejudice, while in a way perfectly natural, still, as I say, distinctly unfair—which exists in the minds of many persons against the prosecuting officer in a case like the present. One who occupies a position such as mine, in a capital case where public interest is thoroughly aroused and public sentiment runs high, is not infrequently, as he brings forward evidence and argument to show that one of his fellow-beings should properly be condemned to death, regarded with a feeling akin to horror. In the ten years during which I have filled the office of district attorney for the county of Seneca, I have had the real sorrow of hearing myself referred to as a butcher, as a murderer, as a man who has delighted in his opportunities of sending unfortunates to the gallows. Now, Mr. Foreman and gentlemen of the jury, not so much in justice to myself, although that, too, is perhaps a perfectly natural desire, but rather in justice to the high and worthy office which I have the honor to hold, I wish it to be perfectly clear to you gentlemen that neither I nor any other prosecuting officer with a vestige of proper feeling and regard for the rights of mankind ever enters upon the conduct of a case like the present with any feeling other than a most earnest desire to see justice, absolute and final, done. If the accused in this case, after the hearing of the evidence and the arguments on either side, shall, upon the verdict of twelve good men and true, go forth again under God's pure sunlight, a free man, none will rejoice for him more heartily than I; if, on the other hand, you shall be satisfied that the accused is guilty of the crime with which he stands charged, and if upon your verdict he shall be sentenced to death, beyond the feeling of sorrow that I, together with every man in this court room, must share at the thought of a fellow-being paying the extreme penalty of the law, beyond and above that feeling, I say, is the more solemn thought that higher than the rights of any individual in the community, whether he be of high or low degree, stands the immutable law that first and before all else must be safeguarded and protected the rights of the town, the city, the county, the state and the nation; that unless safety of life, of liberty, of possessions, be made possible for our citizens, unless law and order be made to rank above deeds of violence committed in disregard of law, then the whole fabric of our nation must crumble, and the government of which we so proudly boast be reckoned little better than a mockery and a sham."

He paused for an instant, and then, simple, forceful, direct, began his final summing up.

"And now, Mr. Foreman and gentlemen of the jury," he continued, "briefly to review the facts in the case; briefly to summarize the evidence; briefly to outline the theory of the prosecution in regard to it. And first, the facts. On the seventeenth of December last, the bodies of James Mason, long a well-known and universally respected member of the town of Seneca, and of Miss Rose Ashton, the fiancée of Mr. Gordon, who has become well known to all of you since his residence here, and whom you heard yesterday upon the witness stand, were discovered by Mr. Harrison, James Mason's foreman, in the mine in which Mr. Mason had worked for so many years. Death in both cases had apparently been instantaneous, and had been produced by shooting, the medical examiner finding that both deaths had been caused by a bullet from a thirty-two caliber rifle or revolver.

"At the very outset it must be admitted that there is nothing in all the evidence which has been presented to you even savoring of direct proof as to how the deaths took place. It becomes necessary, therefore, to examine the case from the standpoint of what is commonly called circumstantial evidence, in order to see whether a chain can be constructed of sufficient strength properly to hold the man who has been brought before you, charged with the commission of the crime. And I shall not only not deny, but shall be the first to admit, what my learned brother in his closing argument will not fail to emphasize and reemphasize, that it is upon circumstantial evidence only that the case for the county must rest.

"First, then, we are faced with the very obvious fact that the deaths took place; of that there can be no question whatever. Next, going one step further, we come to the question involved in this trial: by whose hand was death inflicted? Could Mason have killed Miss Ashton and then shot himself, or even could Miss Ashton have killed Mason and then shot herself? In both cases the answer must be that such a supposition is not within the bounds of possibility. Not only can no possible motive be found, but on the evidence neither party had a weapon, and such a wild explanation of the case may be dismissed as soon as raised.

"The inquiry, therefore, unavoidably narrows down to the theory of murder. Murder by whom? The most exacting search has brought to light seven persons who were anywhere in the vicinity on the afternoon of December the seventeenth, or who were in any way connected with the events of that afternoon. These persons are Abe Peters, and his two helpers, Marston and Ferguson, Mr. Gordon, Jack Harrison, Ethel Mason, and the prisoner at the bar, William Hinckley. Proceeding on the theory of elimination, we find that in the case of the first six persons mentioned we have a complete alibi. Abe Peters and his helpers have testified that they were at work in their claim during the whole of the seventeenth. There is no shadow of evidence to the contrary; they were in one another's company during the entire day, and, furthermore, the friendly relations between these three men and Mason was matter of common knowledge throughout the county. Mr. Gordon, as he has testified, was obliged to go over the mountain on the day in question to transact some business with the superintendent of the Iroquois mine. Every moment of Mr. Gordon's time is accounted for; his testimony is absolutely straightforward and sincere, and, in addition, the bare idea of a man of Mr. Gordon's standing and character even dreaming of killing his friend and the young lady to whom he was engaged to be married is absolutely unthinkable. Jack Harrison, whose testimony is corroborated in every detail, has

testified that he went to town on some errands for Miss Mason; and Miss Mason herself remained quietly at home, busied with her household duties, until, on Harrison's return, no word coming from the mine, they became alarmed, went to investigate, and discovered the tragedy that had been enacted.

"And now, Mr. Foreman and gentlemen of the jury, we come at last to the consideration of the case against the prisoner, and here, for the first time, we find a chain of evidence, circumstantial, to be sure, but in every link so firm and true that it can not by any possibility be broken—a chain of evidence which leads indisputably to the conclusion that the murderer of James Mason and Rose Ashton sits here before you now, the perpetrator of as dastardly a crime as has ever marred the records of our county. The prisoner's story is absolutely unbelievable. He claims that he remembers seeing Mason and Miss Ashton enter the mine, that shortly afterwards he ate his lunch, and that he must have then dozed off; to sleep, remembering nothing more until Harrison, coming to see what had become of the missing victims, shook him back to consciousness. Certainly an improbable story, even on its face, but in the light of other evidence, clearly appearing as a clumsy lie, an excuse for not being willing to lay himself open to the danger involved by permitting a more extended field for cross-examination.

"Mr. Harrison's testimony is clear and concise. He has told us that, on reaching the entrance to the mine, he found Hinckley in a drunken stupor, an empty whisky bottle by his side; that being only partially successful in his efforts to arouse him, he went at once into the mine, descended to the fifth level, where he found Mason's body; then to the sixth, where he found Miss Ashton's; that on his return to the mouth of the mine he found Hinckley still only half aroused; that, upon taking away his revolver and examining it, he found two of the five chambers empty; and that the revolver was a thirty-two caliber. The expert testimony, as you scarcely need to be reminded, has shown that the bullets which killed the two victims fitted with exactness the revolver with which Hinckley was armed. In addition, Miss Mason, who accompanied Mr. Harrison as far as the entrance of the mine, has corroborated his testimony in every detail. Now take, in addition to this evidence, the testimony that Hinckley's work had been far from satisfactory; that since he had gone to work he had persistently got drunk, and several times neglected his duty; that he had on at least two occasions had words with Mason himself, and that on the latter of these occasions he had sworn at Mason, and said that he would 'square up with him some day.' Take all this testimony together, and is not what happened on the afternoon of December seventeenth pretty plainly to be imagined? 'Nothing but theory' perhaps my learned brother may say, and this of necessity is so, for the prisoner will not speak, and from the mute lips of James Mason and Rose Ashton the story of the tragedy we shall never learn. 'Nothing but theory,' and yet how plainly we can see it all. Mason, on coming to the mine, has further words with Hinckley; Hinckley, perhaps even then partly drunk, later, emboldened by a further drink or two, creeps down on to the fifth level, treacherously shoots and kills Mason from behind, and then, in terror at what he has done, kills Miss Ashton also, and returns to the mouth of the mine. In doubt as to what means to take to escape detection, he desperately turns to the flask again, and before he knows it, his sodden brain loses consciousness altogether, and thus Harrison finds him.

"Gentlemen, I have finished. The facts are all before you; all the evidence is in. I have striven, as best I could, fairly and impartially to present to you the case for the county. The learned counsel for the defense, following me, will present the prisoner's side of the case. His Honor will instruct you as to the law; the burden of proof, the sufficiency and weight of the evidence, the different degrees of murder—my last word to you is to remember that in presenting the case for the prosecution I am acting simply in discharge of a duty, that justice is all I ask, and that justice from you—a careful, just, impartial verdict—is all that the county has a right to ask, and all that the county has a right to expect."

Amid a dead silence he resumed his seat. On jury and on spectators alike the effect of his plea could scarcely be mistaken. Young Amory, following, did his best, but facts that no process of reasoning could satisfactorily explain away, at every turn blocked the path of his argument and robbed it of its force. The judge charged clearly, briefly, impartially; the jury remained out but two hours and a half, and in accordance with their verdict of murder in the first degree, Bill Hinckley, some three months later, was duly and properly hanged by the neck until he was dead.

CHAPTER IX

THE PUBLIC EYE

"After that?" repeated Doyle. "Well, after that for three years I did newspaper work; then I was

appointed Governor Parker's private secretary; he was in office two years; and then I had an offer from Henry Eastman, of Eastman and Peabody, and I went with him as confidential clerk, and have been with him since a year ago last month. And that, I guess, is about the whole story."

Gordon leisurely drained his glass, glancing once more with appreciation about the familiar little room. The return to civilization and the Federal Club had not been unwelcome. Then, with deliberate scrutiny, he gazed at the young man who sat opposite. Slender, wiry and muscular, Doyle's thin, alert, sensitive face seemed a fit index to the whole make-up of the man. Limited to one word in which to describe him, that word would have been "energy." Twinkling brown eyes, an aggressive chin, a mouth firm and resolute, but with a humorous droop at the corners, all in all Jim Doyle appeared not to be one of those men who are content with viewing the world from a distance, spectators detached, remote, but one who was perforce most decidedly in and of it, rubbing elbows with it, slapping it on the back, and asking after its health with all the friendly good-nature imaginable.

"Well," said Gordon judicially, "you've made a good record for yourself. There's no question about that at all. You've been something of a rolling stone, to be sure, but in the process you've managed to gather considerable moss. You're getting five thousand dollars a year, and from what I hear, I judge you're earning it, too, which doesn't always mean the same thing. And yet I want you to leave your nice, comfortable job, and try your luck with me. And," he added deliberately, "I think you'll come, too."

Doyle's face showed no surprise. For him, indeed, variety had been the very spice of life, and with each succeeding change in occupation and in fortune, his capacity for being astonished had grown correspondingly less. Therefore he simply waited, not without interest, and after a moment's pause, Gordon continued.

"I rather think," he said banteringly, "that I'll show you all the advantages of the proposition first, with the intention of thus dazzling your mind so that you'll be in a hurry to accept, without thinking of the possible objections that might occur to you later on. It seems almost too much luck for one man. You'll think, when you hear about it, that I've been lying awake nights planning it for you, and, to be frank, that's more than half true, too."

He paused again, meeting Doyle's amused glance with an answering smile. "I can see you're pleased," he said, "and I won't keep you in suspense any longer. I want you to come with me in a position which will bear the same name as the one you now occupy, confidential clerk. But the name's the only thing that's the same. In reality you're going to be something entirely different; advertising agency, publicity bureau, whatever name of that kind you choose to call it; and, seriously, it's going to be the chance of your life."

Doyle looked interested, and a trifle puzzled as well. "How?" he asked tersely.

"How?" repeated Gordon, "I'll tell you how mighty quick. First of all, except that you'll be in close touch with me all the time, you'll be your own master, free to come and go as you like. Next, you'll run up against a lot of different men, all working in different lines, but all useful to know; men who, if they take a notion to, can help you along like the very devil. Third, the position pays ten thousand a year salary, and if you're inclined to take an occasional flier in the market, there's no reason why you shouldn't double that. But that's your business, of course. Good men differ on the wisdom of playing the market, even from what seems to be the inside. The ten thousand, however, like the past, is secure. So there's your story. What do you think of it?"

Doyle leaned back in his chair, with a little puzzled frown. "It's a trifle vague, isn't it?" he said mildly; "not the salary end; that's refreshingly definite, but the duties, I mean. What is it I advertise? Fish, or toothpowder, or soap?"

Gordon laughed, then suddenly grew grave. "I beg your pardon," he said, "I got ahead of my story for a moment. It's going to be a worse job than any of those you've mentioned, for you've got to advertise me. Here's the idea right here. For certain reasons, which will develop later, I want to get myself very much before the public. It's going to help me, and incidentally, if you decide to come in with me, it's going to help you. Now let me be sure I make myself plain. It isn't any cheap notoriety I'm after; what I want is a big public following, especially among the so-called lower classes. I want you to get me so well known, and so favorably known, through the city, through the state, through the country, even, that the great mass of the people, clerks, artisans, working people of all descriptions, will say, 'Here's a man that's all right. Here's a man we're willing to follow!' When that's once accomplished, I've got a number of different things in view. The others I needn't bother you with now, but the first is in connection with a big mining deal, which I want to try as a test of how strong I really am with the public, besides at the same time cleaning up a couple of millions or so on the side. So you can see that your end of the thing's no joke; it's a big job; there's no question about that. What I want to know is whether you think you're the man for the place. Personally I believe you are. What do you say?"

Doyle leaned forward confidentially across the table, his eyes twinkling as he spoke. "Mr. Gordon," he said, "I'm so damned modest that I hate to tell you what I think, but since you've asked me, I can only say that I entirely agree with you. I think I can make good on the job, but you won't go up in the air if I ask you one question first?"

Gordon smilingly shook his head. "No, I'll promise that," he answered; "fire away."

Doyle pondered a moment. "The two best things," he said slowly, "that I ever heard Mr. Eastman get off were these. One was on a matter where a crowd of street railway men, to round out their system, had to get a franchise to run through a little town. It was something they had to have, and there was a lot of discussion as to the best way to go about it. All sorts of things were proposed, until finally Mr. Eastman spoke up. 'The real point, gentlemen,' he said, 'is a simple one. All we've got to do is to act and talk and even look so straight that they'll finally say, "These fellows are so damned fair and so damned reasonable about this thing that we'd better let 'em have their franchise.'" Well, one or two of the smart Alecs in the crowd, the kind that think because they're rotten themselves, every one else is rotten, too, kind of gave him the laugh; thought he was a little simple minded and out of date on the thing. Finally, though, they let him engineer it his way, and it went through flying, just as nice as could be. The other time was on a big consolidation scheme, and there was a lot of discussion about including a particular statement in a report that was going to be made to the public. One man thought it would affect the public favorably; another thought it would make a good impression on the stock-holders; one or two spoke against it; then they called on Mr. Eastman for his opinion; he was for it, and he said so; he summed up the points that had been made in favor of making it public, and then in conclusion he said in that dry way of his, 'And I think, gentlemen, that on this proposition you forget what is to my mind the most important point of all; that besides all the other good things that may be said of this clause, it has the additional merit of being true.' Most of them thought he was joking, I suppose, but I knew mighty well he wasn't, and the result of the thing showed that he was right again, as he generally is.

"So, according to my ideas, picked up partly from watching him, and partly on the outside, the only thing that'll really go with the general public in the long run is honesty, either real or imitation, and the trouble with the imitation kind is that it doesn't last very long before it begins to show wear. And that's why I'd like to ask you right out plain, without meaning any insult, whether this mining deal and the other schemes are fakes or not. Not because I've got any conscience; I never had much, to start with, and since I've got into things down town a little, I haven't any at all, but I mean just as a matter of business policy. You might put a fake deal through, and come out flying, but I wouldn't want to go into it myself unless it was straight."

He paused suddenly, refilled his glass, and then added, "After which, you probably think I'm several kinds of a damn fool."

Gordon laughed with thorough enjoyment. "On the contrary," he said, "I find all the good reports I've had on you being borne out. You've got the right idea on these things, or, at least, you've got the same ideas that I have, which with most people means the same thing. No, I'm glad to say that these schemes of mine are all straight as a string. On the mining deal, of course there'll be inflation, and the usual amount of legitimate stock market manipulation, and also, too, you can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs, and some of the general public will undoubtedly suffer, as they always do, for being fools enough to speculate. But in a general way, the proposition's perfectly legitimate, and I think without further discussion on that point we'll agree that you're the man I'm looking for. Now there are two other things I want to get straightened out. First, this advertising scheme. Is it feasible? Can it be successfully carried out?"

Doyle thought a moment only. His active brain had been busied with so many projects, real and imaginary, in his brief span of life, that it was hard very greatly to surprise him. He nodded assent.

"Why, sure," he rejoined succinctly, "it can be done, all right, but, if we do it the way it ought to be done, it's going to cost you money; a whole lot of money."

Gordon looked his approval. "Yes," he answered, "I know it, and of course I shouldn't think of going into it at all if I wasn't ready to foot the bills. I'm in condition, however, financially, to meet almost any expense within the bounds of reason. So much for that. Now here's the final consideration. We've agreed that you're the man for your end of this thing, and we've agreed that with the right man to run it, the advertising campaign can be carried on to advantage. Now, how about the man who's to be advertised. Are there any reasons why I won't go down with the public? If there are, now's the time to tell me about them, instead of later. Go ahead, now; pick me to pieces; I give you leave."

Doyle shook his head in decided negative. "You needn't worry a minute over that," he answered positively, "you've got every card in the pack. All we've got to do is to play 'em right. First, you see, you're from the swell end of town, and that helps to start with. Some people it might discourage. You know some folk that get their ideas mostly from books really believe that the rank and file want one of their own kind to lead 'em. That's the worst rot going. The common people get jealous when they see one of their own getting ahead too fast. 'That fellow,' they say, 'he's no good. Why, he used to live on the same street as me.' And a poor man's got nothing against a rich man that treats him half way decent. He envies him, of course, but he doesn't hate him; and a man like you, if he goes at it right, can get the kind of following he wants quicker and better than the man that's been raised right up among the gang. I know that for a fact.

"And, then, Mr. Gordon, you've got the coin, too. Of course that isn't everything, by any means. Lots of men are so unpopular that all the coin in the world can't help 'em any, but there's

some people that have got to be reached with the long green, and that can't be reached any other way on earth. You've got to show 'em before they'll be with you.

"Finally, you're a business man, and you know every dollar's made up of a hundred cents, and that's going to save you from getting soaked a lot. No, Mr. Gordon, there's nothing to stop you that I can see; nothing in the world."

Gordon checked on the fingers of his left hand with the index finger of his right. "Let's see, then," he reflected slowly, "one's all right, and two's all right, and three's all right; so far, so good. And now we come to the part where I'll confess my ideas are altogether vague, and where I've got to rely on your judgment and experience. And that's on the practical details of this advertising scheme. With a free hand, what would you do?"

There was no hesitation about Doyle. At once he attacked his subject with the relish of an epicure about to enjoy a feast. "Well," he said, "of course, to begin with, there's no way of reaching the general public like the newspapers. It's a fact that most people, even intelligent, well informed people, most of all, people in upper society, don't begin to have the faintest idea of the influence of the one-cent dailies; and I tell you, Mr. Gordon, there are tens of thousands of people in this country who take every word they read in one of those papers for gospel truth; more than likely it's the sum total of all they ever do read. So first of all we want to get control of a paper, and then we can print what we please. Some people might tell you that a weekly or a monthly magazine would answer your purpose better, but it isn't so. That would do well enough for a second string, so to speak; you'd reach a little different class of readers that way, and that would help; but what we really want first of all is to own or control a good one-cent daily that gets right to the people, and that gradually gets you before the people in as many different ways as possible. Then finally one story or another gets the eye of the men on the other papers, and finally you're good copy—for a while, at least, until something comes along to eclipse you—from one end of the country to the other. That's the way we'll work that."

Gordon nodded. "That sounds all right," he said approvingly, "but I suppose it's got to be done with a lot of tact. With some people there can't be such a thing as publicity without criticism."

Doyle leaned quickly forward across the table. "I know exactly what you mean," he exclaimed, "and I know exactly the kind of people you mean, too. You mean the conservative, ultra respectable men you meet here every day at the Federal, for instance; the class that thinks if your name appears in print anywhere outside the society column, it's deucedly bad form, you know, most extraordinary sort of thing, my dear chap, on my word."

He mimicked successfully, and Gordon laughed. "Yes, you've hit it," he answered, "but these same men are powers in the city, and I should hate to lose their regard, as I suppose I undoubtedly should by any such campaign as we propose."

Doyle nodded. "You certainly would," he replied; "but, Mr. Gordon, it's a choice you've got to make. It's simply inevitable. To paraphrase Lincoln, you can suit part of the people all of the time, and you can suit all of the people part of the time, but you can't suit all of the people all of the time. It's absolutely impossible; and the choice to make is to see where you'll really get the true following. Jefferson made the choice, and I suppose he wasn't really exactly popular in good Federalist society, but when he wanted a thing, he only had to go to the people for it, and he got it. He knew where the country's real strength lay, and you can't do better than copy him. It's the so-called common people you want to have back of you, and it's the common people's battle you want to fight, and the common people's ideas of what's right and proper that you want to study over. That's what you've got to make up your mind to."

Gordon looked thoughtful. "So you really think," he said, "that I can afford to lose standing south of the park, and still hope to gain through the city at large."

"The city at large!" cried Doyle, his voice rising in his excitement. "Why, Mr. Gordon, I don't think you've caught the idea of this yet. With the way we're going to take hold of this thing, the things that you've done, the things that you'll be doing, the things that you'll be going to do, we'll sweep the country from one end to the other. This little crowd south of the park you stand so much in awe of aren't even a pin prick on the map, and that's the solemn truth. For one enemy you'll make among them, through the country, from east to west, from north to south, you'll make a hundred, no, a thousand friends."

Gordon laughed at the younger man's enthusiasm.

"That sounds fine," he assented good-humoredly, "but when we come right down to the details, just how are we going to make all these friends? What are some of these wonderful things we're going to do?"

Doyle did not give ground for an instant. His eyes, indeed, gleamed more eagerly than ever, with the ardor of a man fairly started on a favorite theme.

"Details," he cried; "don't you worry about them. I'll give them to you in a minute, but they aren't the things to worry over. Here's the big thing; the one we've got to hang up on the wall, and look at a hundred times a day. What are we going to do, what are we going to say, to make the average man the country through, believe in us? That's the puzzle. We've got to be good

enough judges of human nature and things in general to tell that, and the rest's easy. I've just told you my idea; the one big thing is, 'Honesty is the best policy;' you've got either to be honest, or to have the people think you're honest, and you've got to show at least a fair measure of ability, and after that, you needn't be so careful. You can do lots of things; you can be too radical for a lot of people; you can be too conservative for a lot more; but, whether they agree with you or not, so long as they think you're honest and fairly capable, why, good men, and especially good leaders, are scarce, and they'll stick. You'll find that's so, every time."

Gordon nodded. "Well," he admitted, "I must say I think you're pretty nearly right. Let's assume that you are, anyway, and then you can go ahead and take up some of these details I want to know about. That's where, as I just said, my ideas are vague."

Doyle grinned cheerfully. "I'll clear 'em up for you," he observed, with confidence. "That part's easy compared with the rest. First off, you've got to have six or eight speeches on different topics. A man, to be in the public eye, has got to be a mighty versatile proposition these days. We go crazy over so many different things we've really got to be a nation of cranks, pretty near, and every crank has to be got at on his specialty, if it's a possible thing. You want a good up-to-date talk on financial questions, and work things to get a chance to spring it at Board of Trade dinners, and that sort of thing; you've been an athlete,—work up a talk on athletics, and you'll find that'll go great almost anywhere; your base-ball crank's a power in the land to-day; he has to be catered to, and written for, and everything else. And then you'll have to mix a little in the political game, too. Not too much, at first, anyway; but still politics is the big thing, after all, and you've got to have a good safe speech ready on the issues of the day; you never can tell,—a speech, a sentence from a speech, even, may make a man famous overnight. Versatility; broad-minded interest in everything; and always ready to see that the rights of the people are looked out for; pretty good, what?"

Gordon smiled. "Do I get time for anything else except speechmaking?" he asked dryly.

Doyle laughed. "Of course you do," he cried. "The speechmaking part is only a necessary sort of evil. It's got to be done, for advertising, but it's the easiest thing in the world, if we're not careful, to overdo. It's a great thing to have your name in big head-lines about once in so often; shows people you're alive, and makes a lot of 'em jealous, too; but the minute you get the reputation of being willing to shoot off your face anywhere on any old subject at any time, then people begin to laugh at you. So we'll be careful on that end of it, for, after all, the things a man does count a hundred to one over the things he says he's going to do. And that's where I think we'll score."

Gordon gazed at him. "Young man," he said solemnly, "I begin to have a suspicion that by engaging you I'm going to take my life in my hands. They told me you were a hustler, an enthusiast, and a man of resource, and I begin to believe they understated the case, at that."

Doyle, engrossed in his subject, scarcely seemed to heed Gordon's words. "Look," he continued, "these things we've got to have you do. Here's the idea about them. We want to pull things off just the way they make a dramatic climax on the stage. You know the old gags; the hero says he wrote the letters, and shields the wicked brother; the rich and beautiful heroine leaves her happy home to fly with the poor but honest workingman; and the gallery has a mild species of fit. Of course the fellow that writes the play has the advantage over us; he can arrange things to suit himself, and we can't. But we can work up some pretty neat little grandstand plays, just the same. Like this. When Moriarty was going to run for district-attorney the second time, he paid a poor boy's fine practically out of his own pocket, and let the boy go home to mother. It was just around Christmas time, and that soft and mushy act, which he probably had no business to perform anyway, they claim was worth two or three thousand votes, at the very least. Take another one. You remember Lamson, that tried a good deal the sort of thing you want to do a few years back, and finally failed because he was partly crazy and partly crooked, too. Here's a thing he pulled off, that I heard of from an eye witness. He came driving down to the station at his summer home one fine morning to take the train for the city. There was an old wagon, belonging to a junk peddler that lived in the town, standing near the station, and harnessed to it the weariest, thinnest, most discouraged looking old white horse you ever saw. Lamson eyed the horse a minute; then he got his groom down off his own trap. 'William,' he said, 'unharness that horse at once.' The groom started to do it, and the peddler was going to interfere, when some one in the crowd—probably tipped off, I suppose—grabbed his arm and stopped him. By the time the horse was out of the shafts there was quite a little crowd collected; then Lamson turns to the peddler. 'My man,' he says, 'that horse is going to be taken up to my farm, and turned out to pasture for the rest of his natural life. My groom, in just half an hour, will come back here with a good, strong, bay horse of mine, and you're to harness him up and keep him as a present from me. But if I hear of your not keeping him in the very best of condition, if he isn't fed and watered and cared for in every way just as I've treated him, then, my man, you'll stand a fine chance of going to jail,' and with that, he swung on to the train, while the crowd cheered.

"Well, sir, in some mysterious way that got into the papers and was copied from one end of the country to the other. It had just enough of the dramatic about it to catch people right. The poor old horse going out to the green fields, the man being taught an object lesson. Lamson being so good and generous and kind—it helped him to float a big issue of wildcat mining stock that netted him a couple of millions, and ruined a dozen men outright when it collapsed. So that's the sort of thing we've got to pull off from time to time; you'll be very reticent about it all, when it's called to

your attention; you'll be very much displeased that it's got into the papers; you'll have to beg the reporters to excuse you for being unwilling to discuss the matter at all, and it'll be the devil of a good boost for you and any schemes you may be at work on. And you can't deny it, Mr. Gordon, can you?"

Gordon, without at once replying, gazed quizzically at the younger man. "Doyle," he said at last, "I can't for the life of me make up my mind whether if I follow you I'm going to find I'm on the road to fame, or whether I'm only going to succeed in making a most outrageous fool of myself. But on the whole—" he paused deliberately and flicked the ash from his cigar—"on the whole, I believe in you, my boy, and I'm willing to take the chance."

Doyle leaned forward across the table. "Good," he cried, "you won't regret it, Mr. Gordon. With what I know about you, with what I know about myself, with what I know about the general public, the thing's a cinch. You'll be the best advertised man that's walked the earth since the day it was made."

CHAPTER X

ETHEL MASON DECIDES

"It ain't nothing to laugh about," said Harrison savagely, "you have changed, every way. You ain't the same girl you was a month ago. You dress different; you act different; you treat me different; and it's gettin' to be more'n I'm goin' to stand for."

Ethel Mason only laughed again in answer. A month had passed since her father's death, an aunt from the lake coming up to the mountain to live with her; but, according to Seneca's gossip, and according to Seneca's general ideas of the fitness of things, this was but a temporary arrangement, to last merely until such time had elapsed as would suit the rough conventions of the county, when Ethel Mason would then become Mrs. Jack Harrison.

According to Jack's ideas, indeed, the proper period had fully elapsed, and on this special evening he had walked over from his cabin with a definite purpose in mind; only to find, as sometimes happens when man proposes, that the girl in the case was in mood capricious, even frivolous, always somehow evading, by turn and twist of the conversation, the subject uppermost in his thoughts. Gradually the little frown between his eyes had grown darker and darker, and finally the girl's failure to be serious had provoked him to open wrath.

"Dear me," mocked the girl, "more'n you're going to stand for. And I wonder what you're going to do about it. Are you boss over me? Haven't I a right to dress as I please, and act as I please, and treat you as I please? I guess I don't understand what you mean by not standing for it?"

The young miner winced. Certainly he was not making the headway he had expected, nor was the conversation coming any nearer the desired end. Restlessly he fidgeted in his chair, uncrossed his legs, and immediately recrossed them again, swallowed desperately once or twice, and finally plunged headlong into the speech he had lately rehearsed so many times to himself.

"Look here, Ethel," he began, his voice sounding strangely in his own ears, "this ain't no way for you to live, up here alone by yourself, an' you ought to make a change mighty quick. If things had broke different, and Jim hadn't gone so sudden, I'd have had plenty to say before this, but of course that went and changed everything. You're owner of the mine now, and whatever Jim might have meant to do for me, as it is, I'm nothin' but your hired man; foreman of your mine, workin' under you."

He paused uncertainly for a moment; then, as the girl made no effort to break the silence, he continued, "You know what I think of you, Ethel; you know I've loved you from the day you first set foot in Seneca; you know I've always meant to ask you to marry me the minute I felt I was well enough fixed to have the right to ask; and now—well, everything's changed; you're rich and I'm poor, but, by God, Ethel—" and his voice rang vibrant with a strong man's pride—"I'm a man, and when the papers go through I'll be foreman of the mine for the company at the salary they meant to give Jim, and if you'll have me, I swear I'll never touch a cent of your money; I'll work my hands to the bone for you; and I'll look out for you every way I can, as true and faithful as a man could. I mean it, Ethel, every word; I love you, and if you'll marry me, that's all in the world I ask."

Abruptly he stopped speaking. To the last few words the girl had seemed scarcely to be listening, as the faint sound of wheels, the sound she had been expecting, came to her ears. She

leaned forward, speaking low and rapidly.

"Jack," she said, "you know how fond I am of you, but we can't have to-night to ourselves. Mr. Gordon's coming over to talk some business about the mine, and I can't very well put him off, for he's going East to-morrow. Come over to-morrow night, Jack, and we'll be all by ourselves then."

The tone, fully as much as the words themselves, seemed entirely to satisfy Harrison. Without objection he rose.

"All right," he answered, "I'll be over to-morrow night, and I'll be looking to hear good news, too."

The girl made no answer. For a moment, Harrison paused at the door, then turned and came swiftly toward her. "Just one kiss, Ethel," he said, "just to show everything's all right between us."

With a little laugh the girl rose and yielded herself to his embrace, nor did Harrison, consumed with passion, note that her lips met his without response. Once, twice, thrice, he kissed her upturned lips; then without a word half threw her from him and burst blindly from the room.

Scarcely five minutes later, and Gordon sat in the self-same chair which Harrison had occupied, gazing with approval at the slender figure opposite. Beyond question, the strain of the past few weeks had changed her, and not for the worse. The girl's face was thinner and more thoughtful, and yet far more attractive even than before; the soft, petulant prettiness of the child giving place to the real beauty of the woman.

"You wanted to see me about the mine?" she queried.

Gordon shook his head. "That," he answered, "was only a somewhat clumsy excuse. But I did want to see you very much, and I wanted to see you alone, so I thought the mine would serve."

The girl nodded. "And now?" she asked.

Gordon noted the little smile that played about her lips. In some things, he acknowledged on the instant to himself, no man could ever hope to cope successfully with a woman. And he smiled in answer.

"Yes," he said slowly, "that's it. I want you to marry me to-morrow morning, and start East with me on the express to-morrow afternoon."

Ethel Mason laughed outright. "You're more business-like than the others," she said mockingly, "and yet haven't you forgotten something else? Sometimes, you know, just a word or so, about—love."

Gordon shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't forget it," he said, "I'd have put it in if I'd thought you expected it; glad to, really, because I do it rather well. But what's the use? You know I've got all the feeling for you that sex has for sex; that goes without saying; you've seen it in a hundred ways; and in addition I know that together we can go a hundred times as far as we'll ever get separately. But beyond that—the dying for you, and shedding my heart's blood, and all that—why, these days, that's a little bit out of date."

The girl gazed at him with an expression hard to fathom. "It's not very flattering," she suggested.

Gordon made a little impatient gesture. "Oh, come," he said, "I'm perfectly frank. Why can't you be so, too? Does the woman marry just for love? Doesn't the woman want to feel passion first? Or, if she isn't that kind, doesn't she figure what she's getting in return for herself? Dollars and cents, these days. I say again, story-book love's gone by."

The girl shook her head. "You're talking for the city woman," she said, "who's got so civilized she's lost the instinct every woman once had. With a woman, unless she stifles it till it's dead, there's one thing comes ahead of everything else, and that's to be protected, cared for, guarded, to be safe. Perhaps it isn't quite love, but it's pretty nearly the same thing. Somebody stronger to lean on, some one in time of danger who won't fail her. That's what comes first."

Gordon gazed at her with real surprise. Then, without hesitation, he nodded. "You're right," he said, "and that I can give you, too. Will you marry me, Ethel?"

The girl did not answer; the long silence seeming in no way to embarrass her. At last, with a little sigh, she looked up at him.

"I will be frank with you," she said, "it's so hard to know what to do. Jack was here to-night before you came, and he asked me the same question you're asking now. Jack's rough, and he isn't educated, but he's big and strong, and I know he thinks a lot of me, and, besides, he's really a man."

Gordon, with the skill not to provoke opposition, nodded assent. "You're right," he said with conviction, "no one thinks more of Jack than I do. But, Ethel, without flattery, you're a woman in

a thousand—in looks, in charm, in every way. And Jack—it isn't his fault—Jack is rough and uneducated, and it's too late to change him now. And, with all his good qualities, you'd never be happy with him all your life through. You couldn't, Ethel. Think what it would mean to live your life here on the mountain, no friends, no interests, nothing but life with Jack and the mine. No, we only live once, and it's our duty to make the most of it. And think of the other side of the picture. Wealth, social position, everything you could desire. I'm not a man of great wealth yet, but let me swing the mine the way I want to, and I'll be a millionaire ten times over. Think of it, Ethel. Your city house, your country place, servants, horses, motors, around the world in a steam yacht; we'd get out of life what only a chosen few can get. Say you'll marry me, Ethel, and you'll never live to regret it, so help me God."

There was a silence even longer than before. Then the girl rose and began to pace the room with quick, nervous steps.

"Oh, I don't know," she cried, "you make it so hard. It's my whole life you're asking me to decide. And I believe you're honest, too, and sincere; but, I've known Jack all my life. Oh, I don't know what to do."

Gordon rose, and coming quickly across the room, took her in his arms. She made no resistance, and very gently he stooped and kissed her.

"I know it's hard," he said. "It's hard to give up Jack. It's hard to leave the place that's always been your home; but, Ethel, it's the only way. I'm not going to urge my claims too far. After all's said, you're the one to decide. I'm going back now, and I'm coming here at ten o'clock to-morrow morning. Make your decision then, and whatever it is, in every way, Ethel, I'll always stand your friend. Good night, and I shall hope—and expect—to find you ready when I come."

He was gone, and the girl was left alone. Alone, to lie awake the long night through, thinking, planning, deciding and then changing her decision, in a tremor of doubt and uncertainty, until the morning sunlight, sweet and wholesome, forced its cheery way through the shutters of the little room.

For Jack Harrison, never did day seem so long. The hours dragged on leaden feet, even the minutes seemed mockingly to lengthen all through the dreary day. It was dusk when he started for the cabin, and as he neared it, absently he noticed that the light was not yet lit in the kitchen window. With a step so buoyant as to become almost a run, he thrust open the gate, and gained the porch. The door was shut, and the latch did not yield to his eager pressure. Then, suddenly coming to himself, he gave a gasp of fear, and half staggered back on the porch. As he did so, his eye caught, pinned to the door, a square of white. With trembling fingers he lit a match, tore open the letter, and read the few brief words it contained. Then, silent, as if mortally stricken, he staggered here and there, as if still blindly seeking, in the place she had loved so well, the girl he had loved—and lost.

On his knees he dropped, clasping the railing with his hands, and in dumb agony gazed out as if for help across the mighty silences of the darkening valley. The west wind, sweeping free, moaned through the tree tops below; dark clouds, driven low, one by one blotted out the light of stars; faintly, here and there, on the mountain side, gleamed the lights of other cabins, homes—such as the home he had some day meant to build. With a sudden uncontrollable gesture, he raised his eyes to the heavens, where, amid the flying cloud wrack, one star still faintly shone.

"Oh, God! Oh, God!" he cried. "And I loved her so."

Faster sped the hurrying clouds, louder moaned the freshening wind; even the single star no longer shone, and darkness, like a pall, settled down over Burnt Mountain.

CHAPTER XI

THE LAUNCHING OF THE KONAHASSETT

The hands of the big clock in the "customers' room" at Gordon and Randall's pointed to five minutes of ten. Pervading the place was a general air of extreme tension, somehow suggesting that all present were about to start in a race of some kind, and were undergoing the agonies of the last few nerve-racking moments before the start. And this, indeed, in a sense was true. When the clock should strike ten, and the opening bell of the Exchange should be heard, a race of a kind began for all.

The two thin-faced, alert, nervous young men at the tickers, steadily calling the quotations, must keep pace with the whirring tape; the two boys standing in front of the big stock board, marking up the eighths and quarters, or indeed, the whole points, as the favorites receded or advanced, must make their nimble fingers fly; and the customers themselves, according to their several temperaments sitting at ease in the big arm-chairs or pacing nervously up and down the room, must keep close watch of their holdings; make up their minds, if winning, when to quit at the right time; if losing, whether to take their loss with a philosophical shrug of the shoulders, or whether to dig deeper into their pockets, make the depleted margin good, and desperately hold on for better things.

The day and hour marked the third month of the great copper boom, an "era of good-feeling" when bulls were rampant in every pasture, and bears had retreated so far into the woods that their distant growlings passed all unnoticed and unheard; when every little lamb had his little day and on the strength of his paper profits bought an automobile for himself and a set of furs for his wife; when brokers were encouragingly urbane and polite and customers eager and enthusiastic in their pleasant and successful chase after the jingling dollars; that splendid time, in short, when anybody and everybody could make money, when there were all winners and no losers, when "getting rich quick" was so easy that one felt almost ashamed of his winnings, and thought with good-humored self-contempt of what he had been making in "straight" business, his year's earnings now in a week or two doubled or even trebled, and all without effort, all with scarcely the exertion even of lifting a finger. Prosperity, happiness, glorious country, beautiful world!

Among the other customers was little Mott-Smith, as usual, anxious, worried, hesitating between the conservative wish to make sure of what he had gained by following Gordon's lead, and the maddening desire to hold on and take his chances of seeing things mount higher and yet higher still. A week ago, on Gordon's word of advice, let fall after a game of bridge at the Federal, he had bought two hundred Arizona and Eureka at forty-seven; two days later a drop to forty-five had cost him a sleepless night and two restless, nervous days; then, in a forenoon, it had jumped to forty-nine, and thence had risen steadily on what was described in the learned language of the financial columns as "accumulative buying of the very highest class, rumored to be that of prominent insiders who are in receipt of most gratifying news direct from the mine." In turn it had touched fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two and one-half, and the night before had closed strong at fifty-three bid, and no stock offered.

Thus Mott-Smith worried and planned and mentally bought and sold stocks right and left twenty times in two minutes. On the one hand, twelve hundred dollars in real money was for him a sum well worth having, and yet, in spite of that, he could not forget the tone of Gordon's voice as he had looked Mott-Smith squarely in the eye in answer to the latter's timid question. "Arizona and Eureka," he had said, "yes, indeed, it's a good mine; a very good mine," and then he had glanced over his shoulder and distinctly dropped his voice a trifle before he added: "and from what I hear, I should judge that before many days it's going considerably higher, too."

It had been on the strength of this opinion that he had bought his two hundred shares, for Gordon and Randall were already known as a house remarkably well posted on coppers, and Gordon's weekly market letter, well-written, entirely lacking in anything bordering on the tipster's objectionable art, well poised, and steadily but conservatively bullish, numbered among its readers thousands of Gordon's eager followers. And in this special case, Gordon, as usual, had been right. But "considerably higher"; just what that meant was the hard point to determine. Was six points "considerably higher" or was it not?

While he stood pondering the problem, suddenly the bell struck. Instantly the clerks at the tickers began to call, "Copper, one hundred fourteen and a quarter; U. P., one hundred thirty-seven; Reading, one hundred eight; Copper, one hundred fourteen and a half; Copper, one hundred fifteen;" the race was on.

From long experience, Mott-Smith knew the exact spot on the local board where he should look to find Arizona and Eureka. For some moments, however, he purposely avoided looking in that direction. Supposing there should be bad news from the mine; a cave-in, a washout, a fire; supposing the whole market should suddenly break sharply on foreign war news or something of the sort—momentarily he felt a slight giddiness creep over him, and involuntarily he gave a little gasp as he sought to pull his unruly nerves together. Then, with lips tightly compressed, he glanced a third of the way down the list of local stocks. Opposite Arizona and Eureka was already posted a long row of figures, and even as he looked the boy was putting up others. Heavens! Mott-Smith hardly dared trust his eyes. Fifty-six and a half, seven, six and a half, seven, eight and a half, eight and a quarter, three-quarters, nine and a half, sixty, sixty-one—

A sudden rush of gratitude and self-congratulation swept over him. Oh, if he had sold, he could never have forgiven himself. Twenty-eight hundred dollars—and he had thought twelve was good. Oh, what a splendid thing was life, after all. Twenty-eight hundred dollars—what a world of opportunity it was for men of foresight and ability and sound judgment; for men, in short, like Arthur Fitzhenry Mott-Smith. Twenty-eight hundred dollars—could the whole city produce a man happier than he?

Meantime in their private consulting room Gordon and Randall sat planning the various details of the day's campaign. Randall, pulling out his watch, had just risen to take his departure for the customers' room, when Gordon called him back.

"Oh, Bob," he cried genially, "just a minute, please. I forgot to say that I think we're ready now for the preliminary work on the Konahassett; getting the ground in shape, so to speak, for the circulars and advertisements that will come a little later on. If you can, I'd like you to start to get the tip in circulation to-day, and it seems to me I'd do it something like this. During the forenoon pick out six or eight men that you know trade with half-a-dozen different houses, and in the course of casual conversation just give it to them in the strictest confidence that I've got a mine about to be launched, which you understand, on the very best authority, is going to be, in the course of a year or two, one of the richest producers in the whole world—a genuine bonanza. Tell them of course not to mention it to a soul. Tell them that for a while yet there'll be nothing doing anyway; but you want them to have it in mind in case you shouldn't get another chance to speak to them about it before the stock is really listed. Well, I needn't go into all the details with you, Bob. You know how to do it better than I do, by a long shot. You catch my idea, anyway. Mystery; immense size; inconceivable richness; chance to make a barrel of money, either by out-and-out speculation or by buying the stock as a genuine investment. Savvy?"

Randall nodded. "Sure," he answered briefly, "I'll get you in right; you needn't worry a minute about that. Any men in particular you've got in mind?"

Gordon thought an instant. "Harry Atkinson, for one," he answered, "and Holliday, and Bancroft. Oh, and if Mott-Smith's around, be sure and see him anyway. He's the greatest he-gossip of the lot. Tell him to sell Arizona and Eureka, and then to wait for the word from me. And tell him it's my personal tip to a few old friends, and that it's given in absolute secrecy. Rub that in. If there were any doubt about his not spreading it, that'll clench it. He'll tell, all right. He's human. Absolute secrecy, remember. It's got to be kept quiet."

Randall, pausing on the threshold, smiled grimly. "Dick," he said, "your ability is only equalled by your sincerity, and—you're a damned good judge of human nature," and the door slammed to behind him before Gordon could frame a reply.

Ensuing events certainly seemed fully to bear out Randall's estimate of his partner's cleverness. Little Mott-Smith, indeed, after Randall's guarded talk with him in a quiet corner of the customers' room, fairly grudged the time necessary for closing out his Arizona and Eureka, and hustled away from the office, almost bursting with the magnitude of his secret. In five different offices, before the closing bell rang, he spread the news of Gordon's glorious find, and left behind him a trail of eager speculators, each striving to solve the problem of how best to get in on the ground floor for the largest possible amount within his means, and each wondering what special strings might perchance be worked to get at Gordon himself, and thus to have the wonderful news really verified at first hand.

To cap the climax, Mott-Smith, later in the day, chanced to dine at the Travelers' with Holden, of the *Post*. Even with the oysters, Mott-Smith could not refrain from dropping a mysterious hint or two; with the arrival of the punch he was in full blast, and by the time the demi-tasse was served Holden had at his command a very pretty little two-column "scoop." It appeared duly in next morning's *Post*; by afternoon all the other papers had copied it, and then the real rush to get at Gordon, or some one near him, began.

Gordon, of course, was immensely annoyed. Reluctantly after a day or two, he did in self-defense grant one interview, and that interview served to whet the popular appetite almost beyond restraint. It appeared that everything which had been said of the mine was true, only in reality far short of the whole truth. The samples Mr. Gordon showed the reporter were alive with the very richest copper. The stock would be listed in due time, probably, but for the present Mr. Gordon did not intend doing this, lest the excitement caused by the newspapers might change what was strictly an investment affair into a mere speculative venture.

Human nature being always much the same, and the best and the worst of us being alike ever tormented with the desire to attain that which we can not attain, and possess that which we can never possess, the name and fame of the Konahassett lost nothing in the few weeks' delay which followed. From time to time new strikes, of still greater richness than ever before, were duly made and recorded. And then, one fine morning, appeared the first of Gordon's famous public advertisements, modeled somewhat on the style of the pyrotechnic Lamson, with whom, some years previous, the idea had originated. With this difference, however, that the English of Gordon's advertisements was perfect, his reasoning clear, his statements terse and directly to the point. In one respect, on Doyle's advice, he did copy Lamson direct, and that was in the matter of advising that no one should buy on margin. As Doyle justly observed, not only was the moral effect of this advice excellent, but there was practical advantage to be gained as well, those who had intended buying on margin in the first place most certainly not being deterred by the advertisement from doing so, while on the other hand, many who had never dreamed of experimenting with this risky form of gambling, being told not to do so, and finding in addition that, if they did, they were bound to make four or five times as much—when Konahassett went up—would yield to temptation, and thus largely increase the amount of the stock subscribed.

For three days the advertisements were continued, and then at last the stock was in reality listed. Even Gordon, knowing as he did that he had picked the ideal moment for his venture, knowing as he did that the country was in the midst of tremendous prosperity and fairly on the upswing of a big bull market, knowing that money was still easy and speculation rampant, even Gordon was absolutely amazed at the public response. All day long the stock was bought in small

lots, in huge blocks, bought outright, bought on the flimsiest imaginable margin, bought in every possible way that it could be bought, legitimately or otherwise; and with the ringing of the closing bell Konahassett preferred, with its par of twenty-five, closed at thirty-three and one-half, while Konahassett common, with its par at five, after the heaviest transactions ever recorded in any copper stock in one day's trading, closed triumphantly at nine and three-quarters. And Gordon and Doyle, dining together at the Federal, looked upon their work and saw that it was good.

CHAPTER XII

GORDON LISTENS TO GOOD ADVICE

Fast, true and strong the little black pacer came through the last quarter mile of the speedway. Gradually Vanulm, quietly soothing him with voice and rein, steadied him down to an ordinary road gait, and then, as they swung sharp to the left into the quiet of the old country road, with its crumbling stone walls, shaded on either side by the overhanging elms, the little black reluctantly slowed to a walk, and Vanulm, with a smile, relaxed his hold upon the reins, and leaned comfortably back against the buggy's cushioned seat.

Gordon drew a long breath of satisfaction. "He's all right," he said approvingly, "you've got hold of a great little horse, Herman, and you were mighty kind to give me a chance to see him step, too. Fresh air's been scarce with me, lately; your stopping at the office was a happy accident."

Vanulm's brow wrinkled quizzically. "It wasn't really an accident, Dick," he confessed, "it was only a subterfuge to get you off by yourself where you couldn't run away. You're so confoundedly busy that it was really the only way I could think of to get you where I'd have a fair chance to give you a good talking to."

Gordon gave him a quick glance. "Well," he answered good-humoredly, "they say you might as well kill a man as scare him to death. What's the trouble now?"

Vanulm looked as if he did not altogether relish his task. "Look here, Dick," he said at last, "I'm an older man than you are by twenty years, or I wouldn't be fool enough to try to give you advice. But here's one thing that's the trouble right away. You're driving yourself altogether too hard. Your business has increased enormously; you're fathering this Konahassett scheme; you've married a young and exceedingly attractive wife, and the success she's made socially demands at least a part of your time there; I keep reading of you making speeches in all sorts of places; they tell me you're beginning to dabble in politics; you're taking on a hundred and one new interests, Dick, and it's too much for any one man; you simply can't stand it, that's all; and I want you to promise me you'll begin to go light on some of these things; why not let up on this Konahassett business a little?"

Gordon laughed. "And you get me away from the office to tell me that," he scoffed. "Nonsense, Herman, I'm as fit as possible. A man's got to hustle if he wants to get ahead these days; it won't hurt me; so don't you worry."

There was a moment's pause; then Gordon glanced keenly at his companion's dissatisfied face. Suddenly he leaned forward, and laid a hand on Vanulm's knee. "Damn it, Herman," he cried good-naturedly, "why don't you give it to me straight? You never got me out here to tell me I was working too hard. What did you pick out the Konahassett for? Anything wrong with that?"

Vanulm laughed uneasily. Then suddenly he drew a long breath. "Confound it, Dick," he cried, a note of apology in his tone. "I hate to interfere this way, but I've known you a long time, and I like you too much to have things seem to begin to go wrong with you now. Since you've asked me, I'll tell you straight out that people are beginning to talk about this Konahassett scheme. They don't like it, Dick, and, as far as I can see, you can't really blame them. Your capitalization *is* big, and beyond that, your methods of getting it before the public—well, they're unusual, Dick, if we simply let it go at that. Lamson tried that sort of thing, and you know where he wound up; Prince tried a clumsy imitation of Lamson, with all Lamson's lack of conscience, and none of Lamson's brains to back it up with, and he's where he won't do any more advertising for some time to come. And now you're working along the same lines that they did, and it's costing you your standing around the Federal, and down-town, too. There's not a doubt of it, Dick; and I can't bear to see it going on this way. What's the use?"

Gordon grinned somewhat malevolently. "Meaning the ads?" he queried.

Vanulm nodded. "Principally the ads," he answered. "They are cheap, Dick; cheap as the devil, and you know it."

For answer Gordon pulled from his pocket a sheaf of the evening papers, and at random turned to the financial page of the *Observer*. There, sure enough, in huge black capitals, his latest bit of advice to investors stared the reader in the face:

COPPERS—COPPERS—COPPERS

ran the big head-lines; then, in smaller type, Gordon's brief pithy argument in favor of the purchase of copper stocks; the future of the metal; the expansion of telegraph and telephone; the electrification of railroads; the vain search for a substitute; the immense foreign demand; then good words for half a dozen other mines, all well and favorably known, and, lastly, a glowing paragraph devoted to the past, present and future of the Konahassett, its great area, the wonderful richness of its copper, its boundless possibilities within the next few years. The deduction was as obvious as the type which proclaimed it to the world.

KONAHASSETT—KONAHASSETT

ran the next to last line, and then, for a parting shot at the hesitating speculator, with splendid vigor and decision:

BUY KONAHASSETT—BUY IT OUTRIGHT AND BUY IT NOW

Gordon grinned again. "And you say they don't care for that at the Federal?" he asked.

Vanulm shook his head. "They most certainly do not," he answered. "In fact, from all I hear, it's going to cost you your place on the House Committee at the next election."

Gordon's lip curled. "Well," he said, composedly enough, "I'm sorry to hear that, and I'm sorry they don't approve of my taste in advertising, but I don't know what they're going to do about it. I've got hold of too good a thing to let go of it now."

Vanulm's face showed his disapproval. "Damn it, Dick," he exclaimed, with unusual profanity and real feeling, "that's *another* thing. You're going to get snowed under one of these fine days. No one can make the success you have, and forge to the front down-town the way you have, without making enemies. And I know, on the best of authority, that you're being gunned for, and right on this very stock we're talking about—the Konahassett. And the interests that are after you are interests that you can't withstand—that no man in the country, for that matter, could withstand."

Gordon's eyes narrowed. "You mean the Combine?" he queried.

Vanulm nodded. "I mean the Combine," he answered. "The argument's perfectly plain, Dick. You're in too many things; you're cheapening yourself by this advertising business on the Konahassett, and you're courting ruin, besides. You've made enough, Dick; pull out, now, and quit while you've got a chance. For Heaven's sake, don't wait till it's too late."

Gordon's face set obstinately. "One thing first Herman," he said, "I'll tell you frankly that I wouldn't sit here and take all this advice from any man on earth except yourself, but I know the spirit you're offering it in, and I appreciate it, too. Now, to answer your arguments; in the first place, I won't admit that I'm courting ruin, as you put it; in the second place, I'll acknowledge that my methods of getting the Konahassett before the public are cheap, if you choose to use that word, but they suit the general public, and therefore they suit me; as to my doing too many things at once, that may be an open question; personally I don't think I am, but, of course, I may be wrong. Anyway, I can't stop now; I've got too much to straighten out first. I don't mean to keep up this pace for ever; if things go right a while longer, I shan't have to."

There was a long silence before Vanulm spoke again. "All right, Dick," he said slowly; "I see the force of what you say, and, after all, every man *has* got to live his own life in his own way. I'll drop the subject, seeing that I look at it one way and you another; I've had my say, and you've been very considerate to take my interfering the way you have; and now, if you'll bear with me, there's just one other thing I want to say, Dick, before I get through. And that's on the point you spoke of about the number of things you were doing; if you were a single man, I think it might make a difference, but you're not. You've married a girl who seems to me to be one of the most charming young women I've ever met. Are you treating her quite right, Dick? You're very seldom seen with her in public; she's young, and exceedingly attractive; she's bound to receive a lot of attention, and it's common gossip the way this young Ogden's seen around with her. You know what he is, Dick, and I ask you again, fully aware of the liberty I'm taking, 'Is it fair to her?'"

Gordon turned to him with a little mocking smile. "While you're on the subject," he said, with

irony, "is there anything else? My character, my religion, what I eat for breakfast? Don't stop with my family affairs, I beg. Is there anything else?"

Vanulm flushed scarlet. "I ask your pardon, Dick," he said stiffly, and, after a moment's hesitation, he added quietly: "No, there's nothing else."

With the gentlest shake of the reins he signaled the little black that they were ready for the journey home; for five, ten, twenty minutes they sped along in silence; then Gordon turned to his friend.

"Herman, old man," he cried, "forgive me. You're the best fellow in the world, and I had no business to lose my temper. Only—it *is* true—every man has got to lead his own life, and use his own judgment, such as it is. That's really what makes life, I suppose. And a man's family affairs, pleasant or unpleasant, are his own property. But I had no business to speak as I did. Forgive me, Herman."

In silence Vanulm extended his hand. "Nothing to forgive, Dick," he said half sadly; "I'm a meddling old fool, and I'll never bring up the subject again. It's a queer world, anyway, and which one of us has the right to judge the other?"

Gordon sat silent and thoughtful. Once, twice, he made as if to speak; then, with a smile that had no mirth in it, he shrugged his shoulders, as though dismissing something from his mind. "Yes," he said, "you're right, Herman. It's a queer old world."

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE TRACK OF THE STORM

It was on a Wednesday morning that the famous "Gordon Panic" began. According to the later comment of the financial critics—those writers whose opinions are always interesting, rather, perhaps, than valuable—diagnosis, and not prognosis, being their forte—according to the critics, then, the members of the Combine, patiently biding their time, chanced to hit upon a morning when a well-defined war rumor joined company with a sudden and utterly unexplained drop of five pounds in copper in London. The result was immediate and disastrous. Overstrained and feverish for a fortnight past, the market broke sharply at the very opening, and Konahassett common, which had closed the night before at twenty-three and a half, by eleven o'clock, had run off, in sympathy with the other coppers, to nineteen. Then, and not until then, came the attack, evidently planned and executed by a master hand. Huge blocks of Konahassett were thrown upon the market with such rapidity that, for a time, Gordon himself seemed utterly helpless. Indeed, before he was fairly able to come to its defense, the stock had touched fourteen and a half. And then ensued a battle royal, waged with unabated fury until the ringing of the closing bell. Not only Gordon's office, but the offices of half the brokers in town, were overrun with crowds of frightened speculators; white-faced, anxious, terror-stricken. To all, by word of mouth, by tissue, by published statement, Gordon gave out the watchword, "Hold on; don't sell; it's only a drive; the mine's all right; above all, don't sell!" and Konahassett, on huge transactions, closed at sixteen.

On Thursday morning, indeed, everything looked better. The war rumor was denied, the decline in London copper was attributed to speculation, pure and simple, in nowise affecting the stability of the market, a remarkable report from the British Atlantic Railroad was rumored for the morrow, and, Gordon's followers taking heart of grace, Konahassett worked steadily upwards in sympathy with the rest of the market, and closed strong at twenty bid.

Thus things stood on Thursday evening, but Friday, day of ill-omen, disproved all the promise of the preceding day. Crop damage and heavy rain in the cotton belt both served their turn; the war scare was duly aired again; the report of the British Atlantic, so far from being what was expected, on the contrary not only showed a very considerable decrease in net earnings, but stated moreover that the complete electrification of the system would be for the present indefinitely postponed; rumor bred rumor, and the whole market, under the lead of the railroad stocks and the coppers, plunged heavily downward.

Amid all the excitement and confusion, once again it was an easy matter to distinguish the hand of the man or men who had led the attack on the Konahassett on the preceding Wednesday. The stock again from the very first acted badly; half an hour after the opening it had dropped to seventeen, and then a sudden flood of selling orders carried it down, and still farther down, until at eleven o'clock it was quoted at thirteen and a half.

Gordon, for the first time anxious and plainly doubtful of the result, fought his fight with all the cool daring and stubborn courage which had won him his place in the market world. One barrier after another was interposed in the effort to stem the tide, and one after another was ruthlessly swept away. About noon, for the first time in years, Gordon in person took the floor of the Exchange, and, knowing full well that he was destined to defeat, none the less bravely fought out his battle to the bitter end. Just once, indeed, early in the afternoon, it seemed for the moment that he might, after all, have a chance to win, and then came still another drive; stop orders were at last uncovered, and the battle, in a short half hour, became first a retreat, then a slaughter, and finally a hopeless, panic-stricken rout.

Gordon himself, pale as death, authorized the giving forth of the news that the fight was lost; that it was every man for himself; in the jargon of the street, made to do service to worried brokers in time of hopeless panic, that "one man's guess was as good as another's."

In the ensuing wild scramble to unload, Konahassett common was buffeted about the room, kicked and beaten and dragged in the dust, with none so poor to do it reverence. Once even it broke par for the first time in its history, a lot of a thousand shares selling at four and seven-eighths, and at the close it had only staggered weakly back to seven and a half. A great day for the Combine, if all the rumors were true; a great day for the reporters and their news columns; a day that had crushed and crumbled Gordon's little army into oblivion, spreading ruin and disaster in its wake.

Ruin and disaster—and worse, for not alone money losses and huge flaring head-lines followed closely on the heels of the Gordon Panic. In Saturday's paper one read of a woman, crazed by her losses, found dead beneath the window of her third-story room, and in the early calm of the Sabbath morning little Mott-Smith, at last tired of following the advice of others, for once acted on his own initiative, and the attendants at the Federal, bursting in the door, found him lying across the bed, the smoke still curling faintly upward from the pistol in his hand, a little round hole drilled neatly between his eyes.

And then, at last, after all the damage had been done, Monday morning saw the clearing of the storm. The newspapers which had talked hopelessly of panic, acting on "information from the very highest sources," suddenly changed their tone. "A bear drive," "A carefully planned raid," "Gunning for Gordon," were some of the phrases used. Stocks rallied, went blithely up, held their gain and then increased it, and closed actually buoyant. It was over. "They" had "gone" for Gordon, and had "got" him. That was all. The incident was closed.

During Saturday and Sunday Gordon received three visitors at his home. The first was a man whose eyesight evidently troubled him very considerably, for he came to Gordon's door in a closed carriage, with the shades drawn; did not emerge until such time as there chanced to be no passers-by in sight; and hastened up the steps with his hand held close to his face, as if further to aid the disfiguring blue goggles that protected him from the sun. It was two o'clock when he arrived, and he remained until shortly before six, when the same carriage again drew up at the door.

Once safely ensconced behind the drawn shades, he thoughtfully removed the blue goggles, and sat silent and preoccupied, until the carriage paused before the most magnificent house on the wholly magnificent avenue, the famous residence of the famous head of the Combine. Just once during the drive did the man with the weak eyes allow himself a thought outside his mission; very slowly he shook his head, and half aloud began to frame a brief sentence, "Of all the damned, cold-blooded—" and there he stopped, for the head of the Combine desired reports, and not comments, even from the man who was, perhaps, in his way, the most trusted little cog in the whole vast machinery of the big Trust's many activities. And so the sentence remained unfinished.

Gordon's second visitor; and the word is used advisedly, was his wife. For the first time in a week, she invaded the privacy of his study, and stood by his desk, tall and slender and graceful, her neck and arms gleaming with jewels, her opera cloak over her arm, a copy of the evening paper in her hand.

"Well," she said coldly. "Is it as bad as they say?"

Gordon made a little deprecating gesture. "You can read," he answered shortly. "The papers haven't got everything quite right, of course, but it's been bad enough. Yes," he added with emphasis, "the whole affair's been fully as bad as the papers make it out to be."

She nodded, a cold gleam of anger in her eyes. "You've done splendidly, haven't you?" she queried scornfully. "You that were going to make yourself one of the richest men in the country before you got through. You that were going to see that I never lacked for anything I wanted to raise my finger for. You that said you never started out for anything that you didn't get it—"

She gave a scornful little laugh. Gordon, with a humility that sat strangely on him, rose quietly. "I'm sorry," he said simply. "For myself, I don't mind, but I'm sorry for you. I think, though, in time—"

She cut him short. "In time!" she echoed bitterly. "And I've got to give up everything. To be

pointed out as the wife of a man who went broke in the stock market. To be laughed at, pitied, patronized; oh, it's too much! I hate you, you fool! I'll tell you the truth now. I hate you! I despise you! I'd be glad—"

With a supreme effort at self-control Gordon clutched the rim of the table with both hands. In a red mist the room swam before his eyes. Then, all at once, together his vision and his brain suddenly cleared. He raised his right hand and pointed to the door.

"You'd better go," he said, in a perfectly even tone. "You've gone too far. I'll never own you as my wife again."

She did not flinch. Her eye met his with a passion less restrained, but the equal of his own. "No," she blazed, in sudden wrath, "you won't. You never spoke a truer word. Perhaps—"

She stopped abruptly, then silently turned and swept from the room.

It was not until Sunday night that Gordon's third caller came. Doyle, hurrying post-haste from the West, consumed with anxiety, his fears increasing with every bulletin received on the way, burst into Gordon's study, travel-stained and weary, to find his chief sitting calmly in his easy chair, the long table in front of him, usually covered inches deep with papers, cleared bare, with the exception of two sheets, one a letter, one a memorandum covered with minute figures. Gordon nodded pleasantly.

"Well," he said, "glad you're back. You've missed all the excitement. We've been making history since you left. All sorts, too."

He pushed the letter across the table. Mechanically Doyle took it, and read the few brief lines through. Then he looked up with a gasp.

"Is it true?" he exclaimed. "She's really gone?" Gordon nodded. "Quick work, wasn't it?" he said pleasantly. "She could have had a divorce, if she'd waited; but she was in a hurry, it seems. So they're off on a three years' tour of the world on Ogden's steam yacht. Quite romantic, isn't it?"

Doyle shook his head in mute sympathy. "I'm awfully sorry—" he began, but Gordon, with a strange laugh, cut him short.

"Needn't be," he said. "You don't know the humorous side yet. When you do, you'll laugh, too. It's really funny."

Doyle's face sufficiently showed his bewilderment. Inwardly he wondered whether it was Gordon or himself whose brain was giving way. After a moment's pause Gordon continued, half, it seemed, as if to himself.

"You're the only man who's ever going to know the inside of this; this—and one other thing. The two are inseparably connected, as they say in books. Well, here's the story. You've heard gossip about my wife and Ogden?"

Doyle nodded reluctantly. Who, indeed, had not?

Gordon nodded in turn. "I supposed so," he said dryly. "And I suppose, further, you've wondered at my inaction. Before this gossip started, I made a deal with Ogden, by which he lent me a very large sum of money to use in engineering a stock deal I'll be coming to in a few moments. It was demand money, unfortunately, and Ogden, like the thorough gentleman he is, made use of the fact that he knew I needed it, to go on dancing attendance on my wife and getting her name coupled with his, feeling sure that I wouldn't be in a position to act, or even complain. Clever, I think. Don't you?"

Doyle's lip curled. "Clever!" he cried. His tone was enough. Gordon smiled.

"There, there," he said, "don't take me too seriously. I'm never serious, these days. Life's too amusing. Well, now we come to the side-splitting humor. The real reason my wife took French leave, as you've just read in her touching little farewell, is that she couldn't endure life with a poor man. That was the phrase, wasn't it?"

Doyle nodded again. Uneasily he began to think that Gordon, under the strain, was going mad. Yet his chief's tone, when he spoke again, was sane enough, even pleasantly indifferent.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that my poor wife decided too quickly. As far as Ogden is concerned, his wealth has been grossly overestimated. To-day he isn't worth over three millions, and while it's too long a story to bother you with now, the substance of it is that, thanks to this wild trip of his, I've got the information, I've got the men in my power, and, best of all, I've got the resources to make the man a beggar, so that long before he gets ready to come home, he'll be glad some fine morning to sneak into the poor debtor court and take that means of getting rid of his creditors."

Again Doyle's fears returned. Gordon, himself a hopeless bankrupt, sitting there and stating calmly that he had the resources to put a multimillionaire into bankruptcy. Possibly something of Doyle's thought showed on his expressive face. At all events, Gordon smiled.

"Well," he said. "I mustn't have all the enjoyment. It isn't fair to keep you away from the point so long." He picked up the paper covered with the neat little figuring, and almost lovingly glanced over it once more. Then he handed it across the table to Doyle.

Half a minute passed—a minute—two. Then Doyle slowly raised his eyes to Gordon's face, and his expression was that of mute adoration. Once again, as if he could scarcely believe his eyes, he glanced at the eight figures in the lowest row of all, just below the little code cipher known only to himself and to Gordon, which, translated, read, "Deducting amount paid to Combine, as per agreement." Then once again he raised his head. "My God!" he ejaculated slowly, and, after a pause, even more slowly and with greater emphasis, "My God!"

Gordon gazed at him with a slow smile; then, when he spoke, his tone for the first time showed a trace of excitement.

"It is remarkable, isn't it?" he said simply. "And Jim, at that, it's only the first step. I'm through with the market. You're to come with me at a doubled salary, and I'm going to try the biggest game of all. A year from now I'm going to be elected governor of this state—the first Democratic governor for twenty years—and the year after that—"

He paused, as if confident that Doyle would catch his meaning, but for once the latter's ready brain was fairly staggered by what he had seen.

"The year after that—" he repeated.

Gordon rose, and stood facing him, the lust of battle in his eyes.

"The year after that," he said quietly, "is presidential year."

CHAPTER XIV

GORDON ENGAGES A POLITICAL LIEUTENANT

Vanulm dropped into the chair next to Carrington's, reaching for a match as he did so. "Well, Mr. Journalist," he said, "and what's the news today?"

Carrington sighed. Following the campaign through the hot weather was no easy task. "The news to-day," he echoed. "Why, for me the same as it was yesterday, and the same as it will be tomorrow. State politics, morning, noon and night. I've just come from an interview with an old friend of yours."

"Gordon?" queried Vanulm.

Carrington smiled. "How'd you guess it?" he answered. "Yes, they told me to get a column and a half out of him on his chances of election. He says he's going to win."

The brewer paused a moment before lighting his cigar. "And is he?" he asked.

Carrington's brow wrinkled doubtfully. "Well," he replied at last, "I wouldn't want to be quoted, but between ourselves I really think he's got a good show. It would seem queer enough, too, to have a Democratic governor again after so many years. Nobody down-town thinks he's even got a show, and yet somehow away down in my heart I think he'll go in. How do you feel about it?"

Vanulm shook his head. "Why should he?" he answered. "The state's normally Republican, to begin with, of course, and always has been. Add to this that Endicott's a man of intelligence, and a man of great wealth; that he's essentially a corporation man, and supposed to be hand in glove with the Combine, and how's Gordon going to beat him? I dare say he'll make a creditable showing, but he won't win. I'm sure of that."

Carrington did not look convinced. "Well, you voice the general down-town opinion, of course," he answered, "but here's something that you don't realize. The strongest bond in the world is the bond of a common misfortune, and the strongest passion in the world is the passion for revenge; and when you come to instil that passion into men already united by that bond, why, something's going to drop. And that's been Gordon's game ever since the panic. He's got a tremendous following throughout the state, as far as the market goes, and men aren't Republicans or Democrats when they've been touched in their pocket-books. So you see the chance he's had. Day in and day out he's been preaching the same thing: that that Konahassett drive was a deliberate,

cold-blooded steal from the stock-holders of an honest mining venture, that the whole thing was planned and carried through by the Combine, and that the only way to break up such practices and give the people a show is to place an honest man in the governor's chair. That man, he modestly admits, is himself. That's only his start, and it's a strong start, at that. You and I may laugh at the hackneyed 'People against the Corporations' cry, but it's as effective with the masses to-day as it ever was, perhaps even more so. And added to all that, Gordon's been a tireless and systematic worker. He's gone everywhere; he's sent out the greatest mass of literature you ever heard of; he's apparently had plenty of money to use—and, by the way, that's a queer thing. I understood he was busted when they made that raid on his mine, but he doesn't act so. I wonder where he gets his money. I guess we both know one place he doesn't get it from."

Vanulm laughed. "The Combine," he said. "Yes, that's right. I don't believe they've been very large subscribers to his campaign. They aren't worrying, though. I talked yesterday with a man very close to headquarters. He says they don't even take him seriously."

Carrington rose. "Well, I must get along," he said. "Buy a paper to-morrow, anyway, and read my write-up. And, though I'm not posing as a prophet, you may get a surprise on election day, too. Remember that."

Gordon's campaign for the nomination, fostered carefully for a year, had been one which had puzzled every one, most of all the politicians of the old "machine" school. Received at first with unbelief, then with derision, the announcement of his candidacy had never met with really serious consideration until about a week before the primaries. Then, indeed, disquieting rumors began to pour in from all over the state, and there was a general revival of interest at the headquarters of Logan, the machine candidate, who had so far branded Gordon as a "butter-in" and an "amachoor," and had further regarded as unnecessary the usual "distribution of campaign funds." Subsequent events proved the revival to have been started about a month late, and the nomination came to Gordon by a clear ten thousand plurality.

Even then, however, the Republicans had not seen fit to be alarmed, regarding the choice as reflecting on the judgment of their opponents rather than as putting their own candidate in serious danger. And now, with election day only three weeks away, the situation was practically unchanged; the Republicans serenely, even majestically, confident; Gordon's forces working day and night, for the most part under cover, with Gordon himself the only figure really in the limelight, but working with a silence and with a system that spoke well for the youthful manager of the campaign. Doyle's methods had been characteristic. For Gordon, ceaseless activity; the entire round of the state; speeches not too long, but clear and to the point, driving their lesson home to the humblest intellect in the crowds which flocked to hear him; the "glad hand" to all; the introduction of the much-abused "personal element" into all that was said or written concerning the candidate. For every one else connected with the campaign, the most praiseworthy shrinking from publicity; an almost morbid desire not to attract too much the attention of the public; as Doyle, in a phrase long remembered, had put the matter to his lieutenants assembled in full conclave: "Gordon's looking out for the theoretical part; and the rest of us are going to be practical, and pretty damned practical, too."

The day on which Carrington had interviewed Gordon had been a hard one for the candidate. The hands of the clock pointed to half-past six as Senator Hawkins rose from his seat in the inner office to take his leave. Gordon rose also, smiling and shaking hands with the distinguished leader of the fifth ward just as cordially as though he had been his first, instead of his hundredth, visitor for the day.

"Well, thank you for coming in to see me, Senator," he said, with the utmost sincerity in his tone. "I think we understand each other perfectly, and I'm delighted that I'm to have your support. You won't forget to remember me to Mrs. Hawkins, will you? And about the details—if you will see Doyle any time after to-morrow. I leave all that in his hands. Thank you again for coming in. I think we're going to win. Good-by."

As the door closed behind the senator, Gordon resumed his seat and rang for Doyle. The year's struggle had certainly not improved him physically. His face in repose looked tired and worn, and the vitality and energy of former days seemed strangely lacking.

"I guess, Doyle," he said, "I'm pretty near my limit for to-day. Anybody outside I've really got to see, or can you put them off until to-morrow morning?"

Doyle glanced with ready sympathy at the candidate's weary face. He, better perhaps than any one else, realized what the strain of the last few months had been.

"You do look a little off color," he said; "it's been a hard week for every one. Yes, I think I can fix things outside without making any friction. You've seen most of the big fellows already."

He hesitated a moment, as if suddenly recalling something, then added doubtfully: "There's one young fellow out there that I don't really know how to place. He's been around two or three times now. First, I took him for an ordinary 'heeler,' but to-day he said he wanted to see you right away, and intimated pretty strongly that it would be to your advantage to see him, too. I should almost advise you to see him, I think."

Gordon frowned. "The story sounds old enough," he said indifferently. "They all have something to tell me that's going to be to my advantage."

Doyle nodded. "I know it," he answered, "and I may be all wrong. It was his manner, really, more than anything he said. But suit yourself. I'm just giving you my impression."

Gordon sighed. "All right," he said, "show him in; and for Heaven's sake, clear out the rest of them. If this fellow's an ordinary cheap grafter, I'm going to use up the little strength I've got left kicking you down-stairs."

Doyle grinned and withdrew, presently to usher in a slight, wiry, young man, with a keen, alert face, and a manner that bore out Doyle's description. Without embarrassment he came quickly forward and took the vacant chair by the side of Gordon's desk.

"My name is Lynch, Mr. Gordon," he said, "Thomas Lynch; I live out in ward twenty-six, Bradfield's ward, and I should like very much to have charge of your interests there on election day."

Mentally Gordon enjoyed the process of kicking Doyle down the two steep flights. Outwardly he managed to keep to the tone of unvarying courtesy so necessary to the candidate for public office.

"I'm very glad to have a chance of meeting you, Mr. Lynch," he said smoothly, "and extremely sorry that I've already looked out for things in twenty-six. If you'd come in a couple of weeks ago, now—"

He stopped, as if to talk further was hardly necessary. Lynch nodded, as if he understood the situation. Then he drew his chair a trifle nearer.

"To tell the truth," he said, "I supposed that was about what you'd say. But there are exceptional circumstances back of my request. And when you hear them, I think you'll change the arrangements you've already made."

Gordon glanced sharply at his visitor. He was, indeed, out of the ordinary; either a monumental impostor, Gordon decided, or a ward leader of real importance somehow unknown to him.

"Suppose," he suggested, "you come right down to the facts. What are they?"

His answer was as sudden as it was unexpected. Lynch, a bright gleam of excitement in his eyes, leaned forward and whispered two or three brief sentences. In spite of himself, Gordon could not repress a start, and the eyes that looked into Lynch's were the eyes of a frightened man.

"You lie!" he cried, and then something in the other's look made him add quickly, "and if you were speaking the truth, what good would it do? It's your word against mine."

Lynch shook his head. Again he leaned forward and whispered in Gordon's ear. Then fell silence, until finally Gordon turned full on his accuser. "Come," he said, "we might as well talk this thing over now."

In the outer office, Doyle waited patiently. Fifteen minutes passed—twenty—a half hour. At last he heard the door leading to the hall close sharply, and, with a smile, entered the inner office.

"Well," he said, "are you going to kick me downstairs?" and then stopped short, struck by the expression on Gordon's face.

The candidate's lips forced a smile, belied by the expression in his eyes. With an effort he made reply.

"No, Doyle, you were right, as usual," he said, in a voice curiously unlike his own. "I'll see you in the morning," and, with steps that seemed to falter strangely, he passed quickly from the office and out into the street.

CHAPTER XV

THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

To Gordon, wearied and worn out in body and mind, the last few weeks of the campaign passed like an evil dream. Always the steady stream of callers, all more or less frankly with hand extended, not merely for the clasp of friendship, but with palm upturned as well. Always the same calculations with Doyle, based on the reports of their subordinates in city, town and ward. Always the same disbursements, some large, some small, but in number keeping at one steady high-water mark. And always, when evening came, and Gordon would think longingly of what one night of refreshing, uninterrupted sleep would mean to him, there was the meeting or rally which positively could not be missed, and Gordon, hating the sight of his big white automobile, would climb reluctantly in, and be whirled away to some hazily indefinite point on the map, to mount the platform and make his plea for a fair show for the rank and file, for the curbing of the Combine, and for an honest man—to wit, Richard Gordon—in the governor's chair.

Among the many disbursements made, there was one series which filled Doyle with wonder. In practically every case, Gordon, taking into consideration the fact that he was in a field entirely new to him, had handled the financial end of the campaign with extreme skill and good judgment. Therefore, to Doyle it seemed inexplicable that one Thomas Lynch, who had been appointed Gordon's representative in ward twenty-six, should be able to come to Gordon seemingly with the most outrageous demands, and yet, at the same time, in the vernacular, "get away with them." Once, indeed, Doyle had ventured to suggest that ward twenty-six was being treated in a manner far outweighing its political importance, but Gordon had answered him in a manner not to be mistaken, and Doyle, with an outward shrug of his shoulders, and much inward speculation, had let Mr. Thomas Lynch and Gordon run matters in twenty-six to suit themselves.

Three times in the last week of the campaign, in most unheard-of places and at most unheard-of hours, Gordon met the man whose weak eyes drove him to the wearing of blue goggles and to traveling in the protection of a closed carriage. The conferences were not over-long, and yet they seemed to be regarded as of importance by both of the principals, and after each of them, and especially after the last of the three, Gordon's spirits seemed better, and a certain well-known man about town, who for many years had made a specialty of election bets, in one day not only changed the odds from five to three on Endicott to practically even money, but in addition, even at the altered figures, with the greatest readiness covered everything in sight.

And thus matters went until at length the final night before election was reached. Gordon, in deference to time-honored custom, had reserved the night for a whirlwind tour of the city's twenty-six wards, but when the time arrived it found him for once under a doctor's care—a doctor who did not mix in politics, and who gravely recommended a month's rest, and an instant cessation from all work. Smiling grimly, Gordon left the celebrated practitioner's office, and went home to dose himself with brandy until, on the stroke of seven, gaunt, hollow-cheeked, with dark circles under his eyes, he climbed uncertainly into his place beside Doyle and started on the final effort of the campaign. And somehow, for six solid hours, with the platforms reeling under him, and the red fire dancing drunkenly before his eyes, he managed to get through his evening's task; half mechanically, indeed, and yet, served in good stead by his long practice in speaking and in meeting voters, so well that not one man in a hundred knew they were applauding a candidate who stood on the brink of nervous and physical exhaustion, finishing his battle on sheer nerve alone, game to the core, and ready to fight the people's fight against corruption in high places as long as he could stand or see. From the facts, however, the enterprising Doyle, weighing all the chances, decided that good capital could be made, and, quoting to himself with a grin his favorite phrase, "It has the additional merit of being true," he divulged to the reporters the true state of affairs, with the result that next morning the papers fairly teemed with splendid head-lines. "Gallant Gordon," "A Fighting Candidate," "Democratic Candidate Risks Death in the People's Cause," were some of them, and Doyle felt that for once, at least, the Ideal and the Practical had been effectively united.

And Doyle, indeed, in that last threatening night, came nobly to the front. To Gordon's benumbed brain, at many a critical moment, he furnished the inspiration, and always the inspiration was a happy one. Over in respectable ward ten, Gordon, finishing his plea for righteousness, for decency, for common honesty, had come out into the street to find his motor surrounded by a crowd of street urchins, all anxious in due time to become politicians, and all beginning on solid Democratic principles.

"That's Gordon," they chorused shrilly. "That's the guy." And then, in the jargon of the day, surrounding the automobile, they fairly rent the air with the insistent cry: "Well, what do you say?" "Well, what do you say?" "Can't get elected if you don't scatter the coin." "What do you say?"

The crowd, appreciating the incident to the full, paused. Gordon, not knowing whether he was in ward ten or ward twenty-six, mechanically was on the point of plunging his hand into his capacious, jingling pockets, when Doyle clutched his arm. "For God's sake," he whispered, "don't! Get up and tell the crowd you won't stand for such a thing. Give it to 'em strong."

The suggestion was enough. Gordon nodded, and in an instant was on his feet. "Gentlemen," he said quickly, "I have been telling you that there is something wrong in our state to-day, and when those in authority set the standards they do, what can you expect from the boys who, twenty years from now, will stand in our places? It gives us food for thought to see these boys,

the products of our public schools, and yet I think the blame is scarcely theirs. If elected, I pledge myself to see that a course in the simple ethics of right and wrong in respect to our government is included in future in the curriculum of our schools, and for the present, let me say that, rather than give one of these boys a cent of the money for which he asks, without, I believe, fully realizing the enormity of which he is guilty, I will suffer defeat, and suffer it gladly, at the polls to-morrow."

He resumed his seat amid a genuine burst of cheers. "By George," one old conservative was heard to say to a friend, as the motor vanished in a cloud of dust, "that fellow's got the right ring to what he says. He means it, too, every word. I've voted the straight Republican ticket for thirty years, but I'm hanged if I don't give this man a vote tomorrow. I'd like to see what he'll do if he wins."

And so the evening passed. "Something to suit everybody," was Doyle's motto; the reporters were well looked after, and Gordon preached virtue in the tenth, eleventh and the kindred wards, and thence ran down the entire scale, until, out in twenty-six, about two in the morning, he used up the remnants of his voice in a fiery, scathing indictment of the money power—a speech savoring in its radicalism of sheer anarchy. Then, as Doyle got him back into the automobile, outraged nature at last rebelled, and Gordon was got home and to bed in a state bordering on collapse.

A long night's rest, a morning in bed, and the relief of having the strain of the campaign off his mind, all, however, combined to work wonders, and Gordon, choosing to watch the returns from a private office opposite the huge bulletin in front of his own newspaper office, by evening, attended only by Doyle and by his secretary, Field, was able to come down-town in comparatively excellent condition.

The street showed the usual election night scene: the crowds lining the sidewalks in front of the bulletin boards, and overflowing into the street itself; two rival brass bands engaging in a duel of sound; and ever, high above the waiting crowds, the huge lantern throwing the messages upon the glaring white of the screen.

Gordon drew a long breath. "Doyle," he said, "this is like the moment in a race, just after the starter has sent you to your marks, and just before he fires the pistol. Before the start you're all right, and the second you're off you're all right, but the intervening instant is hell."

Even as he spoke, the first returns were flashed upon the screen. The little town of Freeport was the first to register its vote. "Endicott—234; Gordon—139."

Gordon nodded approvingly, for Freeport had been staunch Republican since the memory of man. "What was it last year, Doyle?" he asked.

Doyle ran his eye down the table of last year's vote. "Two hundred ten Republican, eighty-four Democrat," he said quickly, "a good omen."

Quicker and quicker the returns came pouring in, almost faster than they could be flashed across on to the screen. Doyle and Field bent to their work, adding, comparing, calculating; Gordon stood silently watching the bulletins, each bearing its message of good or evil fortune. At length a little frown gathered upon his forehead; things in the western part of the state were not going to suit him. Gains, to be sure, he was making; in many instances, substantial gains; but as a whole he did not seem to be repaid for the efforts he had made. Once he turned disgustedly to Doyle. "The farmer," he observed, "is a pretty conservative animal. A little of the pig about him, and a good deal more of the cow."

Doyle grinned encouragingly. He had never deluded himself as to the leanings of the west and northwest. "Wait for the cities," he said. "They'll make up in five minutes for all you're losing in an hour now."

A half hour more and his words were verified. First, River Falls, with its huge mill population, went in a perfect landslide for Gordon; Linton and Kingmouth followed suit, and by nine o'clock Gordon was able to make the rough calculation that he had come into the capital itself only some fifteen thousand votes behind. On the capital, then, with its twenty-six wards and its vote of ninety thousand odd, depended the result.

From the crowd below Audible comment came floating up to the little group. "Win!" they heard one man shouting at the top of his voice, "of course he'll win! He'll take the city by thirty thousand!" Then a howl of protest, offers of huge sums of money, for the most part put forward by men without a dollar to their names, on the result of the city vote; finally a strident voice, repeating over and over again, "He can't beat the Combine!" "He can't beat 'em." "He ain't got nothing on Endicott through the city—not a vote!" Just for a second Gordon's eye met Doyle's, and simultaneously they smiled.

Ten minutes passed, and then the first ward made return—ward ten, the respectable. It went for Endicott, and by a fairly good margin, so good, indeed, that the Republican sympathizers in the crowd raised a little cheer. Fortunate, indeed, for them, that they did so while they had a chance, for with the next bulletin the rout of the Republicans and the signal defeat of the Combine began. Twenty-six came strong—overwhelmingly strong—for Gordon; twenty-four

hundred and fifty-one to five hundred and twelve were the figures; then twenty, the ever-faithful Republican stronghold, actually, for the first time in its history, swung into the Democratic column by the narrowest of margins, then thirteen, fourteen, six and eight went by large majorities for Gordon, and, to complete the ruin already begun, the famous Combine wards, eleven, two and twenty-five, made the weakest showing to be imagined, somehow not even getting out their full vote, and giving Endicott, just where he might well have expected to make one last stand for victory, at the best nothing more than lukewarm, half-hearted support. "Overconfidence," the spokesman of the Combine said to the Press next day when interviewed; they had rated Gordon altogether too lightly, and had paid the penalty. That was all. And Gordon, carrying the city by rising twenty-five thousand votes, left the little room for his home, governor-elect of the state by a plurality of nearly ten thousand.

Doyle, with a hearty hand-shake, left him at his door. "What we want," he quoted, without the shadow of a smile, "is an honest man in the governor's chair."

Gordon, gazing with equal solemnity at his friend, for answer bared his head. "It has been," he said simply, "the people's fight," and then, for the greatest and most successful of us, after all, are only human, the governor-to-be and his right-hand man burst forth simultaneously into sudden, unlooked-for and most unseemly laughter. And they laughed until they could laugh no more.

PART III

THE RECKONING

CHAPTER I

THE HAZARD OF THE DIE

Mrs. Holton doubtfully shook her head. "But he won't come," she said; "you can't fool him that way, Tom. He's too clever a man."

Lynch's eyes narrowed a trifle. "Oh, don't think I'm forgetting that," he answered; "on the contrary, that's the very thing I'm taking most pains to remember. It's the very fact that he is a clever man that's going to bring him here, where a stupid man, for love or money, wouldn't dare come on his life."

Mrs. Holton looked puzzled. "But I don't see—" she began.

Lynch leaned forward in his chair. "Look," he said abruptly. "Things can't go on the way they're going now. Either we've got to do something pretty quick, or else he will. That's the point. It's simple enough, and yet, when you begin to follow things out, right away you run into all sorts of complications. First of all, of course, he'd like nothing better than to have us out of the way. There's no doubt about that, is there?"

Mrs. Holton shivered. "No," she answered, in a low tone, "there isn't. And yet, knowing him the way we do, isn't it strange he hasn't tried before now?"

Lynch glanced at her keenly. "I've thought of that," he admitted. "There hasn't been anything of the sort with you, has there? Nothing melodramatic, like an automobile coming on you without warning, or a brick falling off a house, or a thug holding you up in a dark alleyway?"

The woman shook her head. "No," she said again, "and yet I've suffered as much the last few weeks, just from the dread of what he might do, almost as if he'd really tried. My nerve is pretty near gone, Tom."

Lynch nodded. "I know," he said briefly. "It isn't pleasant to feel there's some one gunning for you. At first I thought myself he'd try something of the kind, and of course he may yet, but I hardly think so. That's one of the complications I spoke about, for him. It's a good deal like one of these endless chains. It would probably be easy enough for him to get us put out of the way, but, even at that, he'd be no better off than before. There'd always be some one else to look out for, and they might not be as reasonable as we've been, either. No, I guess, on the whole, on that lay we're safe enough. If he ever makes a try, it's going to be a different one from that."

Mrs. Holton turned a shade paler. "You mean—" she faltered.

Lynch gave an impatient little laugh. "Exactly," he answered. "If he wants the job done, he'll do it himself. Try to do it himself, I should say. That's a pleasanter way of putting it."

A sudden gleam of comprehension darted across the woman's face, followed on the instant by an expression of abject fear. "God! Tom!" she cried sharply. "That's why you think he'll come!"

Lynch nodded. "That's it," he agreed. "He knows what he wants; we know what we want; it comes down to a question of who strikes first. With this difference—" he paused purposely for a moment, then added, with grim significance, "if we pull it off, it's successful blackmail; if he pulls it off, it's successful—murder."

Mrs. Holton's face showed gray in the lamplight. "God!" she muttered again.

There was a long pause. Then Lynch spoke again, half to his companion, half to himself. "No," he said meditatively, "there's no getting around it. In one way he's certainly got the best end of it. The thing he wants most is to see us out of the way; the thing we want least is to see anything happen to harm him. As I say, if we strike first, it merely costs him money; but, if he strikes first, that's all there is to it; we're done."

The woman, with an evident effort to pull herself together, drew a long breath. "And so," she said, with sarcasm, "knowing all this, you're going to try to get him down here, and give him the very chance he wants."

Lynch smiled patiently. "Well," he admitted coolly, "that's one way of putting it. But, on the other hand, you'll never catch a big fish with a bare hook, and I'm putting on the bait that I think's most likely to work. There are only three moves, really. First, the message that I'm going to send him; second, the way he's going to figure out what it means, and last, what's going to happen if we do get him down here."

Mrs. Holton nodded. "Well?" she said inquiringly.

"Well," repeated Lynch, "as far as the message goes, I simply send him word that I'm sick; confined to my bed, and very weak; that I've got no one here to look after me but you, and that I've got some political news of the very greatest importance that I've got to let him know about at once. Further, that if he can possibly arrange things to come down here and see me, he'll be well repaid. 'Well repaid,' is good, I think. And that's all there is to that."

The woman shook her head. "It's no use, Tom," she said, with conviction. "Either he won't come, or he'll bring some one with him, or he'll leave word where he's going in some such way that, if anything should happen to him, we'd be sure to be found out. No, it's no use."

Lynch smiled. "Those are the obvious things he would do, I'll admit," he answered. "But then he doesn't do the things that are obvious, as a general rule. I've studied the man pretty close since I've been in touch with him—a good deal closer than he thinks—and I've about made up my mind that I've got to the secret of how he's got along so fast. Most of us can't get rid of the habit of looking at everything from our own point of view; you know how you hear a hundred times a day, 'If I were in his place, I'd do so and so,' and all that sort of fool talk. Some of us, who think we're clever, get far enough to be willing to imagine how, under given conditions, the average man would think or act, not just how the particular kink in our own special little brain would work; but the governor's got further than that. He gets away from himself altogether—he even gets away from the average man altogether—and instead, if a man's worth being studied at all, he puts himself, as far as he's able, inside that man's skin; he eats, thinks, sleeps as that man, and when he's ready to make a move, he figures his own play by his own standards of thought and action, then plays the other man's game as the other man would play it, and so he's really on both sides of the table at the same time. God knows I hate Gordon, but God knows the man's smart as chain lightning, and anybody who undervalues him is a fool."

The woman frowned. "I don't understand what you're talking about," she said fretfully.

Lynch looked at her with ironical contempt. "My fault, I'm sure," he said gravely. "This was all I was trying to say; that I'm figuring now just how he'll look at this message he gets; not what you or I would think about it, or what anybody else in the world would think about it except the Honorable Richard Gordon himself. Is that any plainer?"

Mrs. Holton nodded. "What you think," she retorted, with unexpected spirit, "is plain enough, but what he's going to think isn't plain, and never will be."

"There," replied Lynch, "is exactly where we differ. I'll tell you just what he's going to think. In the first place, for any one who's been spending as much thought on us lately as I flatter myself he has, the first thing that will strike him is the fact that by coming down to this forsaken spot he could find us together, and in all probability would find no one else excepting ourselves. That's clear enough; and from that it's only a step to thinking how easy it would be to put us both away at the same time, and nobody the wiser. He'll have thought that far in about a tenth part of the time it's taken me to say it. Then he'll pull up short with the idea that the whole thing's a trap, and decide not to come; then he'll go into it deeper, and suddenly it's going to strike him what a big advantage he's really got over us; he knows we can't see him hurt; he's got the chance that the message is genuine, which is perfectly possible, and if it isn't, if things don't break right for him, he'll figure that he's sure to get away with a whole skin; and, if they do break right, he's got the chance of his life to get us off his mind for good and all. See?"

Grudgingly enough the woman nodded. "Yes," she said slowly. "But how about his bringing people with him; and how about his leaving word with the police where he's gone?"

Lynch laughed quietly. "Not for a minute," he answered confidently. "He's got to be careful, too. If he brings any one with him, he safeguards himself, and at the same time loses the chance to harm us, which is really the very thing that's going to bring him here. If he comes alone, and leaves word, it's going to cause a lot of talk; and what's more, some wise guy would be sure to follow him, looking for a chance to poke his nose into something that didn't concern him. No, if he comes, he'll come alone; and he's going to come, too; I can put my finger now on the thing that's just going to turn the scale."

Mrs. Holton glanced up. "And what's that?" she queried.

"A question," Lynch answered, readily enough, "of nerves. Something that no one who hadn't had a chance to watch the governor pretty carefully of late would ever think of; but I've had that chance, and I can see in a dozen little ways that he isn't just the man he was a year ago. At times he's irritable, something he's never shown before; he doesn't keep his mind as close to a subject as he used to; on two or three important matters he's been apparently unable to make up his mind; and twice, at least, he's made decisions that I'm sure politically are going to be disastrous for him. Mentally and physically, he's a tired man; little things bother him more than they should, and after he's brooded as much as I think he has over the trouble we're making for him, for once, very likely against his better judgment, he'll decide on the rash course, and he'll take a chance on coming down here just to get rid of the suspense of the whole affair. He'll come; I don't feel the slightest doubt about it."

"And if he does," said the woman thoughtfully, "you're really going to hold him up for fifty thousand."

Lynch nodded. "I think that's the proper sum," he said, "anything under that's too small, and anything over that he'd probably kick at. But that figure gives us enough to get by on for the rest of our days, and the idea of having us half way across the world for all time is going to strike him pretty strong. He knows he can trust me when I say this is the last deal, and I think he'd do it anyway, but when I've got it in reserve to tell him that it's a case of put up or shut up; that we get our fifty thousand right off the reel, or there'll be a vacancy in the office of governor, why, there's nothing to it. I think the whole scheme's a damned good one, if I do say so. He's got everything to live for; he'll have his mind at rest; and the money's only a flea bite for him, after all. Anyway, the game's getting too hot for me, and we might as well get it settled one way or the other. We'll get his money, or we'll get him."

Mrs. Holton rose to take her leave. "And if he should try to get in first?" she said apprehensively.

Lynch's mouth set grimly. "I'm not taking chances," he said significantly. "You needn't worry that anything's going to happen to you. You see that you get here to-morrow night at eight sharp, and we'll have a little rehearsal."

For half an hour after Mrs. Holton had taken her leave, Lynch, from time to time glancing at his watch, sat alone in silence. At length there came a faint knock at the door, and he rose to admit a thin, ferret-faced, slinking little figure of a man, with a sinister eye and a manner in general far from reassuring. Lynch welcomed him with scant courtesy, and his tone, as he bade him take a seat, savored less of a request than of a command.

"You're late," he said curtly.

The other nodded. "I know it," he answered sulkily enough, "I couldn't help it. What do you want of me, anyhow?"

Lynch's expression was the reverse of pleasant. "Come, come," he said sharply, "we'll cut that out, right away. You know what the bargain was; you ought to, since you were the one that was so anxious to make it. You've had a cinch, too. Just twice in three years I've asked you to do anything for me, and now, when I need you for a little job that I want to see pulled off right, you turn ugly, as if I was trying to rub it into you too hard. And I tell you, you can cut it out; if you don't feel like doing it, just say so, and I'll know what to do."

There was a certain cold menace in his tone, and the man threw him a glance malevolent, yet cringing, much like that of a beaten dog, subdued against his will.

"Why, sure," he whined, "don't go talking that way, Tom. I'm game enough. What's the row?"

Lynch motioned to him to draw his chair closer, and then, leaning forward, for some minutes he talked earnestly, the little man listening attentively, and from time to time nodding his head. As Lynch finished speaking, he glanced up rather with an air of relief.

"That sounds easy enough," he said, "most too easy. I'll want to look the place over, though, to make sure what I'd better use. Maybe I'm a little out of practice, anyway. I hope I don't get you in bad."

He grinned as he spoke. Lynch, observing him, allowed the faintest shadow of a smile to play for an instant around his lips.

"I hope not," he answered dryly, "both on my account—and on yours."

The little man glanced at him furtively. "Whatcher mean?" he demanded.

Lynch raised his eyebrows. "Mean?" he said carelessly, and with apparent lack of interest. "Why, what should I mean? Nothing, except that if you shouldn't happen to be in time, and anything unpleasant should happen to me, I've left everything looked out for. The police will have all the papers within twenty-four hours."

The man's impudent grin had completely vanished. He turned a sickly white, and swallowed with difficulty once or twice.

"Hell, Tom," he remarked at last, "but you follow a man up too close. I guess I'll be able to look after my end. Come on; let's see what the place's like," and together they left the room.

CHAPTER II

THE HAND OF MAN

The governor stood by the window of the inner office, gazing out with unseeing eyes into the fast gathering twilight of the short November afternoon. The lights gleamed faintly through the haze—half mist, half rain—and the passing crowds, as they hurried by, seemed somehow to have about them an air of being shadowy, ghostlike, unreal.

Slowly the governor turned away from the window, and seated himself at his desk. For perhaps half an hour he sat motionless, his brow furrowed, his eyes questioning, his whole attitude that of a man who seeks to solve a problem which again and again comes around to the same starting point, and at the last still eludes him. Finally, with a sudden gesture of decision, he raised his head; the faraway expression left his eyes, and he was once again his old, alert, everyday self.

Closing his desk, he pressed the button for his secretary. Then, suddenly, as if overcome by utter weariness, he sank back in his chair, with eyes half closed, and thus Field, as he entered, found him.

"Nothing wrong, sir?" he asked anxiously. He, perhaps better than any one else in the city, save Doyle, knew the pace Gordon had been setting for himself of late.

The governor, with a sigh of infinite weariness, raised his head. "No," he said slowly, "nothing really wrong. Nothing but what a night's sleep will put right. But I am worn out, Bert, utterly worn out. We'll have to cancel everything for to-night, I'm afraid, and I'll just go home and get to bed."

The secretary nodded in quick appreciation. "That's right, sir," he cried quickly, "you couldn't do anything more sensible. It's only what I've been saying for a month past. No man on earth can treat himself as you've been doing. Flesh and blood aren't steel and iron. You're an exceptionally strong man, Governor, but other men, every bit as strong as you, are in their graves to-day simply because they got the idea they were something more than human. No, sir, you get a rest, and I'll look after everything for to-night. The dinner's really the only matter of official importance, and I'll get the speaker to represent you there. The other things it won't be any trouble to arrange. And no matter what happens, you take a good rest. No man ever deserved one more."

With a slight effort the governor rose. "Thank you, Bert," he said gratefully. "You're very kind. I think I'll do as you say."

The secretary nodded. "Good," he cried; "and if you'll just wait a moment, I'll have a carriage here."

The governor shook his head. "Thanks," he said, "I think I won't trouble you. I feel as if the air might do me good, and it's only a short walk, at best."

Then, as Field helped him on with his coat, he added: "There's one thing you might do, Bert, to head off any possible interruption. Just get my house on the 'phone, and tell Hargreaves that I'm at home, but that I'm not to be disturbed by any one. Tell him to answer the 'phone himself, and simply say that I'm indisposed, and can't see any one before nine o'clock to-morrow morning. Thank you. Oh, yes, indeed, I'll take care of myself. Good night."

Two hours later, although Governor Gordon was known to be at home, so completely worn out as to be confined to his room, a man whose face and figure, had not both been hidden by raincoat, slouch hat and umbrella, would have disclosed at least a startling resemblance to the governor's, strode along across the city through the downpour of rain, out towards the northeast streets; past Fulton, past Bradfield's, straight out across the deserted fields, now ankle-deep in mud, stumbling along the miserably kept by-paths, now fording miniature lakes and rivers, ever increasing in size as the torrents of rain steadily increased.

In spite of the discomfort, the weather conditions seemed to be to the man's liking, for as he bent forward in his efforts to breast the force of the gale, from time to time he somewhat grimly smiled. Then, as he neared the solitary house, visible only by the faint light gleaming uncertainly through the dripping panes, the smile faded suddenly from his face, his mouth set in a tense line, and into his eyes there came an expression keen, alert, watchful. As he entered the gate, he cast one quick glance about him through the darkness, and half-way to the door he thrust his right hand momentarily into his pocket, and as quickly withdrew it again; then, passing under the shadow of the porch, he lowered his umbrella, shook the water from his dripping garments, hesitated for just the veriest instant—and knocked.

He had but a moment to wait. Silence for a space, and then the scrape of a chair, footsteps along the hall, and the door was cautiously opened to reveal Mrs. Holton, lamp in hand, peering anxiously out into the darkness.

"Who is it?" she quavered, and he could see that the hand which held the lamp was shaking. "Is it you, Governor?"

Without ceremony Gordon pushed past her into the hall. "Of course it is," he said curtly. "Who did you think it was? Or do you have a run of callers on a night like this? If Tom's got me down here in this storm, and his news isn't what he makes it out to be, I'll break his neck; that's what I'll do to him."

Mrs. Holton, leading the way into the kitchen, managed to force a laugh. Then, as Gordon removed his dripping coat and seated himself by the fire, she remembered instructions, and grew suddenly grave.

"You'll be lucky to get anything out of him at all," she said. "He turned so weak an hour ago I was going out after brandy, but he wouldn't let me go till you came. I'd better go now, though, I guess. He said you could come right up."

Apparently frightened and painfully ill at ease, she rose and started to put on her coat. Gordon eyed her with a glance much like the look that a snake might cast upon some shrinking, terrified rabbit.

"Didn't care for the climate of Europe?" he said abruptly.

The woman turned a shade paler, and her hands trembled more violently still. "I suppose I oughtn't to have come back," she said, in a low voice, "but I couldn't stay. Everything was different from what I'd expected; everything had changed so; and I got homesick; I had to come back, that was all there was to it."

"Although," said Gordon lightly, "your return involved, of course, a little matter of breaking your contract with me; going back absolutely upon your pledged word."

The woman flushed scarlet. "Well," she said half-defiantly, "in a way I did, but I can't see that it makes any difference to you. I'm living here quietly, seeing no one, having nothing to do with any one, I should think it was all the same to you."

"That," answered Gordon evenly, "I imagine should have been left for me to decide. However, we needn't discuss it now. You're here, evidently, and taking care of my friend Lynch. I suppose, incidentally, of course your coming back had nothing to do with him."

The woman's eyes did not meet his. "Of course not," she lied glibly. "Why should you think such a thing?"

The governor raised his eyebrows. "Oh, it simply crossed my mind," he said indifferently; "seeing you here, taking care of him, I suppose. He's really pretty sick, is he?"

"Is he?" echoed the woman. "I should say he was. He's so weak; that's the trouble. He can hardly lift a finger. But he'll get well; it's just a question of rest, and decent care; that's all."

Gordon rose abruptly. "Well," he said, "I guess I'll go up and see him. Which room is he in?"

"Head of the stairs," she answered, "first door on the right. The only room with a light. You can't miss it. I'll be back in half an hour."

She had reached the door as she spoke, seemingly not anxious to delay her departure.

"One minute!" called Gordon sharply. "You understand, of course, that my being here to-night is absolutely to be kept secret. I shouldn't want you to make any mistake about that."

His tone was scarcely threatening, yet the woman seemed to understand. "Of course," she answered hastily. "Tom told me that. I understand everything."

Gordon smiled grimly. "That's good," he said dryly. "In half an hour, then."

He held the door open for her; then stepped to the window, and watched her until her figure was swallowed up in the blackness of the night. Then, turning leisurely, he made his way up the creaking stairs and into the sick-room.

In the dim lamplight Lynch's face, as he sat propped up among the pillows, looked ghastly enough, and yet, as Gordon came forward and pulled a chair up to the bed, it at once struck him that Lynch's eyes looked naturally bright, and when he spoke, his voice, though pitched low, was hardly the voice of a man who is seriously ill.

"Glad to see you, Governor," he said, "and sorry to trouble you so."

Gordon looked at him with keenest scrutiny. "It was some trouble," he answered, "and I dare say I've done a foolish thing in coming here at all. And now, let's not waste any time. What's your important news?"

There was a silence. Outside the grim northeaster drove the rain, sheet upon sheet, against the rattling casement and the flooding pane. Within, the flickering lamplight threw strange, darting shadows across the sick man's bed. Finally Lynch raised his eyes squarely to Gordon's.

"Governor," he said quietly, "ever since the day I came to see you first, we've both played the game with the cards on the table. I'm going to play it that way now. I haven't any news. I only used that to get you here."

Gordon did not start, or in any way show surprise. On the contrary, he nodded, as if in self-confirmation.

"I thought the chance was about even," he said quietly, "and yet I thought if it was a lie, that for you, Tom, it was a pretty clumsy one. I should be sorry to think I'd overrated you."

Lynch forced a smile, but far back in his half-closed eyes there gleamed a little angry light, "On the face of it," he admitted, "it was clumsy, and so I felt it had a better chance of passing for truth. I apologize, of course. I have no excuse, excepting my anxiety to see you."

The governor leaned back a trifle farther in his chair. "Well," he said, "and what's the story?"

Lynch did not hesitate. "It's like this," he said. "Of course you'd like to see me out of the way, and the old woman, too. That's so, isn't it?"

Gordon smiled faintly. "For the sake of your argument, whatever it is," he said dryly, "I'm perfectly willing to assume that it's so."

Lynch nodded appreciatively. "Now," he said quickly, "I'm tired of the whole game; sorry I ever started it. I'm afraid of you, Governor, and that's the truth. Let's cry quits. Give me what I want, and I'll get out for good. And what's more, I'll get the old woman away for good, too. I'm on the level. I'll do anything you say; sign any papers you want me to sign. Let's fix it up, and stop the game right here."

The governor's expression was one of faint interest. "How much?" he asked casually.

Lynch's answer came with equal promptness. "Fifty thousand," he said.

Gordon raised his eyebrows a trifle. "Quite a sum," he said mildly.

Lynch shook his head. "Not for what it gets you," he answered. "You'll find the value's there, as they say. It's a good bargain for both of us."

His voice was quiet enough, his tone conversational, and his gaze seemed not to be upon Gordon as he spoke, yet from the corner of his eye he was watching his visitor with a singular

intentness. Gordon, as if wearied, yawned leisurely, raising his hands above his head and then replacing them upon his hips. Then, with a purely natural motion, he slipped them into the pockets of his coat.

"Well, Tom," he began slowly, his eyes fixed on the other's face, "I think, on the whole—"

Lynch gave a sudden cry, sharp, warning, insistent. Above the howling of the storm two quick reports sounded almost as one, but the little spurt of flame from the wall behind Gordon's back flashed just on the instant that the governor's finger curled about the trigger of his revolver. Aimlessly Gordon's bullet ripped through the flooring, but the skulking figure in the room adjoining had made sure of his aim, and with a choking cry the governor of the state pitched forward and lay motionless across the bed, with a bullet through his lungs.

In an instant Lynch, in a frenzy of haste, had leaped from the bed and started to dress. Then, suddenly, still but half-clothed, he ran to the door, just in time to meet face to face the slight, stooping figure stealing down the hallway. Lynch raised his hand. "Get that carriage!" he called sharply, "and get it quick! No skulking, now! Quick, damn you! Do you hear? Quick, I say!" And in a very ecstasy of impatience he stood, with face contorted and both arms uplifted and shaking, as if he could thus drive more speedily the crouching figure that nodded and slunk away down the stairs.

Back again he turned into the little room, and lifting the body of the governor on to the bed, he hastily tore away the clothing until the wound lay bare. Quickly his hand fumbled in his pocket until he had found what he sought; then, pulling the cork from the little bottle, with a tiny hook of shining metal he probed for an instant into the bullet's track, and then poured a drop or two of the liquid into the wound. With a long-drawn sigh, as if of relief, he rose, and gazed at the motionless body.

"And that settles you," he muttered, below his breath; "if you should come to, it won't be for long. Maybe that won't make your high-priced doctors sit up and take notice for a bit. And now, by God," he added brutally, "I guess I'll treat you to a little ride. You don't look like you'd make out very well walking it. Damn Durgin! Why doesn't he come?"

It was long after midnight when, through the driving sheets of rain, a carriage stole softly up the deserted street and stopped in front of the governor's dwelling. The driver, slipping from the box, opened the carriage door, and helped to hold upright the silent figure that his companion half lifted, half pushed, from within. In silence they carried their burden up the steps, in silence and in haste propped it against the outer door, and again in silence descended and drove away, until the outline of the carriage, quickly blending with the darkness, was at last lost to sight as it turned into the street leading away to the northeast.

Up-stairs, in the pleasant warmth, the faithful Hargreaves, for the twentieth time that night, stepped to the telephone. "Yes, sir," he answered, "all right, sir. Nine o'clock to-morrow morning. Oh, no, indeed. Nothing serious, sir. Just tired. There's no light in his room, now. I think he's sleeping sound."

Outside, braving the wind and the rain and the storm, the huddled figure, with its head sunk on its chest, leaned wearily, as if mutely pleading for shelter, against the fast closed door. The small hours of the morning came, and went. Still the figure was motionless. Spitefully the lashing rain beat down as if to rouse it; fiercely the gale, howling and moaning through the deserted streets, stopped to beat and buffet it; yet strangely, the figure, gazing with fixed, unseeing eyes, made no effort to resist, no effort to move. Governor Gordon slept soundly indeed.

CHAPTER III

THE HAND OF GOD

Vanulm, standing by the window, hat in hand, abstractedly watched the carriage swing smoothly down the street and stop, with a jingle of harness, in front of his door. Abstractedly he walked slowly down the steps and out toward the street, and had even started to get into the carriage, for once without remembering his never-failing word to the coachman on the box, so that the dignified James, violating much against his will all the traditions of his craft, was at last obliged to speak without first being spoken to.

With a preliminary cough he touched his hat. "Begging your pardon, sir," he said, "but is there any chance?"

Vanulm, coming to himself with a start, glanced quickly up. Then slowly he shook his head. "The doctors think not, James," he answered; "we can only hope they may be wrong. We'll drive straight to the hospital, please."

The coachman touched his hat again, and at the word the spirited grays, chafing at the delay, swung swiftly away down the avenue. Out through the long, smooth streets they sped, out through the Arborway, flower and bush and tree still lying cool and green and fair in the splendor of the soft Indian summer day; now slower and slower as the gradually recurring hills grew more frequent and more frequent still, until at last, at the summit, they drew up before the door of the hospital, isolated, restful, serene, looking far off over the valley and the broad blue river winding peacefully along through the cool, green fields, in the wistfully lingering sunshine of the waning afternoon.

Doctor Stratton, the foremost man of his day, slight, alert, composed, met them at the door. With a curt word of greeting he led the way within, and motioned Vanulm to a seat. For a moment or two he sat silent, a troubled frown upon his face. Then he glanced quickly up.

"Vanulm," he said abruptly, "this whole business of getting you to come out here comes pretty near being unprofessional. In the first place, the governor's going to die; there's not the slightest doubt of that whatever. If any man with that hole through him could live, he's the one. He's got more nerve and more will power than any man I've ever met, and that's saying a good deal, too; I've seen some plucky men in my time. But—no human being with that wound could pull through, and I doubt if he can even last out the night. Now, on the one hand, you can't fail to excite him, and will probably hasten the end; on the other hand, he's evidently got something on his mind that troubles him, and you're the one man he wants to tell it to. Therefore, considering his temperament, to me it seems better, even if it does result badly, to let him see you. Not to allow it would be rank cruelty. Simply, if you can help it, don't let him excite himself, and above all, don't let him make any attempt to raise himself in bed. I'll be directly outside, if you should want me. That's all. I suppose we might as well go up now." He rose, and Vanulm, following suit, laid his hand for a moment on Stratton's arm. "Just one question, Doctor," he said, "suppose he starts to talk about how it happened. Shall I let him go on?"

The physician shook his head. "He won't," he answered, "I even tried him on it myself, and his answer was most curious. 'I'm not talking,' he said. 'It was the same game with both of us. Let him get away with it, for all of me,' and not another word would he say. So come, we'd better not waste time."

As quietly as possible, Vanulm entered the darkened room and took his way over to the narrow bed by the window. In spite of all the doctor had said, he could scarcely repress a start. The face that looked up at him was fearfully changed—haggard, unshaven, pale, drawn with pain—only the eyes, upturned to meet his own, gleamed still with all the unquenchable fire of old. Gordon's mouth half parted in the pathetic semblance of a smile, and more by his glance than by any real movement of his head, he signed his visitor to take the chair that stood beside his bed. In silence Vanulm did so, and Gordon, with evident effort, began to speak, his voice not strong, and yet distinct and clear.

"I knew you'd come, Herman," he said. "Devil of a time to get 'em to send for you, but Stratton's a pretty good sort, though. Not a damn pompous old fool like most of 'em. I suppose he's told you. I'm dying. He told me this morning. Thought it was news, but I knew it already. It doesn't need a doctor when the time comes. Any fool can tell—"

He broke off sharply, his lips contorted in a spasm of pain. Vanulm, frightened, made as if to rise, but the sick man frowned and shook his head. "No, no," he whispered, "don't get him. All right in a minute. Leave me alone." And after a moment, indeed, the look of pain left his face, and he went on. "I'd better make it short," he said, "short as I can, but I want to tell you. Remember, Herman, away back, five years ago, a dinner Jim Norton gave to that submarine chap; four or five of us there?"

Vanulm nodded, and an expression of relief came over Gordon's face. "Good," he said, "saves a lot of explanation. Remember we talked religion? Remember I told about a chap that was going to make a gamble out of life? Going to risk everything on there not being any God?"

Vanulm, his eyes fixed on Gordon's face, nodded again.

The sick man spoke quickly, eagerly. "I was the man, Herman," he whispered. "I always pretended religion; I knew in lots of ways it would help me, and it has. I've got men that way that I never could have got in any other. But the whole thing was a lie; to the world I've been a sneaking hypocrite; to myself I've lived straight; no bluffs; no lies; no whining; I've lived my life, and had my fun; and I'm ready to pay—if we have to pay."

He paused, and suddenly his glance found Vanulm's. Keenly he sought to read the expression there; then, with just the shadow of a smile, nodded to himself. "I thought so," he said. "How long have you known?"

"I haven't known," answered Vanulm, "only suspected, from things that have happened lately, that it might be so. In fact, if it hadn't seemed like such a damned piece of impertinence—"

Gordon took the words from his lips. "Yes," he said quickly, "the day you took me to drive. I knew it. I knew you meant well by me, Herman, but it wouldn't have done any good then. It was too late."

The brewer's kindly face took on a troubled frown. "Dick," he said diffidently, "I'm not religious myself, but they say—"

Gordon strove to raise a protesting hand. "Damn it, Herman," he cried, "it's harder than I thought. You're the only man I ever cared a straw for; I suppose that's the reason. But I've got to tell you. I've gone the limit. I was the man that killed Harry Palmer."



"I have gone the limit." Page 369

Vanulm half recoiled, then made as if to rise, but again Gordon shook his head. "No, no," he said, "it isn't fever; I'm as sane as you are; I wanted money; I tried to blackmail him; drugged him, and made him believe he'd ruined a girl; bled him for a hundred thousand; and then, by the devil's own luck, the thing leaked out. Then it was my life against his, and he was fool enough not to see it. I got my chance out on the island, and I shot him, and threw his body into the quicksand over by the point. That same night I killed the woman who told him, and that's how I got my start. Then came the time about the Konahassett—the Ethel, they called it then—and I couldn't come to terms with Mason; he was honest—and stubborn—and that left only one way. I killed him, and to make things sure, I killed the only woman that ever really cared for me, and married Mason's daughter—" he smiled sneeringly—"the young woman you thought so charming, and who tired of me when she thought my money was gone. To make the thing safe, I had to get the murders saddled on a poor old drunk out there; that never troubled me much, though; he was only a pawn in the game. So I got the mine. And since then, as you probably know, I've been fooling the people right and left—the people that have trusted me; all my stock market letters were fakes; all my battle with the moneyed interests was a sham—I've been hand in glove with them, from the start. My politics have been rotten, right through; I've bought, bribed, corrupted, betrayed, and yet they've followed me like sheep; if I'd have lived, I'd have been president of this country; deals; combinations; God, how, I had things lined up; and now I'm through; I've had my turn at the game; I'm through; and we're counting up the score."

As he spoke, a curious light had come into his eyes; slowly the color had crept back into his sunken cheeks; even his voice had taken on something of its old, commanding ring. Fascinated, Vanulm gazed at him without speaking, and the dying man, almost as if in a state of exaltation, went on: "I've played square with myself, Herman; square all the way through; and I'm not afraid, now. It's been a fair game. I've seen what I wanted, and I've taken it. Money? I've made my fortune. Twenty million dollars, Herman; no more, no less; and I could have doubled it, trebled it, in ten years more. And everything it could buy; I've gratified every wish of man; God, Herman, I've lived a dozen lives in one. Power? I've made history in the market; I've changed a state in politics; five years more, and I'd have changed the destiny of the country. Success? There isn't a man alive that's accomplished more. Every one's envied me, looked up to me, tried to copy me,

even. And the preachers say a man is nothing; it's a lie, Herman; a man's a god; man is God; I've played the game through, and I know. Herman, get that doctor; I won't die; I can't die; I tell you I'll be president yet. Great God, Herman—"

The light faded from his countenance as it had come; from his pallid face the tide of life ebbed again; his eyes closed like a tired child's; then, in an instant, he opened them again, and gazed at Vanulm with an expression that the latter had never seen before.

"Good old Herman," he muttered drowsily, "I knew he'd come. Off my head a minute, I guess. Feverish, maybe; that night did it, that night it rained—"

He stopped, with an expression of complete bewilderment; once, twice and thrice he gazed around the unfamiliar room; then drew a long sigh, as if at last awakened from sleep.

"Herman," he said quietly, "God knows what rot I've been talking. I'm pretty near gone; I know it; but whether I go off wandering again or not, I'm sane now; as sane as you are; do you believe me?"

Vanulm nodded silently. It took no eye of experience, indeed, to see that the sands of life were running low.

"There's something more you want to say?" he asked, with sudden intuition.

Gordon spoke with ineffable sadness. "Herman," he said, his voice scarcely raised above a whisper, "I've made a horrible mess of things. I know it now. If only—" his voice faltered—"if only I could go back to that day on the island with Rose. I can remember so well. 'A cottage in the country,' she said, 'with you all to myself.' Herman, I didn't know it then, but that day I shut myself out of Paradise. That day was the parting of the ways. And since then it's been down and down and down—Palmer, and poor Annie Holton, and old Jim and Rose, and I ruined May Sinclair's life, and I ruined poor Jack's—and Hinckley—poor fool—he had as good a right to live as I—Ah! God! Herman, what I've got is turned to ashes. Gold—Love bought for gold—Power bought for gold—all Gold. Everything—and Nothing! And I could have had friends—money enough to live on—and a woman who loved me. Think, Herman—" and his voice sank very low—"a woman who loved me, and, after all, that is life."

His voice died away. There was a long silence. Outside, the wind stirred gently the clambering vines, and a ray of sunlight darted, questing, into the quiet room. The sick man turned his head, and his voice was very low. "And after that, Herman," he said, "a good friend; the friend you've always been to me; the kind of a friend I might have been to you."

Again fell silence. Once outside a song-sparrow sang sweet and clear his brave little song, and the sick man smiled. At last he turned his head, and with a great effort raised his hand until it touched Vanulm's. "Good-by, Herman," he said.

And then, over the quiet of the peaceful afternoon came a change, sudden, terrible. Before Vanulm could stir, the sick man dashed aside his coverings and raised himself bolt upright in the bed, his eyes burning, his face working convulsively, his whole expression that of a man who looks upon a sight of horror. "I've lost!" he shrieked, in a terrible voice. "Oh, God, I've lost!"

Vanulm had leaped to his feet; at the same instant the doctor rushed into the room, but a doctor was no longer needed. In one great crimson stream the bright red blood gushed from the sick man's mouth, and the body, lifeless, inert, sprawled horribly back among the pillows. The Honorable Richard Gordon was dead.

THE END

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