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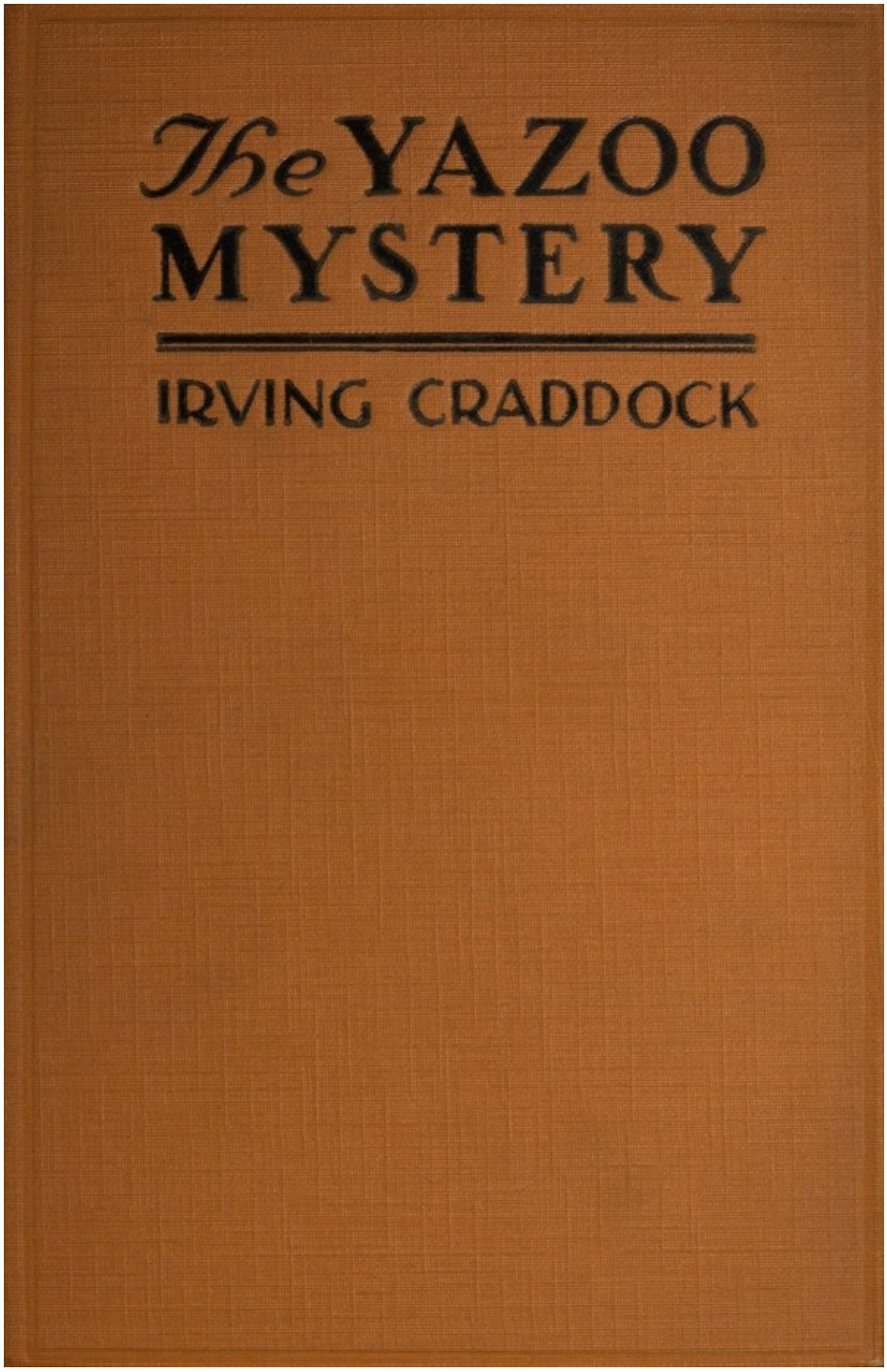
*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE YAZOO MYSTERY: A NOVEL ***

Transcriber's note

Minor punctuation inconsistencies have been repaired. Variable spelling has been retained. A list of the changes made can be found at the end of the book.



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A Novel

BY

IRVING CRADDOCK

BRITTON PUBLISHING COMPANY
NEW YORK

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To Those Who Love Adventure

The Yazoo Mystery

CHAPTER I

THE harbor-master entered briskly but dubiously the room of the ship's first officer.

"What about the five men for the *Domus*?" he bellowed.

"All ready to sign, sir," assured the manager of the employment agency, pointing toward two saddle colored negroes, a Spaniard, and a limp figure half asleep, slouching in the corner on a narrow bench, one hand clutching an expensive leather bag.

"It is the best I could do on such short notice," assured the agency man in an undertone, noticing that the first officer's inventory was not very encouraging.

"Get them up here to sign. We're anchored in the stream, losing two thousand dollars every hour we stay here. We need five more firemen—anything that looks human," he added impatiently, spreading the ship's articles on the counter that reached across the smelly water-front den.

"Come on and sign up, boys," said the agency man with assumed good nature.

While the two negroes and the Spaniard were signing, the ship's first officer went to the sleeping figure in the corner, took up his free hand and felt of the palm, then dropped it disgustedly as he took the man by the shoulders and shook him vigorously.

"Come on and sign up, Strong," he shouted into his ear.

Strong labored with himself, still holding to his bag, half staggered to the counter and signed on the line indicated —"Hiram Strong, Jr."

The signature was plain and businesslike. Evidently the Candidate had known better days.

"He's been kicked out or disowned," muttered the first officer to me while he was signing up. "He won't be worth a cuss. Look—those hands never did a lick of work—but he will fill the list," he added, walking about nervously and sizing me up with apparent approbation.

The agency man came up at once and held the pen towards me, and without hesitation I signed "Ben Taylor" on the line beneath. While I was thus engaged Hiram leaned against the counter weak and listless, his bag between his feet. We had both signed as firemen or stokers on the steamship *Domus* for a round trip to an unnamed Gulf, or Mexican port.

Although pretty well awake by this time Strong did not resent my taking his arm and helping him a bit. He made no comment at first, but after he got used to the lively walk along the dock, he began to show signs of saying something.

"Old pal," he began, without turning his head, "I—I've got a headache—top's coming off—and my stomach is all jelly. It shakes as I walk and makes me sick," he ended under his breath.

"You'll be all right after you get some sleep."

"Y-e-s—I think—I h-h-ope so——I've had an awful time—an awful time, pardee—but this is my last—this is my last," he added, more to himself.

His bloodless face and lips, pink lids and bloodshot eyes indicated a disordered system urgently rebelling against recent abuses.

After we got aboard the harbor-master's tug, although very weak, he refused to sit down. Noting that I had found a seat, he lurched over to me. 12

"Old pal, everything looks yellow to me, even the sun looks yellow—sort of faded. Does it look yellow to you?" he asked, blinking at the clear setting sun, and although his power to realize was at low ebb, he picked me out evidently as being different from the others. By that act he exercised a discrimination that predestined an exciting and almost unbelievable career.

"The sun looks all right to me," I told him, smiling up in sympathy.

"I guess it's me—it's terrible—but this is the last—I'm going to work now. Little Hiram is going to work for the balance of his life—I got to, that's all," he ended, with a dogged determination that I hoped would survive after he recovered from his unsettled and polluted condition. I steadied him a little when climbing the ladder from the tug to the ship, which attention he seemed to appreciate.

"Old pal, I must go to bed. If I don't I will die," said he as we went forward to the firemen's sleeping quarters. There he tumbled into a lower bunk, not stopping to remove even the cheap cap he wore. In an incredibly short time he was "dead to the world" and snoring at a lively clip. 13

Upon returning to the deck I heard a loud grunt from the Siren and at once the ship began to swing out into the stream, heading toward the Statue of Liberty and that great sea beyond the Narrows.

The captain still leaned over the bridge, taking stock of his nondescript crew of firemen that loitered about, forward. His bulk evidenced a growing appetite and his almond shaped eyes suggested the prenatal influence of a Chinaman. It was hard to understand how so much tallow and bone, in a florid lumpy skin, ever became master of a big ship. Such luggage as Hiram Strong, Jr. and I had brought aboard might have told him a story, but he didn't care; all he wanted was thirty-five human machines, capable of shoveling coal—in four-hour shifts—in a temperature of a hundred and twenty-five degrees. He knew that his ship was marked as a "hell," and that no fireman would ship for a second trip.

While standing beside the rail and studying the retreating outlines of Battery Park and its wonderful skyline, I was approached by the firemen's mess steward, who wore a dirty white jacket and apron. 14

"I don't suppose that young feller will want anything to eat?"

"No—I guess sleep is better now," I replied, interpreting in his round greasy face evident good-will.

"The firemen are eating and you had better go in," he said, but seemingly in no hurry for me to tear myself away. The tip seemed a good one, so I made an opening for a better acquaintance.

"Where are we bound, steward?"

"We're bound out and back to this port, but at how many places we will call, God knows. I don't! When we start, lately, we never know when we'll get back. Sometimes we call at Key West, and usually at Galveston or New Orleans. Don't you know what you signed for?" he asked, without surprise, but grinning significantly.

"Yes," I replied, hesitating somewhat. I wondered why he continued to grin. Then he again asked:

"Are you coming down to mess yourself?"

"Yes, I will come right down."

Following him below, I crowded over on one of the nondescript crew to a seat on the end of a bench at a narrow, bare table, and received from the steward a half-gallon of thick soup dished up in an enameled pan from a galvanized-iron wash-tub. Later I was supplied from the 15

same laundry utensil a liberal portion of what was intended for a meat stew, and a war allowance of bread. I was wondering how Hiram Strong, Jr., accustomed to uptown dining, would relish this atmosphere with its filthy service and coarse food. The men along the bench beside me consumed the soup noisily, like Bowery bums, and bit from chunks of meat on the ends of their forks like swine with their forefeet in a trough.

Sitting at one end, I was able to size up my fellow-firemen, twenty-five of whom were devouring food with great relish as they chattered like magpies, mostly in a foreign tongue. Negroes of all shades, Mexicans, Poles, Italians, Greeks, all sweated out, thin and bleached to the shade of a cadaver. I speculated again as to how young Strong would mix with this motley crew, and why he had allowed himself to choose stoking as a means of livelihood.

After eating I went below, but Strong had not moved and it seemed that his thin white hands and expensive footwear 16
were more out of place than ever. I wondered if he had any money left. Usually were to be found some light-fingered gentry among tramp-steamer firemen, so I took a small chain and padlock from my bag and chained his grip with mine to a bunk stanchion.

Returning to the deck, it was something of a shock to note the ship in complete darkness, no light visible save the red and green signals on either side. Later I learned that the globes were removed from the passenger cabins to prevent even a flash from the rooms of any one disinclined to obey "Lights out" at seven p. m. by order of the Naval authorities.

After clearing Sandy Hook and rounding Scotland lightship, by locating the North Star I saw that the skipper was heading a little east of south against a sharp, cold wind, close in to the Jersey coast, where lights were plainly visible. I was rather astonished to see all lifeboats lowered from their davits to the level of the steerage deck, and by edging down that way, saw they were provisioned with water, biscuits, lanterns and all necessary equipment for immediate use. Then I realized that young Strong had not only chosen 17
an unusual occupation but a rather unpropitious time in which to sign up for duty on the high seas.

But with visions of four o'clock in the morning, the hour assigned us to begin our work, I returned to the bunkroom to go to bed.

Hiram Strong had moved neither hand nor foot, but his breathing was more normal. A dark blue light was the only illumination in the place, giving to everything a mere shadowy appearance. I was glad to notice that the place was well ventilated, fairly clean, and likely to be free from vermin.

At three-thirty in the morning a heavy hand was laid on us, and we were told to roll out to go on watch. To my surprise, young Strong responded at once, with much yawning and stretching. Now and then he would sigh deeply, ending in a sort of dismal moan, hard to tell whether from resignation or abandon. He spoke for the first time after I had tumbled out and had begun pulling on my shoes. He seemed to recognize me in the uncertain light.

"Do we get anything to eat before we go to work?" he asked, leaning against his bunk dressed in the correct street attire in which he had slept.

"Yes, I think by going aft to the ship's kitchen we can get 18
something; coffee, anyhow," I replied, stripping down to my underwear.

"Is that the way you go to work?" he asked, quickly noticing my matter-of-fact preparations.

"Yes."

"Why?" he asked, surprised.

"Well, it's pretty hot down there; and besides, it's very dirty," I replied, pleasantly but convincingly. "Shoes, pants and

undershirt are about all you can stand," I added.

I had to wait a while for him to remove all but those needful garments before starting for the kitchen, there to find good hot coffee and a dish of that same thick soup.

He followed my lead again, silently, deliberately drinking two cups of coffee and eating the soup. Then it was time for us to go.

He negotiated the several narrow iron stairs leading down to the boiler-room like a cat avoiding water, and looked ruefully at his hands blackened by contact with the greasy handrail. A pink silk undershirt and polished shoes contrasted strangely with the coarse, black pull-on's and dingy brogans of those at work. He must have noticed the contrast. 19
Stripped, he showed a compact figure, with good lung capacity and likely a good heart, that being an absolute necessity in order to tolerate the extreme heat of a boiler-room.

The engineer on watch asked me if I had ever fired, as though expecting an affirmative.

"Yes," I replied.

"But this young fellow is a 'greeny'?"

"Yes—I think so."

"You and him take the two end boilers on the left—they are as cool as any—and give him a few tips, will you, till he gets his hand in? Two hundred and eighty pounds on the gauge," he added, as a hint to keep the dial at that notch. He then told Strong I would show him what to do.

As we moved down over the piles of coal between a battery of boilers facing the rather narrow corridor between them, Strong remarked to me, "I'll do the best I can, sir!"

It did not seem so very hot when we first went in, but I noticed there was only one ventilator, which came down about midway.

Strong followed me over to the end and watched me with 20
interest when I took the twelve-foot poker—a one-inch steel bar with a big eye bent on one end and spatula shaped at the other—for the purpose of freeing the clinkers from the grates before shaking them down into the ash pan.

"I will clean your fire for you this time and you can see how it's done," I suggested, and proceeded to do so. "You know, the first thing you do when going on watch is to clean the fire, but it must be done quickly to keep the steam from going down too much." He listened attentively and good-naturedly, but still silent, as one about to be initiated into a college fraternity and was waiting for something to happen.

I handed him a scoop and told him to put in a half dozen scoop-loads at a time and to be sure and get it well back on the grates. I then proceeded to clean my own grate.

Taking up the scoop, he filled it brimful, and started for the furnace door like a girl shoveling snow. He missed the narrow opening and the coal fell off into the ashes. He did not swear as I had expected but glanced sheepishly at me, then about him, to see if others noticed it, but we were all too busy with our own back-breaking jobs to pay heed to his 21
worries.

Determined to be successful, he walked close to the furnace door, exposing his face and hands to the glaring fire, and succeeded in getting the next shovelful pretty well back on the grates. After repeating this a half dozen times his face took on a "Turkey red" and he puffed like a lizard.

After a few more trials and a little more instruction the novelty of doing it well seemed to interest him, and two hours wore away. He soon learned to watch the steam gauge above him and kept it pointing at the requisite two hundred and eighty.

At the end of the shift he leaned heavily against the bulkhead next to his furnace, panting like a race-horse. The

perspiration rolled off of him until even his well-tailored trousers were wet and his pink silk undershirt a sight to behold. His face was the shade of pickled beets mixed with coal dust, and his hands the color of the lobsters he was accustomed to eat after midnight, his palms blistered and sore, from the friction of the shovel handle.

His neat black shoes, now grimy and rough, were full of water and pinched his feet. I did not give him the extra pair 22
of soft cotton flannel gloves I had brought along for him until he asked me where I had got mine. Then I showed him how to cool off by standing under the ventilator, for which he seemed very grateful. He looked curiously at me, evidently discovering that he and I were the only ones down in the furnace room not of a hardened class. He seemed inclined to stay under the refreshing ventilator, and I noted the hands of his steam gauge drop back to two hundred and seventy, so I opened the door, cleaned the grates and spread over a fresh bed of coal.

He came over while I was doing this, and I gave him some little tricks on how to spread the fuel and not expose his hands and face to the heat.

He seemed to appreciate this and surprised me by his cleverness in making use of my tips. For a time he revived and I thought he was going to pull through his first watch all right, but at the end of another hour he became shaky on his legs, and his arms scarcely supported the empty shovel. The intense heat and effort had a telling effect on him and it did not surprise me when he toppled over on the coal pile in a dead faint.

CHAPTER II 23

When Hiram Strong collapsed it did not surprise the other firemen. It was not a rare occurrence for even seasoned firemen to faint. But it did amaze the engine-room crew at the ease with which I took him in my arms, for he weighed at least one hundred and sixty pounds. I laid him down beneath the ventilator, where the others had prepared a place for him. I then removed his cap and dashed a pail of cold water over his face and chest, coal dust and dirt having washed up in his black, wavy hair.

For the first time since I had met him I got a good look at the youngster's face. Even during this temporary lapse the slightly upturned corners of his mouth and the red of his lips showed, lending the impression that he was about to break out into a sunny smile. There was nothing about his features to indicate the confirmed inebriate or debauchee. He had a good, honest ear, a clean neck and a generous breadth of shoulder. After making sure of his respiration and heart 24
action, I returned to my post to feed his furnace and mine. To maintain two hundred and eighty pounds of steam on the gauge required constant, back-breaking shoveling. In a few minutes both furnaces were roaring, with one blowing off a notice to the engineer that, although one of the crew had fainted, the boilers were hot.

It was perhaps a quarter of an hour before Strong raised himself to a sitting posture and looked over toward me. He was dazed, and blinked like an owl. I waved to him to stay where he was and rest. For answer he made a "cat's cradle" by clasping his hands before his knees, unmindful of the fact that he was seated in a pool of water and saturated coal dust.

We evidently had a good head wind outside, for it rushed down through the big ventilator as though driven by an exhaust fan, thus rapidly reviving Strong. However, it would not be well for him to remain in the draft too long, so I crossed over and helped him to regain his feet. He reeled and stumbled as he walked back to his station, which took grit, but there was no evidence of self-pity.

For the remainder of the watch Strong was unable to do much work. First he tried to shovel coal, but found he couldn't lift it. However, he insisted on staying around while I shoveled, occasionally opening and closing the furnace doors. All the while he maintained his attitude of silence, apparently taking it for granted that I understood the situation and was willing to help him. At last the eight o'clock relief crew came, and although still weak, he made the narrow iron stair to the deck much easier than when he descended four hours before. He was adapting himself to the conditions the best he could. 25

Strong soon washed up and donned clean wear, which seemed to refresh him, but coal dust still showing about his eyes, ears and brow gave him the appearance of an actor made up for his part. At mess he devoured soup with relish, but when he tried the stew, made up of overdone neck, cuts of fried beef and cold potatoes, he tossed the pan and its contents overboard.

"I need sleep more than that stuff," he said, and straightway made for his bunk.

Six hours later I found him standing beside me at the rail in the waist of the ship and he appeared to be much improved. His fine skin glowed, but his hands looked as though they had been parboiled, with palms badly blistered. His trousers were dirty, dry, stiff, baggy and wrinkled. On the upper part of his body he wore nothing but a silk undershirt, and for his overworked feet he had pulled on a pair of sandals. 26

It is quite as impossible to disguise a real man as it is for a make-believe to pass himself off for a gentleman. Though unaware of how to go about it, he began taking my measure quite as coldly as I was his, after which he spoke his first connected words since we came together.

"It was mighty decent of you to help me out last night," he said, affably, holding a lighted cigarette contemplatively. Evidently his decision favored me.

"Every one has to make a beginning; you did very well to stay there during the whole of your first watch," said I, ignoring his thanks.

"Is it always as hot down there as it was last night?"

"Yes; sometimes more so. You see, last night we had a head wind."

"After my hands harden, and my stomach becomes accustomed to the food, I guess I'll be able to stand it all right." As he said this he looked at the palms of his hands ruefully. The backs were scarlet and glossy. 27

"You can if you want to," I replied. "You have the build. The food is coarse, but perhaps the best for that kind of work. Four hours is not very long to stand anything; you have not worked lately?"

"Lately?—never!" Then as though frightened at my reference to his past or even himself, he surprised me by asking, "How soon do we eat again?—I believe I could eat some of that horse-meat now."

"You think it's horse-meat?"

"Well, if it's not horse-meat, it came off a bull just behind the horns. However, my grates are clean and there's a good draft; I believe I can get up steam on it now," he ended with a reckless laugh, indicating that, although languid from his final fling in New York, he had noted fully how to proceed with his work in the boiler-room.

"Perhaps by going back to the galley we can get a bite. It's nearly two hours before we go on watch, but it's better to give the stomach a chance before doing hard work," I suggested, leading the way to that mysterious quarter of the ship where the cook is king. 28

This time we inherited mutton stew and the usual bread allowance, which we ate as we sat on the edge of a hatch.

Looking across the water, I noted that we were still hugging

shore, but were now far enough south to be free from the chill November winds of New York. We were now favored with a balmy, invigorating breeze.

Strong's first question was not unexpected after he glanced at some curious passengers on the deck above us, amused at our sumptuous meal and manner of taking it.

"How do you happen among this gang?" he asked, laying his bread allowance on the hatch and poising a knife and fork that came with the ship direct from the builders twenty years before.

I looked at him squarely and knew I had to give a logical reply. His straight nose showed the power of logical analysis. The thought came to me that he had somehow robbed a marble image of Cleopatra of its nose and clapped it on his own face. There could be no question of his inherent refinement. Such a person one usually answers civilly, though the questions be frivolous.

"Well, you see, in order to get a marine license you must do a certain amount of sea duty in the fire room."

"Is a marine license so very desirable?"

"Chief engineer is a pretty good berth, especially now. Those running in the war zone get good pay and a big bonus besides, you know."

"Are we in the war zone?" he asked with some surprise.

"Yes—don't you see those lifeboats swung out? One of the firemen told me last night that this line had lost two ships—both torpedoed."

"And I suppose the firemen get the worst of it on account of being so far below?" he queried, glancing nervously at the dim shore line.

"Yes. Then, you know, there are supposed to be mines all along the coast."

Without comment he gnawed the last piece of meat from the bone and tossed the refuse overboard. Two young girls among the passengers above giggled at that. Strong flushed, but gave no other outward sign of annoyance.

"Then we are liable to be plugged any time?" he asked.

"Yes; there is a possibility."

"Well, if I get another dose like I got last night I believe I would welcome it," he laughed, looking at his blistered hands.

"You will soon learn how to favor yourself, and the work won't be so hard."

"But you say the men who do the actual work get the worst of things."

"Yes—I think so. Firemen are the feet of the ship, you know."

"I think I was all feet last night," he replied, smiling dolefully. "I have heard professors rant about the dignity of labor," he replied, arising with the empty pan, having enjoyed the first full meal he had ever actually earned. "However, I have signed for a round trip and I'm going to stick if it kills me," he added, half to himself, as he went below.

When he came on watch at four the fire of adventure had taken the place of Hiram Strong's glassy stare of debauchery. He cleaned and shook his grates without coaching, heaving the coal well back in the fire-box. I knew that every bone and muscle of his body was crying out in protest. Later I saw blood from the blisters show through the cotton gloves, but he worked stolidly, silent and grim. Surely he was game.

We were getting farther south, the wind coming hot and the boiler-room an inferno. As Strong worked he perspired to the point of melting. I saw him grit his teeth, determined not to show another white feather, and when we were washing up at the end of that four-hour watch, there was something

of unction in his remark, to himself: "Thank God, it didn't get me this time!" Sensibly he went to his bunk without eating.

CHAPTER III

Our shift was off at eight p. m. with duty ahead at four o'clock in the morning. But not feeling disposed to sleep just then, I began to study our position. Twenty-four hours ago we had cleared Scotland lightship, and I figured we were something like three hundred miles south of New York, off the Virginia capes.

The ship, as on the previous night, was wrapped in complete darkness as we emerged from the boiler-room, and I could just make out the shadowy form of the officer on the bridge, who moved about nervously. I glanced across the expanse of water but no light could be seen in any direction. The only activity was the sounding lead which was thrown overboard occasionally.

We still had the southern head wind which made it too hot for sleeping below, so I decided to bunk on deck, and went below for a blanket. Young Strong slept as though dead, even though the quarters were close and stuffy. I was glad to escape to the deck with my covering. As I laid down, expecting to doze off at once, I began to hear subdued voices. I heard some one say: "You know, we passed him this afternoon at three. He couldn't be over two hours behind us." At first I wasn't sure I was awake, for the voices were almost inaudible. I was sure I had slept some time.

"Did the wireless say all were taken off?"

I could now make out two officers talking near me, but they were unaware of my proximity. Then came the answer to the question:

"Yes; the report came from the shore station where the lifeboats landed, but if the subs are operating up there, we're probably safe."

Manifestly they referred to some ship that was torpedoed two or three hours behind us.

"That's all right, but you know well enough that mines have been sown here for the Chesapeake traffic."

"We're not due there yet, and it's a thousand-to-one shot that we'll get by. We've passed that spot many times. I believe that talk about mines is all bunk. Anyway, you know the Old Man changes his course at that point to keep the supposed mine field shoreward. Go to bed: you'll be bawled out quick enough if we hit anything."

Then all became quiet, but now thoroughly awakened, I went down to the galley to cajole some food from the cook. There, to my surprise, I found young Strong on the same errand.

"You had a good sleep?" was my greeting. I needn't have asked, for he looked rested and bright, even jaunty.

"Five hours; it's past one now. Where did you sleep?—I did not see you in your bunk." His voice sounded rather chummy, as the cook relented and helped us liberally. We told him we had both gone off watch without eating.

We took the food into the firemen's messroom, lighted by a single dark blue bulb, and sat opposite each other, a long, narrow, oak plank between us, picnic style. The cook enjoined us to shut the door, to cover even the dim illumination. The closed windows of the messroom were painted black so that not the slightest trace of light could escape.

"How do you feel this morning?" I asked.

"I am surprised at how well I do feel. If it wasn't for my hands I would feel fine," he replied cordially, sort of self-congratulatory, a half smile creeping about his non-secretive

mouth.

"Moisten the inside of your gloves with petroleum, and your hands will soon heal if you are careful," I advised quietly. "The oilers will give you some."

"It is the first time in my life that my system has had the nicotine and other bug juices washed out of it; a cigarette tastes different now," he exulted, though evidently looking for sympathy.

"Do you know," he continued, as he cornered a chunk of meat in the bottom of the pan and tried to sever it with the ancient cutlery, "I always thought I could work, and now I know it."

"Then this is really your maiden labor sweat?" I asked, seemingly incredulous.

"Say," he began, still laboring with the meat, "I think this ship bought a job lot of sheep, and there were some granddaddies in the lot." I smiled an assent.

"If any one had told me a few days ago that I would be sitting on board a ship before an oak plank, eating old ram with relish, and out of a laundry vessel at that, I would have believed him insane." 36

I laughed outright and mumbled something about "crises in every one's life."

"My crisis came, all right, the other day. It was like the sidewalk coming up and hitting me in the face, it so upset me—oh, it was terrible. I am surprised that I can talk about it so soon." There was a ruefulness and disappointment in his tone.

I smiled encouragingly as he went on.

"I knew there was trouble ahead when the Governor called me into his office—there always was—but I expected, as usual, to win him over. I found for the first time why men called him a 'Gold-Beater.' I sat across a long table from him, never before realizing how big a man he was, his chest seemingly as broad as those of two ordinary men. He wasn't mad, just cold and immovable. He gave me some money and told me that was the last. I had to get out and work or starve. What I decided to do did not interest him. He said he didn't want to see me again and that he didn't care whether I went to hell or to work." Strong spoke as one recalling a nightmare.

"I suppose you have not been able to figure out yet who is right?" I asked. 37

"Oh, I think there is little doubt who is right, but just how long it will take me to recognize the fact is the question. You see, the Governor was never stingy or tight with me. That's why he was called a 'Gold-Beater'; he has made money, but he owns the money instead of it owning him—at least that's what his cronies say. And there's no doubt about the fact that I should go to work, but in the two or three days I have had to think about it I can't see why he waited so long. It's downright wrong to allow a fellow to believe he's got nothing to do but spend money and get into trouble for years at a stretch, then stop everything all of a sudden. I think that's where the Governor's wrong. But, you see, I can work, and I'm going to fool the old man." Bending over toward me, he added, "But I don't know how I would have come out on my first try if it hadn't been for you."

"Oh—I have done nothing but pass on to you what was done for me when I started. Later on you will perhaps admit that men who work with their hands, if approached right, are more kindly disposed and even more generous than others. 38
But I am glad you speak English, to say nothing of finding a good fellow," I replied, approvingly.

"Well, I am not only glad to find some one who uses English, but, like the kid I really am, I am glad you listen to me. I got such a jolt. You see, it was the first time I ever felt the lash of the paternal whip, and one or two cuts were enough. I now know why the Governor is such a power among men—

he does things so thoroughly and quietly. There wasn't any row—he was ready for me and I don't realize yet how well he prepared things, or how much he apparently knows of my movements——" He hesitated with a sorrowful shake of his head and resumed eating.

"You found he was checking you up pretty close?" said I, to urge him on.

"He must have known just how many breaths I took. He said I was a poor investment: that since my mother died when I was three I had cost him about two hundred thousand, and he was closing out a poor proposition. He informed me that I was to consider myself no more a son of his; was even sorry I would have to use his name. And the two thousand, his share of fixing up a man that I, and three others, ran down in the park with an auto, was the last assessment he would stand; and before I knew what was really happening I was leaving without even a good-by. I knew I was going to work, but thought I would have a last grand night and then pull out. But do you know, that in less than an hour, wherever I went, every one knew that Hiram Strong, Jr., had been disinherited and kicked out. I then learned what New York thinks of a 'has-been.' I tried to drown the thought in liquor, but it floated in spite of my most frantic efforts. I guess there was a good deal of the last pickle in me when you saw me first?" 39

I laughed and Strong continued:

"Oh, I'm going to beat it—I've got to beat it," he said, closing his mouth savagely and tossing the empty pan down toward the other end of the table. "I guess it's about time for us to go to hell, isn't it?" he added, lighting a cigarette.

"Yes—all we need down in that hole is the boss with a pitch-fork tail; we've got the shovel, coal and heat."

"Say, Ben—I believe I heard them call you Ben—do you think the 'Old Boy' with the forked tail gives his furnace men four hours on and eight off, and great granddaddy sheep stew for eats and makes 'em sleep in tiers?" he asked, as we laughed our way to the boiler-room. 40

CHAPTER IV 41

Hiram Strong was in need of oil for his gloves, and, left to myself, my mind reverted to the conversation I had overheard between the ship's officers. Shoreward, about a half-mile, I could make out a lightship. Being somewhat familiar with the coast, I decided it must be the Cape Charles light. As soon as we were abreast of it, our ship changed its course several points to the west and seaward, just as the officer said it would. I observed this and recalled the other officer's cocksureness that the ship had been running by or through the supposed mine field for months. Nevertheless I confessed to myself a distinct feeling of anxiety as we went down into the region Hiram had properly designated as "Hell," to begin another four-hour draft on endurance and vitality. Though silent, Strong remained cheerful and never for a moment allowed his steam gauge to drop. The draft was good, making the work easier.

There is something about labor in intense heat that calls for silence, but after an extended stillness there comes an oppressive feeling that makes one want to break out into a yell. Often in a steel mill a weird howl will be started by some one, to be taken up by others until a bedlam is created among the thousands of workers. There is a certain rhythm in it, a sort of boisterous chant, a good-natured protest against conditions. Then, suddenly, it will die out just as quickly as it started and quiet will reign for an hour or two. 42

Such a yell had been started by an Italian standing under the ventilator. Then it was that I learned that Hiram Strong had a voice, and although more than half our watch had passed,

he felt vigorous enough to join in the general outbreak.

As though in protest against the riotous exhibition, the engines stopped, a circumstance that regular firemen secretly desire, for it means a respite in their conflict with the blazing furnace and grates, with the excitement of uncertainty added. The pause may continue for a minute or an hour. At any rate the trouble in this case had been shifted to the engine room.

Before the engines first stopped I thought I heard a noise, but it wasn't loud enough to attract the attention of others, so concluded it must have been a slight shift in the cargo near us and gave it no further thought. 43

Hiram accompanied me to the far end of the furnace room for water, after which we returned and sat down on the hot, iron-sheeted floor against the bulkhead that flanked our station, from which point we viewed the whole length of the narrow corridor between the battery of blazing furnaces that generated the ship's power.

"Did you ever read Dante's Inferno?" he surprised me by asking.

"Yes, but not recently."

"A tutor made me read it as punishment. You know, I never would study. I guess that's what makes the Governor so sore. I tried three colleges and flunked. I was so infernally worthless that I wouldn't even go in for athletics; but what I started to say was that I believe Dante must have known about the furnace room of a steamship, when the engines were at a standstill." He said all this with a sleepy grin.

I could see what he meant. The engines had been stopped but a few minutes when the entire fire-room crew succumbed to a lethargic sleep. A serrated ridge of coal two feet high extended the entire length of the room, on which they had disposed themselves in all sorts of postures—some curled up like animals going into hibernation, others sprawled out full length, and there were many who lay as though stricken dead while in a reclining position. Most of the crew who worked in overalls, with bodies bared above the waist, black and grimy to the tousled hair now matted with sweat, laid carelessly about as in death from convulsions. In some cases they were in such a position that the fierce light from the cracks in the furnace doors gave their faces a weird, deathly appearance, and after noting this, I glanced at Hiram and saw that he, too, had succumbed, his head resting heavily against the supporting bulkhead. 44

A sweet, irresistible languor now dulled my perseverance to keep awake. How long I slept was uncertain, but I do know that I was awakened with a start by dreaming of an immense wave, much higher than the ship, a solid perpendicular wall of green sea bearing us down—a veritable tidal wave. I was sure the ship could not survive. Hiram was tugging at my sleeve. 45

"Ben—Ben, wake up; we have struck something and the ship is sinking!" He did not seem frightened, just urgent.

"What!—What's that?" I asked, wondering if I was still dreaming.

"We've been asleep an hour. The ship's deserted; I can't find a living soul on board! Passengers, crew, and boats are all gone!" he cried, catching me by the arm and helping me to rise hastily. "Nobody on board but the engine-room shift."

If the effect of this information on me was magical, it was electrical on other firemen and the coal passers. One and all seemed to hear it instantly and made a rush for the narrow, iron stairs leading up, which could accommodate but one at a time. Here they fought, as if in death's last throes.

With a fiendishness indescribable, twelve or fifteen men massed seemingly into one great squirming monster, all legs and arms, kicking, striking, biting, shouldering and trampling each other, emitting groans and execrations in all

languages. The struggle was to determine who should ascend the stairs first. 46

Young Strong seemed deeply moved by this exhibition, but stood beside me, superior, contemptuous, little impressed with the danger. He turned toward me, saying—

"Let 'em fight it out; she isn't going to sink at once; she has floated an hour. It's full daylight and good weather. Did you ever see human beings so quickly turned into writhing snakes?"

"Suppose we turn the water on them," I suggested, and we both ran for an inch hose used to wet down the coal.

Hiram aimed the nozzle at the struggling mass while I opened the valve releasing the high pressure stream which shot forth upon their bodies. This had a cooling effect upon all but two who were lost to their own safety in the vicious fight over a screaming woman. These we shoved aside, while the prospective victim escaped. We then hurried up the three flights of stairs to the main deck where others were attempting to lower one of two remaining lifeboats.

Strong, cool and collected, said, "The bow sunk an hour ago. The sea is washing over it." The damage was located ahead of the forward bulkheads and the ship would probably float until they gave way. 47

"We must get our bags, Strong," said I, starting forward to our steerage quarters. He followed, though a little dubious about taking the time. Our quarters, though not flooded, were very wet.

Strong grabbed up all of his belongings that were outside of his bag, while I attempted to free the chain that held them to the stanchion against possible larceny. It seemed an interminable time before I found the key. Then we hurried back to where a mass of fighting men were lowering a lifeboat.

"Good God, Ben; what is this?" exclaimed Hiram, as we rounded the deckhouse to where the boats had been hanging. All but one had been lowered and apparently all would be saved but ourselves and one officer in uniform—he was the captain! There was no mistaking his great bulk, lumpy skin and small piggish eyes.

As we approached he turned upon us as though we had done him great injury and swore like a pirate. He held in his hand a pistol of ancient pattern as big as an anchor shank. 48

"I don't believe they would have stopped if I had killed every damned one of 'em!" he shouted, as if to overawe us, "but you needn't think you are going to get away. You've got to stay," he added, gritting his teeth as he moved toward us, holding the aged shooting-iron down at his hip as clumsily as the usual officer of a merchantman.

I was greatly reassured by his presence on the ship, and also the remaining lifeboat. We were two against one and I was inclined to consider the humor of the situation.

"Why should we stay when every one else has gone, captain?" Hiram asked this question respectfully enough, glancing at me; then placed his grip against the deckhouse and deliberately laid across it his shirt, coat, necktie, hat and shoes.

The captain continued to focus his two ferocious eyes upon us, and took full time in which to answer Strong's question.

"Because this ship ain't goin' to sink, and you've got to help work it over to the beach!" he fairly shouted, unable to control himself. He was evidently of the old school and as appropriate on a passenger ship as a pig in a parlor. He was unable to see in us anything more than ordinary firemen. 49

"How can two men run a big ship like this?" Strong asked, keeping himself well in hand, though there was a glitter in his eye as he glanced at me, while advancing toward the captain, who still held the firearm in a hip position against his six feet and two hundred and fifty pounds of flesh.

"That's for me to say," he shot back threateningly, "an' if you don't do it I'll put you in irons."

"We can't see it that way, captain; besides, I'm afraid——" Then something happened which indicated that Strong had acquired the art of jiujitsu.

With the litheness of a cat he sprang violently forward, struck the captain's wrist that held the gun, and the immense revolver dropped to the deck with a thud. Strong quickly kicked it overboard with the same agility.

"Captain, I was just going to say that you seemed to handle that gun awkwardly and I feared it might go off accidentally," he said, as he jumped back beyond reach. The captain's florid, lumpy face now ran scarlet, his eyes glaring like those of an old dog in futile rage. He swallowed hard but could not articulate.

"You allowed the passengers and crew to leave, but left the firemen down in that hell hole to drown like rats. We are inclined to hold that against you, captain," said Strong, quietly enough. "There is one boat left and we are going along, too," he said, turning to me as I edged over toward the boat.

"Didn't I stay?" the captain was finally able to say in a shaky voice, with some trace of a plea.

"Yes, you stayed, because you would be put down for a coward if you hadn't, and if there is any profit or glory you get it. I've traveled on ships before when I wasn't firing," Strong replied forcefully, but with no trace of anger, coming over to where I was engaged in placing our baggage in the lifeboat.

"But we can save the ship if you'll help—I'm willing to pay you extra if you'll stay," said the captain, pleading outright now.

"Well, that sounds different—how much will you give us to stay and take chances?" Strong asked quickly, assuming a bargaining attitude, but still assisting me to lower the boat.

"Why, I'll—I'll give you fifty dollars apiece," he offered, as though making a tremendous sacrifice.

"Fifty dollars don't look good to me—how about it, Ben?" he asked, as we halted the boat a few feet from the water. "The news headlines will state that the captain went down with the ship, but two firemen drowning with him wouldn't be worth an agate line."

CHAPTER V

HIRAM STRONG, JR., amazed me. Surely this was an outcropping of the Gold-Beater's blood. He may not ever be a Gold-Beater as the term was applied to his male parent, but he was destined to be a gold-getter, for he displayed evidence of that trait when he stood there actually dickering with the captain for a sum beyond a month's wages as a fireman.

The seas breaking over the sunken bow of the vessel, and a cargo in the hold worth at least a million and a half, he had only the captain's word that the ship would not sink at any moment. However, he saw by my attitude that I also thought that the wreck could be salvaged.

And he also saw that the ship was wallowing in the trough of the sea, while the lifeboat was near the water on the lea side, and he knew that I could handle it.

"You see, captain, we have only your word that she isn't going to sink, and we have lost confidence in you. You left us three stories down there to drown like rats. You got everybody else off and never thought of your firemen."

"I couldn't think of everything, and I tell you she is not going

to sink," shouted the captain, coming closer and pounding the rail with his big fat hand. "I've got to get her to anchorage or on the beach, and you've got to help. Fifty dollars is enough; that's nearly a month's wages," he added, trying to avoid his usual overbearing.

"Why did you let the crew go?" Hiram shot at him.

"I didn't know the for'd bulkhead was holding then. You know if the for'd head holds she can't sink," he said vehemently, appealing to me this time. But before I could answer Hiram was after him again.

"And you left us to drown! Our lives are just as valuable to us as any of the rest of the crew, and maybe more than some of them," he said, looking meaningly at the captain, who squirmed visibly, now realizing that we were not ordinary firemen.

"I'll give you a hundred apiece. Now stop talking and come on. We'll have to run her stern fore-most, and if we can keep 54
the wheel going enough for steerage way, the wind will blow us in," haggled the captain like an old market woman.

"A hundred dollars will not interest me; how about you, Ben?" Hiram turned to me and began taking the lifeboat's rope from the cleet and I did the same. "You can stay here and drown if you want to, but we're going. The water here looks pretty deep, and I understand when a ship goes down it makes a pretty big hole into which we might fall," he added as we began to lower the boat.

"How much do you want? I've got to save her," he pleaded now, walking back and forth like a caged hyena.

"If you hadn't let your wireless man go you would have had a tug or another ship here by this time and they would take as salvage only about a quarter of a million," suggested Hiram with a cynical smile, stopping the descent of the boat and making fast again. "We'll stay, but you've got to pay. Ben here knows something about the engines and I will shovel the coal, but you've got to give us two-fifty apiece," he added, taking away my breath and almost prostrating the captain.

The captain began to pace the deck again, then pausing in 55
front of Hiram, he said, as though imbued with a big idea: "All right, I guess I'll have to do it, but you've got to hustle." Moving over to me, he asked if I knew how to start the engines, to which I nodded an affirmative.

"But, Captain," interrupted Hiram forcibly, "it's got to be cash," and there came to his mirthful mouth a certain hardness that surprised me, and again started incipient apoplexy within the captain.

"If I say you'll get it, you'll get it. Isn't my word good for that much?" he blurted out, trying to control his rage.

"Captain, you left us to drown just like kittens you would like to be rid of. Your word isn't worth a counterfeit dollar. I wouldn't trust you for shoestrings. We've got to have the cash—now!" There was genuine bitterness in Hiram's voice.

"I haven't that much cash on the ship," pleaded the captain, but with a sort of wolfish gleam in his eyes.

"All right, then. Come on, Ben, let's get out of this. I wouldn't take his word for one of his firemen's rations of soup and lumpy stew, and if he gave us the company's I. O. U., we 56
wouldn't get it for a month, and they'd red-tape it to death," he ended, starting for the ropes again.

"Wait a minute and I'll see," coaxed the captain, starting up to his quarters nearby.

"The old liar; he's got it, all right. Say, Ben, do you really think she will float—it seems to me the bow is farther down than it was?" he queried me with something of a chuckle.

"Yes, I think it will. The sea is a little higher than it was, and that makes the ship seem lower, but if it gets worse there may be some danger."

"Do you think we can afford to take the chance?"

"I think we can get away in the lifeboat if the ship gets lower. I'll watch closely, but if we take the money we are bound to take the risk."

"Oh, if we take the money we will deliver the goods, but hang the money if the risk is too big."

"It's a fair bet. If we back in it will take the strain off the bulkhead, but if it does not hold, we'll have time to get away."

"Watch this old jockey; he'll come rushing back with part of the money, saying that's all he could find." Hiram, Jr., had hardly finished when the captain came rushing down and gave us in bills the exact amount, cheerfully, and apparently disposed to treat us as equals. 57

"Now, boys, we're only about twenty miles off Hampton Roads, and if you can keep a couple of boilers hot, we'll be there in three hours, and your job's done. The tide is right and we might be able to get clear in."

We hauled the lifeboat up so that the sea would not wash over it, but left our belongings in it, and then hurried below. There was enough steam left in the boilers to swing the ship, stern shoreward, and matters looked well. I hurried to the furnace room, where I found Hiram stripped to the waist, working as if the ship belonged to him. He had wisely selected the four boilers beside which was the most coal, and seemed to forget that his hands were sore and his body all too green for such an effort. I aided him as much as I could and then ran back to the engines, repeating this operation for two hours. I noticed that the lightship off the harbor was gradually growing plainer. The upper part of our propeller blades were exposed because of the ship's nose dip. We were losing a great deal of power due to that fact. 58 Soon we picked up a pilot and in another two hours we slowly made the harbor on less than one leg, and we were through.

"The greatest job ever pulled off! No salvage on this ship or cargo," the captain chuckled, rubbing his hands. "Now, let's go ashore and get some food," he added as cheerfully as would a miser fingering gold. He had not left the wheel house or given an order since we started. However, before we got through washing up Hiram began to droop and was hardly able to walk to a Turkish bath after we got ashore at Norfolk.

He did not improve much, even with a good rub-down after the bath, and I knew it was the hospital for him. Before the doctors got through with his examination he was in a wild delirium and they shook their heads. It was a bad case of exhaustion, and nothing but a strong heart would save him.

CHAPTER VI 59

THE newspapers spread on the wreck story next morning and I read about it while sitting by Hiram Strong's bedside in the hospital. The captain got the glory and credit, although the man, a mere boy, now tossing unconscious on the pillow, was the one to whom all credit belonged. In his delirium he muttered from time to time. Every now and then he would say—"Ben, he was going to let us drown—drown like rats in a trap!"

The nurse gently unbandaged his hands to show me their condition. The palms were cooked—black and seamy—like an overdone roast. But he was now clean, and handsome, his dark, wavy hair mounting high against the white pillow, all trace of dissipation having disappeared from his skin. That was fair and clear, though slightly flushed with fever. The smile hovering about his mouth appeared to be at the point of breaking out into a hearty laugh.

Surely his first attempt at a useful life was not a success, for which I held myself partly to blame. If I had said "no" to the captain's proposal we would have come away like the rest of the crew. 60

Three days found him much better, and when I came to see him he delighted me with his cheerful manner.

"Hello, Ben!" he chanted with an infectious smile. "I would like to shake, but my hands are wrapped up just like a petrified mummy."

Naturally I looked pleased that matters were no worse, and he continued to talk.

"Say, Ben, it was good of you to stick, bring me here, and then come every day to see me. I woke up in the night and the nurse—God bless her—she is a kind soul—she told me all about it."

"Hiram, as we were sort of partners in crime I had to stick."

"But say, we brought the ship in, didn't we? Sit around nearer the foot of the bed where I can see you. My tongue is about the only part of me I can move. Every bone in my body feels as though it was broken twice, and every rib creaks when I breathe. Job never had anything on me." He tried to laugh, but brought up short, ending with a groan. 61

"You'll be all right in a day or two if you take things easy."

"Oh, I'll not stay here long, Doc or no Doc. I'm only sore and that doesn't count for much. Ben, do you know what I would like to have right now?—a porterhouse steak, thick as a flagstone, smothered in mushrooms, and I'm going to have it if there's one in the town. By the way, what town are we in, Ben?"

"Better stick here till to-morrow anyway, then we will see how you feel," I said, ignoring his question.

"All right, old partner, but not a minute longer—they're mighty good to me, but I don't like the carbolic odor that comes floating down the hall. It makes me think of a Long Island fertilizing plant, or a morgue."

The next morning he put on his clothes, which had been renovated and pressed, with many "Oh's" and "Ah's" and "Ouch's," but withal he was good-natured and smiling. Then we started after the much coveted porterhouse and mushrooms. At first he toddled like an aged man, holding on to me. The effort was painful, but in a short time his locomotion was normal and likewise his good nature. 62

After a prodigious meal and a favorite cigarette he again surprised me by putting a question that was hard to answer.

"Where do we go from here?" he asked, looking inside his hands, which were still in a deplorable state.

"What—so soon?" I parried.

"Yes—after I came out of my luny funk at the hospital, I had time to think things over, duly and truly and soberly. You know, I haven't had a drink since we left New York, and I don't want one. This strenuous life rather appeals to me now that I have found I have a good body—as good as any one's—and it's got to work without getting sore or fluffing up with blisters. Besides, the Governor gave me the toe of his shoe and said I wasn't worth a 'cuss,' and I am going to show him." There was great determination in the manner in which he blew out the smoke of his cigarette.

"I think we will find an employment office here," I suggested mildly.

"Take me to it. I'm ready now," he said quickly, though hardly able to sit up in bed, but when we came to the employment office he hung back, insisting that I should be the spokesman. The face of the man in charge was heavy and florid. He might easily have passed for a gambler, confidence man, or race-horse tout. He sized us up critically before he replied: 63

"The only man I need is quartermaster—ship bound for New

Orleans to take on cotton. You can sign again there for Liverpool if you want to."

Strong heard what was said and I moved toward him inquiringly.

"I don't care what it is, so long as you think it's all right. It can't be any worse than firing."

I explained to him in an undertone that the quartermaster steered the vessel, the hardest part of the job being to remain on one's feet four to six hours at a time, to which he replied quickly:

"That sounds good if I can do it."

"I can teach you in a few hours."

"All right, let's sign," he said, coming over.

We went to a second-hand store, found a book on practical seamanship, and I spent the afternoon familiarizing him with his duties, after which we went aboard. He seemed keen to know everything about a ship.

64

The captain, a jolly good fellow, asked us a few questions, seemed pleased, winked knowingly, and gave us a room to ourselves on deck just back of the officers' quarters, and told us to arrange the watches to suit ourselves. It was to be six hours on, six off, and we would sail at eight that night.

The next five days went by speedily. Our course was down the coast through the Straits of Florida and the Gulf of Mexico to the bar; thence to the little white lighthouse at the entrance of the Mississippi, over a hundred miles from New Orleans.

I wondered at Hiram constantly. He was so alert and apt that he never came in for a reprimand, never again referred to his father or his future plans, or craved liquor—an ample supply of his favorite cigarettes seemed to satisfy him. He had no time for stories, nor did he speak of women, or of any escapades in which he may have been involved. He was actually glad to be making his way by toil. With hands all healed he became quite normal, and was altogether a fine minded man. While such a rapid change might not be permanent, he appeared not only to have turned over a new leaf, but to have lost all taste for the habits and customs of his previous life.

65

Things went well with us and we sped along at a lively clip. I was at the wheel on the last watch that would take us into dock at New Orleans about midnight.

"Pop has been talking some"—Strong, from the beginning, had referred to the captain as Pop—"and wants us to sign up for a round trip to Liverpool. He says it's sixty dollars and fifty per cent extra for going the submarine zone."

"Then I guess we must have done our work all right," I replied, noncommittal. "What do you——"

"Ben," he interrupted, "why are you married to the sea?"

"I never considered that I was—I have never been blessed or cursed by being married to any one or anything—one has to make a living somehow." It was perfectly dark in the wheel-house with the exception of the tiny hooded light over the compass, and I couldn't see Hiram's face.

"A fireman can become an engineer and stops there?" he surprised me by putting forth a question in just that way. I paused before replying.

66

"Yes—usually."

"A seaman can become captain, and then his road gets very narrow and steep toward further advancement?" he persisted.

"Yes," I replied, wondering what was on his mind.

"It strikes me a man of your ability is wasting his time at sea—I don't see any future—what about wireless men?"

"They get ninety dollars a month," I replied, amused and still wondering.

"What about telegraphing?" he then asked.

"Some of our best men started as operators, Edison, for instance. I am inclined to think it's the methodical drill they get that helps."

"Ben, are you going to sign up for the other side?" he asked, as though expecting a negative answer.

"Well, I think the subs are getting quite plentiful—more than they tell us about. Don't you?" At last I knew what he had been driving at.

"That settles it," said he. "I won't, either. We've got a stake now and can afford to look around a little." 67

"Our stake won't last long unless we get busy," I warned.

"Oh, I'm willing to work, and I don't expect to go up on an escalator or an express elevator—but I do want to know that the stairs lead somewhere worthwhile. Do you get me, Ben?" he laughed. "I'll tell Pop we're not anxious to play hide-and-seek with the subs."

I did not reply, but wondered what effect "a stake" would have on an idle man like him in New Orleans.

CHAPTER VII 68

To Strong's mind satisfactory quarters meant rooms of good size, and well lighted. We finally found connecting space in a private house. He seemed anxious to see New Orleans, and started out while I looked up some old acquaintances, but I found him awaiting me at our lodgings in the early evening.

"Ben, I have done it. I've paid out the money, and I'm going to see it through," was his greeting.

"Paid for what?" I asked, unable to avoid smiling at his cheerful optimism.

"Fifty dollars to learn telegraphy. They say I can do it in sixty days, and when I have completed my course I will get a job. New Orleans looks to me like a regular place. I like it."

For a moment I thought he might have been indulging in some of the mixtures for which the Southern Metropolis is noted, but it was only the wine of youthful credulity that did the talking.

"That's good," I assented quickly. "When do you commence?" 69

"Oh, I have already started in. I took my first lesson this afternoon. How did you make out? Can you get a job here?" There could be no doubt of his keen desire to have me stay near him.

"Yes—two or three things turned up to-day."

"And any one of them better than going to sea, I'll bet?"

"Yes, as far as the money goes," I replied, reservedly.

"Bully, old boy!" he shouted, seizing my hand in a vise-like grip. From then on the days were full of interest for both of us. Hiram's intention to master telegraphy became almost an obsession with him. From the moment he started in he seemed to forget everything else, and he worked as though his welfare in this world and the world to come depended upon his learning telegraphy in the shortest possible time. He ate, drank, inhaled, and absorbed the Morse system during every waking moment, and in less than three weeks he was substituting for a sick operator on the Yazoo & Mississippi Railroad.

Strong's was undoubtedly an intensive nature; the height and especially the width of his forehead clearly indicated power of concentration, which, apparently, he had done nothing to build up. It was the same way when he met the girl, Anna Bell Morgan, and when an intensive man meets a comprehensive girl there is apt to be trouble, or a wedding, or something equally interesting. If he had spent money with 70

the same tenacity of purpose that he set about learning telegraphy I do not wonder that Hiram Strong, Sr., became tired to the bone of his folly and would have no more of it.

After working a week as a substitute he blew into quarters one evening like a cyclone and gave me a thump on the back that made me grunt.

"I've got it!—I've got it!—I've got it!" he shouted, his face aglow and his eyes snapping.

This time I was sure he had broken over into old habits, especially when I well knew the lure of that celebrated New Orleans gin fizz to which all newcomers seemed to succumb. But again I was wrong. Strong had simply boiled over with exuberant spirits and he certainly had a jag on board. His ardor not in the least dampened by my hesitation, he 71
grabbed my hand and shook it vigorously, then capered about in front of me as a boy in his teens might do.

"Congratulate me, Old Man, I've got it!" he roared. "The Yazoo Railroad has offered me a station. Quarrytown, Ben—Quarrytown, Louisiana, is my address after to-morrow!"

Of course, that was pleasant news to me and naturally I became as excited as he, so much so that I became fearful we would jeopardize our joint reputations for sobriety.

"There's only one thing, and you've got to fix that—eh? I don't know just how: I must have a surety bond for a thousand dollars and also three first-class references—can we do it, Ben? Can you do it?" he repeated.

I hesitated a moment, wondering how I was going to get three first-class references for a man who had spent a big part of his twenty-four years in riotous living, even to the point of being disowned. But there was no such thing as resisting him now.

"Oh, I don't have to wait for it; that can be done any time. But we can fix it some way, can't we, Ben?—I've got to," he added with emphasis.

"Yes, if we have a little time I think it can be arranged," said 72
I, soberly, wondering somewhat over the details of the job. But he hardly waited for my assurance before he seized me by the hand and began dragging me about the room.

"Come on, let's get out—out in the air—let's go out and have a good time," he commanded as he got my hat and jammed it down over my head. "It's up the river, only about a hundred miles. You can come up Sunday. It's big enough to have a day and night man, and I get the day job!" he added, loud enough for the whole house to hear him as we passed downstairs to the street.

The following Sunday I went to see him. His station was delightfully located. There was enough level space between the river and its very high bluffs for two long sidetracks convenient for the meeting of freight trains, which made a night and day operator necessary.

Hiram was expecting me and waved his arms wildly as I stepped off the train, but as he was busy rushing mail, express, and trunks into the baggage car, there was no chance for a handshake for the time being.

The depot looked like the cabin in which De Soto died from 73
malaria and disappointment in 1539, although somewhat modernized and adapted to the needs of railroading.

Quarrytown was a rambling village around D. R. Morgan's General Store, and he was Anna Bell's father. Near the ancient depot was a considerable stone quarry, high clay bluffs, and the Mississippi River. Pickaninnies, starved dogs, mules, razorback hogs and malaria seemed to thrive along with the willow and pepper trees. The question of moment was how long would Hiram Strong, Jr., late of Broadway, Sherry's, and Delmonico's, be satisfied here? In the place of porterhouse steaks there would be sow-belly and corn bread, and a very dry section to live in.

As soon as the train was out of the way Hiram came rushing

over to me.

"Ben, old man, you look good to me!" he exclaimed. "I'm getting away with it; haven't made a bull yet. Excuse me a little bit until I take this mail over, then I'm through." Thus he greeted me, enthusiastic and confident, then rushed away with the small mail bag to Morgan's store and the post office.

While awaiting his return I examined a two-wheeled baggage truck he had left standing after being loaded from the train. This contained an old trunk fastened with a clothes line, a bunch of bananas, some castings for a cotton gin, three boxes of chill-and-fever remedy, and five cases of dynamite.

As Strong hurried across the street his eyes shone with anticipation from under the visor of a cheap cap that had replaced the jaunty derby.

"Say, how do you like my new station? All the white people here are mighty nice," said he, pushing the truck toward the depot.

I nodded approval and helped him to push the load up a steep incline into the freight house adjoining the ticket office.

"Do you get much of that stuff?" I asked, pointing to the dynamite.

"Yes—the quarry uses quite a bit, but it usually comes by freight and I don't have to handle it," he said, locking the door and leading the way to the ticket and telegraph office, located in a small bay-windowed room facing the track. We walked through a dingy waiting-room, in the center of which stood a wooden box, half filled with sand, which stood permanent duty as a cuspidor.

"You see, there is no hotel here, and Mr. Morgan has kindly taken me to board with him. The night man stays there also. Sunday is such a busy day, especially for freights, that I can't leave for my dinner, so they send it over to me. They'll send enough for two to-day. You won't mind, will you?"

Before I could reply the dispatcher called him and he began taking a train order while I sat down upon the one remaining sixty-nine-cent chair.

Opposite the bay-window was the regulation standing-counter, a ticket-cabinet, and little window opening out to the waiting-room, aged and dingy, especially the floor.

"That chair will go down with you some time," I suggested, when he turned about after copying the order,—and setting a red signal for the train.

"It looks as though it had served its full time," he replied, laughing, as he arose in answer to a tap on the waiting-room door. A darky boy with a market basket and a white pitcher stood grinning outside with our dinner.

"Ben, this dinner is not like some we've had, but it's better than the soup and mutton stew we got on the boat. Do you know, I would rather be dead and in torment than fire again on that boat, but I would have stayed, though, if you had," said he, opening the basket and setting out a liberal portion of fried chicken and hot biscuit on the small instrument table.

"We can tell only by comparison when we are well off," I replied.

"That's beginning to dawn on me, also," said he, dryly.

We had hardly begun eating when a big panting Mogul stopped with her nose opposite the window and the conductor came trotting up and signed for the orders. He gave one copy to the engineer and scuttled away.

"I was telling you about the white people here," he began, as we resumed eating. "Old Mr. Morgan, who runs the store and post office, is about the biggest man here, and his daughter, Anna Bell! Say, boy, she is as pretty as any woman

I ever saw." Then, for some reason, he checked himself on the "Anna Bell" subject and became absorbed in the well-cooked dainties spread before us.

CHAPTER VIII

78

It was not what Hiram Strong said about Anna Bell Morgan, but the tone in which he said it, that raised the big interrogation point in my mind. Matters as they stood suggested the possibility that the youngster had plans in mind to "face the Governor" and that Quarrytown was a place quite good enough to settle down in if Anna Bell said the right word.

A chicken leg in one hand and a hot biscuit piled with jam in the other, he stood facing me, with an excited glitter in his eyes. Continuing, he said in a tense undertone:

"The night man is half gone on her, but he is a German—at least has a German name—and this place is intensely patriotic. As I told you, he boards there and when he is not sleeping he hangs——"

At this moment a north-bound freight rushed by, and with the noise of the locomotive and banging of the trucks over a poor railroad joint opposite the wide-open window, together with the slapping of brake beams, made further conversation impossible. He turned, watching it as though expecting something, and as the way car passed something did happen. I heard a metallic thud on the floor, at which Hiram dropped his food and began to hunt for the thing that caused the noise. Finally, by getting down on all fours, he brought out from between the old iron safe and the letter press a rail spike to which was fastened by a rubber band a piece of white paper which he carefully unfolded. It was a train order reporting train No. 192 passing at that time with two cars picked up at a siding below where there was no telegraph office. Strong sprang to his instrument and dispatched the message forthwith. I wondered if he realized the danger to himself from messages thrown in upon him that way. A railroad spike weighs about a pound, and while he was telegraphing I speculated on what would happen if one struck him, or if by any chance it struck one of the fifty-pound cases of dynamite that had come by express.

79

"The conductor drops his reports that way to save time," he said, calmly resuming his seat.

Hiram's days were full of things to do, therefore we never had ten minutes' connected conversation. I would have been glad to learn the situation inside the fellow's active mind. I don't think he knew. He was doing honest, useful work, and received its immediate reward in full satisfaction—his first real satisfaction—that intoxicating lure that fans a spark of ambition into a flame.

80

Later in the day, at a hint from Hiram, the conductor of a refrigerator train invited me to ride to New Orleans with him.

"He makes better time than the passenger," said Hiram, who in less than a week knew all the road employees by their first names. Somehow he took it for granted that I had satisfactory employment and never asked me what it was. As a matter of fact I was employed in connection with the American Defense League, a patriotic organization, which was destined to throw me in contact with Hiram Strong very often and sometimes unexpectedly. Ours was not the kind of friendship to end through mere separation.

We exchanged letters frequently. He asked me to send him a typewriter, which, though not required in the service, was "the only way to do things right," he wrote me. I noted that his letters avoided any reference to the night man or Anna Bell Morgan. I wondered if it was an oversight or intentional evasion.

81

The Yazoo Railroad had reported, as required by law, that they had shipped ten cases of dynamite, but only nine were delivered. As soon as I had time I was asked to look it up, as fifty pounds of dynamite in bad hands would make a great deal of excitement in or about the shipping of New Orleans.

I was astonished to find, upon examination of the papers, that the explosive had been shipped to the quarries at Quarrytown, together with an affidavit by the train conductor that he had delivered ten cases on the platform there. This put it squarely up to the agent, Hiram Strong, Jr.

On arriving at Quarrytown I found Hiram as busy as ever, but overjoyed to see me. He was considerably surprised when I inquired about the lost dynamite, but he was not worried and evidently had not been. He was looking splendid; hard work and regular hours had accomplished wonders, and he seemed completely unmindful of discomforts. As to the explosive, he took me out on the platform to where it had been unloaded. 82

"It came here," said he, "in the evening, along with half a car of mixed merchandise about the time I was going off duty. I had to work overtime to put it all in the freight house. The next morning the quarry man came for it and signed for the nine cases which I had delivered to him. That's all I could find and I believe that is all that was unloaded, although the way bill called for ten," he admitted.

"The stuff was locked up, wasn't it?" I enquired.

"Oh, yes, I locked the warehouse myself, and carry the only keys," he replied, as we returned to his office.

The place looked to me darker and more dingy than before, but the day was gloomy. The rickety kitchen chair had finally collapsed and was substituted by a box covered with a burlap bag, with some padding on the end for a cushion.

"How about this door?" I asked, pointing to the one leading into the freight house.

"That has no lock, but I never leave here until the night man comes on. It couldn't get away through here." 83

"How about this night man; who is he?"

"He's been here for two years. The company must know he is all right. His name is Gus—Gus Schlegel. I think he is too stupid to be crooked; he knows enough to report trains at night."

At that moment a dark boy came to the ticket window and reported three cars of granite on the quarry siding, and Hiram sat down on the burlapped box in front of his instruments and notified the dispatcher that three cars were ready. He then took up a pad of blank bills of lading and began to fill them out rapidly, though in the attitude of listening.

"One of your chairs went on strike?" I observed, eyeing the artistic arrangement of the burlap.

"Yes; Gus's avoirdupois finally carried it down. He found an old molasses box that was so sticky he had to cover it with burlap. I believe I like it better than the chair; it requires less room," he added, looking up, while changing his carbon paper.

The thought occurred to me that it might be the missing case of dynamite, but I decided that was quite impossible. If Gus had really driven nails into a case filled with dynamite, he would be at that moment in Kingdom Come and an architect busy with plans for a new station. 84

"How is his love affair progressing with Anna Bell Morgan?" I asked, without great show of interest.

"Oh, I know she hates his name, and I think—I think she hates him, too; but these Southern girls are so polite and considerate of one's feelings, I can't tell for sure; besides, she is pretty deep," said he, as one having given the matter much consideration.

Hiram scratched a match on the burlap covering and lit a cigarette.

"He both sleeps and eats there, doesn't he?" I was beginning to consider Gus Schlegel in connection with the disappearance of the case of explosive.

"Yes, he eats and rooms there, but lately he doesn't sleep much. Why, he came in here the other afternoon and sat where you are and cried like a baby. He said he didn't think she cared anything for him, and that he loved her so much 85
he couldn't live without her—even hinted at suicide."

Here Hiram Strong, Jr., looked up and laughed—a cynical laugh—as he glanced at me. His eyes showed that he was in earnest, and evidenced a combination of amusement and anger. He brushed the ashes from his cigarette on the box and continued: "I told him the river water was nice and warm and muddy, and that the alligators would finish the job cheaper than an undertaker."

"And do you know," he continued with a smile creeping about his mouth, "it went completely over his head, didn't even penetrate the tallow. I don't believe a German has any sense of humor—they only laugh at something ribald or salacious—they make a terrible mess of simulating virtue. Then he asked me to advise him."

"Did you?"

"Yes—I told him he had been there nearly two years and that was long enough for her to learn to appreciate him—that the only way was for him to ask her and thus settle the question for good and all."

"Did he take your advice?" I asked.

"He wanted to know if he shouldn't speak to her father first, 86
but I told him the preliminary skirmish should be with her. He decided on the spot to do that and if she refused him he was going to leave."

"I suppose he got his answer?"

"He went over immediately—what happened there I never learned, exactly, but I do know he came back in about an hour squealing like a razorback pig kicked in the ribs by a mule, and wired in his resignation. He was an awfully poor loser," Hiram added, as he sealed the big yellow envelope for the auditor. "Why, the poor dub was so sorry for himself, he snuffled and groaned, and his breath back-fired like a four-cylinder motor hitting only on two."

"Who are his associates here, and does he have any one come to see him?" I asked, detecting something like resentment in his tone.

"No one has been here to see him since I came. No; he is just a big boob, with this love-stuff working overtime."

"Has anything whatever—however insignificant—happened that would connect him with the disappearance of the dynamite?"

"No, not the least thing—the claim agent and I went over 87
that several times. There is a certain low cunning in him, a disposition to be tricky in small things, but there's nothing to him—just grease. Of course, he has the wires here all night, and I may underestimate him. By the use of a code he might pull off something."

"Did the company accept his resignation?"

"Yes; they had to."

"And you don't attach any importance to his going now, further than this love affair?"

Before he could reply the train he flagged for orders pulled past the station. He obligingly took the tissue order pad out on the platform for the conductor to sign. While he was gone I raised the burlap skirt covering from the box. It stuck and I had to pull it loose to get it up. It was undoubtedly a molasses case, a can that had fermented or been punctured and had run out at the corners, but to be sure I took my

pencil point, gouged some of the stuff off the side, sniffed and then tasted it. It was mixed with grit and dirt, but it tasted sweet and I was satisfied.

"Ben, take a walk over to the quarry switch with me. I've got to get the numbers of three cars standing there. I will introduce you to the head quarry man and he will tell you all he knows about it—and that's nothing at all. Still you might get a pointer there," he added.

To this I assented without comment, but wondered why he was so careful to put everything in the safe and lock it; also the office door, when the big center sash of the bay-window facing the main track was entirely raised.

"You have light-fingered gentry here?" I queried.

"Oh, if anything were left lying around loose it might disappear. I don't take any chances because I leave that window open so that the conductors can throw their reports inside. There's one coming now," he said, looking up the line as we picked our way over the main track and two switches, toward the quarry under the bluff, about two hundred yards distant.

"Hiram, have you any theory at all about the disappearance of this case of dynamite?" I insisted.

"I don't believe it ever came here—I know the waybill called for ten cases, and the conductor of the local checks up everything as it comes out of the car on the platform, and they're careful and good fellows, but that day he had a lot of freight; he must have checked in another case to make up his ten—you know there's a lot of goods packed in cases about that size. I'm not worried; that case of dynamite never came here, and will show up somewhere else," he said definitely, and with complete candor, as we approached the three flat cars loaded with granite on the short quarry switch.

While he was taking the numbers I stopped and looked back at the disreputable-looking station house and D. R. Morgan's store and residence beyond, the pepper trees along the highway, and the dwindling sized houses behind them. Two or three mule teams with cotton bales could be seen creeping toward the station.

"Do you want to come over to the office and see the boss here? I must go in and give him a copy of these bills," he explained, looking over at a board shanty they called an office some distance away.

"No—I think not. Where do they store their explosives, Hiram?" I asked, not noticing the usual isolated brick or stone receptacle.

"They tunneled into the granite bluff about four hundred feet down the track. This road leads to it," he replied, pointing to a cart-track which led in that direction.

"You go and deliver your bills—I will stay and make a little diagram or map of the place." He glanced up the track at a heavily loaded locomotive laboring down toward the station, but when the engineer gave no signs of stopping he went over to the quarry office, while I took out my pencil and pad to make my map and notes.

As I drew with my pencil the full length of the pad to represent the railroad running midway between the river and the bluff, a most extraordinary thing occurred. I could not believe my senses. The point of my pencil sputtered like a parlor match, but before it reached the end of the pad it exploded like a firecracker and blackened the paper. In an instant I recalled having used my pencil to gouge some of the sticky stuff off the box Hiram, Jr., was using as a seat. I then knew positively it was the lost case of dynamite.

CHAPTER IX

In an instant my senses were flogged into a stupendous state of excitement, and my eyes must have bulged when I looked again at the blackened pad and then at the pencil point that had been blown off as though it had itself exploded. Then I thought of that crazy, love-sick Gus who had been driving nails into the case, and I sickened. Surely there is a Divine Providence that protects fools at least. Hiram had scratched matches against that case!

My knees shook and my hand trembled, and I do not think I could have uttered a sound. I looked for Strong. He was just coming out of the quarry office. I took one long step to rush back to the station, but saw the locomotive approaching, laboring hard with its immense load and throwing clouds of black smoke from its stack that slowly expanded into an immense dirigible in the still, sluggish atmosphere.

Should the conductor fling his report in at the window fastened to a spike or a piece of granite and hit that case of dynamite—what would happen? This had been done many times, and nothing occurred, but the law of average must prevail in due time. A sickening sensation took possession of me, and I became as rigid as stone. I felt as though ten pounds of lead was in the pit of my stomach; my mind was filled with monstrous forebodings, for one hundred persons were within easy range of that case of explosive—including Anna Bell. I could not prevent Hiram's arrest and trial for criminal negligence if the facts became known. But Gus was the culprit, if any one.

As I looked back, Hiram was approaching. Somehow I did not want to tell him. It seemed unnecessary, and I could save him that much apprehension. I must have looked strange to him when he came up to where I stood as one ossified. He took hold of my arm, and said fraternally: "Come on, Ben; you look as white as if you had seen a ghost." But I could not move. I only stared at the passing train.

Hiram plucked my sleeve. "Ben, you look as though you were standing before a firing squad—just as I must have looked when the Gold-Beater told me to 'git up and git.'"

I could only raise my hand warningly and stare at the passing train. It seemed to me the longest train I ever knew one locomotive to haul, and though it was moving at least twenty miles per hour it appeared to creep.

I raised my hand to my forehead and found it dripping with perspiration; Hiram grabbed my shoulders with both hands and shook me.

"Ben, have you gone stark mad?"

I had forgotten he was there and scarcely heard or felt him. I saw the way-car emerge from the trees and approach the station. I could not help raising my arm and point that way and did not lower it until we were both thrown violently to the ground.

It is useless to try to describe the crashing of the intonation on my ears. I thought my hearing was destroyed. Before the concussion threw us prone there was a fleeting impression of a dense red flame that came from the station. The instant the way-car passed it was lifted from the track. I afterward learned it was detached from the cars ahead and rolled over twice.

The man who said there are words to describe everything groveled in ignorance. I saw Hiram running toward the station; he fairly flew, his legs moving rapidly as though motor-driven. I saw he did not even relax his speed when he ran around the deep hole where the station had stood a few moments before, but continued to D. R. Morgan's store and beyond that to the residence—or maybe he was going to the river to do as he had advised the love-sick Gus. I only know what he told me about it afterward. How the conductor and rear brakeman, after being rattled about in the way-car as dice in a box, escaped with only bruises and cuts was a wonder to me, and when I finally learned that the fatalities were confined to a team of mules forced through the front of

Morgan's store, my relief was immense.

Gus escaped from the Morgan house in his night shirt, and ran down under the river bank, cowering and cringing, along with most of the black population. It was difficult to convince him he could go back to bed in safety. The darkies eventually realized that it was not Gabriel's last call, and were coaxed away from the protecting bank to help remove the mules from the front of Morgan's wrecked store. 95

When Hiram returned from the Morgan residence he was fairly composed. He came to me at once.

"This is pretty bad business; was any one killed?" he asked, bracing himself.

"No, but it is a marvel."

"They will blame me?"

"Yes, likely, at first. Make no statement to any one. Was your safe locked? How about cash and station records?"

"Yes, it is always locked; kept everything there since Gus acted luny; but hasn't it been destroyed?"

"We'll go and see."

The hole where once stood the depot would easily contain a freight house and more. Rails of the main track were ripped up and twisted as though made of wheat straw. We found the safe apparently intact, sticking out of the débris.

Railroad tickets were scattered about like fallen leaves. When he found his ticket stamp he was greatly relieved and almost laughed. How had he suddenly acquired such fortitude and acumen? Was it the Gold-Beater's blood unleashed by work and decent living? When we found parts of the new typewriter he laughed grimly, tossing his head backward. 96

I thought it best for Hiram that he should not know how it happened until after he was grilled, as I knew he would soon be.

The Yazoo railroad did one thing quickly and well. In less than an hour they had a wrecker on the job, and by utilizing the outside track had established a detour which let Superintendent Kitchell's "special" through from the north.

The wrecker reached into the débris with its long steel arm, picked up the safe, and swung it into the superintendent's car. He told Hiram and Gus they were relieved, and to come with him to New Orleans.

Hiram obeyed the order without a murmur, but nevertheless took plenty of time to pack all of his belongings. He seemed to know he was through in Quarrytown. I suspected he was rather deliberate in bidding the Morgan family good-by, taking some time to do it, and was apparently much excited and flushed when he boarded the superintendent's car and waved a cordial good-by to a girlish figure who stood in front of the Morgan store waving back at him. 97

CHAPTER X 98

THERE is something about the duties and ambitions of a railroad superintendent that make him wish to appear inscrutable. The reason, perhaps, is the man behind him who wants his job, or the man ahead whose job he wants—or both. Anyhow, an attempt at inscrutability is the typical refuge for the ignorant and the smaller the road the more futile the attempt. Though I established my identity and purpose beyond a doubt, he at first refused to allow me passage to New Orleans in his car. He seemed to be suspicious of me, perhaps that I intended to burglarize the safe, make off before his eyes with a locomotive or some of the numerous scrap iron along the right-of-way. However, he finally became rational and reversed himself.

His car was divided about the center, one end being private to himself and his clerk. The other part was sort of a reception room, the "anxious" seat for subordinates. In this apartment they had placed the safe.

After we left Quarrytown, his undersized clerk emerged from 99
the private quarters and requested Hiram to open the safe, which he did promptly and with a firm hand. The clerk took the contents to the superintendent. Meanwhile Gus wore a very red face and sighed repeatedly, as though already on the way to the penitentiary instead of New Orleans.

After examination of Hiram's records Gus was called in before the Superintendent and given the third degree. When he came out he was muchly upset and perspiring. Hiram, disgusted, looked upon him with contempt, which feeling was intensified when the flabby Gus dropped into a chair and glared back at him ominously. It may have been because of the high speed of the light engine and the solitary car, but I surely saw Gus's knees knock together from sheer fright. He had likely overstated his alibi in an abandoned and frantic attempt to protect himself to Hiram's disadvantage.

When the superintendent's clerk finally came to the door and beckoned Hiram, the latter's attitude pleased me. Neither defiant nor disrespectful, he walked into the presence of his superior, and when he emerged from the interview he had 100
not changed a hair.

Presently the little clerk stuck his head out of the dividing door and beckoned to me in the same curt manner he had signaled the two men who were under suspicion. I had no notion of being placed in the same category and made it clear to the clerk that such was the case. At once he became civil and led the way.

When I entered his sanctum the superintendent sat facing me at the flat top desk in the corner of the car. He was a short, stocky man, and evidenced much perturbation of mind by mopping his florid face. A Flounder had been clapped on his head and when it came away it brought all the hair under it, leaving only a slight fringe. His lips and cherubic mouth were pursed and screwed up to simulate an executive air. As he jerked his thumb indicating a wicker chair opposite him, I noticed the little clerk sat at a small desk at the side of the car, with notebook and pencil poised significantly.

"What have you to say about this matter?" he asked without delay, withdrawing his eyes and winking violently as soon as they met mine.

"Nothing," I answered good naturedly. 101

"I understand you were here investigating the loss of the dynamite when the explosion occurred. Have you no theory as to how it occurred?"

"No, I have no theory: I *know* how it occurred."

"Would you"—he hesitated, looking down and bringing his chubby hands together before him—"would you mind telling me what you know about it?"

"My information will not be available to the railroad through me, but if you will dismiss your clerk, I will give you, as man to man, enough information to ease your mind." In saying this I was thinking only of Hiram.

After some hesitation, he nodded to the expectant clerk, who rose instantly and left the apartment.

"Mr. Taylor—I believe you said your name was Taylor—this matter has upset me, and I may have been rude," he apologized, and lapsed into the attitude of a very decent fellow with troubles of his own. I then gave him enough details to put Hiram right. He was immensely relieved and pleased to gain such valuable information.

"You seem to know something of this young Strong?" he 102
queried. My reply was that I thought I had a very good line on Hiram Strong, Jr.

"His cash and station records are as clean and straight as a

pin—he seems to be rather under-classed and is capable of better things. What are his antecedents?" The superintendent's interest was aroused.

"My knowledge does not extend beyond his father, a Southerner, now a prominent financier in New York. It appears he decided that the only way to make something of this boy was to throw him out entirely on his own resources, and apparently the old gentleman's reasoning was good."

"I believe you are right; there is good blood in him. Our big trouble is in making good railroad men from material without any blood base. We frequently have to make 'a silk purse from a sow's ear,' which is generally considered impossible—but we do it. Now the case of this other fellow—can you conceive of a full grown man with no better sense than to take a fifty-pound case of dynamite, drive nails into it, and then use it as a chair? But I am greatly relieved to know just how it happened, and if I can ever be of any service to you, don't fail to make it known—will you?" he asked, rising formally, to end the audience.

When I came out Hiram glanced at me searchingly, as though he would learn something from my attitude. He had been absorbing information from the train conductor. Hiram had developed a penchant for burrowing into the confidence of every one and getting inside knowledge of their difficulties.

At this time we succeeded in running around a freight train that had been holding us back, and entered New Orleans so fast that conversation was quite impossible.

Before we reached the station the clerk came out and told Hiram and Gus to report at the office at nine the next morning, at which Hiram became thoughtful, but not downcast.

He was able to get his old room next to mine, which pleased him, and after opening the connecting door and cleaning up a bit, he came in and gave me one of his strenuous whacks between my shoulders.

"Old man Ben, what do I draw to-morrow morning at nine?"

"Hiram, I don't know," I truthfully replied, working my shoulders where he had hit me, "but I think you will be drawn and quartered and made into good fertilizer; that's all you're fit for." At this he began to cavort and caper about like a colt.

"Well, I don't mind telling you how I feel—I don't give a Continental sou Marquis what I draw. I feel like fighting wild cats and buzz-saws. Now that Anna Bell Morgan has promised to marry me, nothing else matters."

CHAPTER XI

Hiram and I were soon ready for the next thing in order—something to eat.

"I suppose now you will want a porterhouse as big as Rhode Island——"

"And as thick as a London fog, with enough mushrooms to choke an alligator," he broke in joyously. "Ben—I want you to know right now that I think you are an infernal scoundrel. You know why my brand-new typewriter blew up this morning and started the whole of Quarrytown over into the river, incidentally putting the main line on the bum—and won't tell me!" he added, squaring himself in front of me.

"You'd better wait until to-morrow and see what your sentence is before you begin to accuse me," I replied, with a solemn wink which he couldn't quite fathom.

"Oh, I suppose the 'Sauerkraut' and I will get bounced incontinently. But what do I care? Had it not been for what happened this morning I wouldn't know that a perfectly

sweet and innocent girl really loves me. I don't care if this part of the world comes to an end, you can't get me into the doldrums. Besides, I know my hands are clean, and I have done nothing for which they should blame me, but they may be looking for a horrible example—a railroad is a railroad—eh, Ben?"

Then, assuming a more serious attitude, he continued:

"I've got a trade now—a way of making a living. I can walk up the street and look any man or woman in the eye, as one who can account for himself, who can do something useful, and at the same time possess the love of a good girl—it's great, Ben! Do you know anything about such things? I shall be no man's dog in the future. Already I've kicked the can off of my tail, to use a figure of speech."

"I don't quite understand you, Hiram," said I, recalling the fact that this was the second time he had referred to some such handicap.

"I've been up there on the river where it's so quiet that one's own thoughts are as loud as grand opera, and I have figured it out," he began, inserting his thumbs in the arm-holes of his vest and moving over to look out of the window. "Of course, you understand, I used the word dog as a figure of speech, but what I mean is that the Gold-Beater, instead of making me work and learn something at the right time, gave me money to spend, and then, along with old women and maidens, old men, and gentry in general, he winked knowingly, indulgently, as I was tobogganning to Hades; then of a sudden, inside of a day, I am kicked out, and told to go to work or—Blazes—he didn't care which—me with my head as empty as a base drum and muscles as soft as a jelly fish. Oh, I'm not exactly sore on the Gold-Beater—he did no worse than a million others, but it's all wrong, Ben," he emphasized, turning his eyes upon me. 107

I preferred not to take him seriously.

"Hiram, there's a store on the corner where we can get a soap box, and I'll try to arrange with the police for a place in the square——"

"Oh, I see you are like the rest of them; your head is like a cocoanut—a shell that you have to open with a hatchet; then some soft, indigestible stuff, and real brains no more than the milk space inside. Come on, let's get some food," he sneered, grabbing me by the arm, and fairly rushing me out on the street. 108

He spent most of the evening talking about Anna Bell Morgan and his plans. Like every man in love, he gave me a poor idea of her—but I inferred she was about twenty-two, and from my distant view of her I knew she did not run to flesh. I was ready to give her a high mark on that score.

"Suppose you'll marry her at once?" said I, arching my brows knowingly.

"Oh, no; not yet; she says I must make good before she will marry me," he replied in answer to my query, "and besides, she has plans. She wants to learn something, too. She is coming down to New Orleans to go to school—her father has promised her that for a long time. Perhaps that mule team going through the front of the store may delay things, but not long. Anna Bell has been helping with his books and knows a lot for one who has always been shut in."

The next evening when I heard him coming up the stairs four steps at a time I backed into a corner. When he felt that way I knew I would get a thump on my back equal to being kicked by an ox. 109

"Ben, you scoundrel, come out of there; I want to hit you. I've got it—I've got it this time right!" he began, reaching for me excitedly, and playful as a young lion. "I believe it's all your work—I'm promoted—I didn't get bounced; the big chief did the handsome thing—right here in New Orleans!" This was as coherent as he was able to make himself.

"Sit down, Hiram;—what is he going to give you?"

"Going to give me? I've already got it; been at work all day. Four tracks on the wharf. Got charge of all the perishable freight—meat incoming and fruit outgoing—office to myself on the dock. First thing I did was to wire Anna Bell—then went to it. Great job, Ben, and I'm going to like it. Got a new typewriter to replace the one I lost. Beats Quarrytown, and twice the money. Why don't you warm up and congratulate me?" he almost shouted, rising quickly from the chair and reaching for my shoulders again, but I dodged him.

"Already received a wire from Anna Bell," he continued. 110
"She's a great girl; the best ever. You sly old dog, you knew it was the box we were using for a stool; I can see it now, but do you know, I somehow feel sorry for Gus; he was just love-sick—he didn't know half the time what he was doing. He was not so much to blame, but Anna Bell wasn't to blame, either, for she never led him on."

"What did they do for him?" I interrupted, fearful that he would lose his breath entirely.

"I did all I could to save him, and they didn't fire him. They gave him another night station somewhere in the swamps. But say, I've got to step pretty lively to keep up with this job—however, it won't be so bad when I get things straightened out," he bubbled. At first I was afraid he had been drinking, but it was just Hiram Strong, Jr., finding himself.

I had something special on for that night, or I think he would have talked me to sleep. He made me promise to come around the next day and see his layout. As I left him, he began writing to Anna Bell, telling her all about everything.

When I saw him the next afternoon, he had on a hickory jumper and cap, and was bossing the final cleaning of a long, 111
roofed-over wharf, strewn with broken cases, trash and dirt—the accumulation of years.

As soon as he saw me he began to smile. He was full of energy, urging the negro laborers to take away the last load, so that he could leave on time. He pointed out how he had charge of the tracks on the wharf. The worst feature of the situation was that he had to be there at 4.30 a. m. with Government meat inspectors, to let the packing-house people have their meat early, but he was through about the middle of the afternoon, as soon as the north-bound fruit was loaded.

"That means you must get out about four in the morning?"

"Yes, but I don't mind that."

"Hiram, it is not so long ago that you did not think seriously of going to bed until that time."

"Yes, that's a fact—but," said he, sobering, "it seems an age and appears to me now like a nightmare. Say, do you want to make an investment?" he asked, changing the subject abruptly, and assuming the air of good-natured bargaining that seemed so natural with him.

"Yes, what is it?" 112

"There is a barrel of filings the agent told me to sell for junk. He says a foundry can use it to melt up. It's been kicking around here for years. It weighs seven hundred pounds net; give me a cent a pound and you can have it," said he, walking over to one side of the dock, a sort of warehouse, and giving an old dingy barrel, lying on its bilge, a shove with his foot.

Mechanically I did the same, and wondered why filings were packed in that kind of a barrel. I leaned over to examine it more closely, and noted the word "Filings" marked on each head. Then I suddenly recalled that very day I had been asked to look inside of a storage place nearby, the same being suspected of contraband operations, and this would offer a genuine excuse. I examined the barrel more closely. It was very strong, and old, scarred, mysterious. I planned to send it to a certain suspected warehouse, and later would go there to draw a sample, thereby gaining admittance without revealing my real mission.

"Will you deliver it, Hiram?"

"Yes, deliver anywhere you want; will put it on the back of that cart right now," he replied, with a bantering smile. 113

"All right; here is your money; give me a receipted bill as the railroad's agent," I said, walking around the barrel.

Hiram grabbed the money from my hand, and after a parting injunction to the laborers went to his little office in the corner. I gave the heavy barrel a shove with my foot and rolled it over. I wet my finger, pressed it close to the chimes on a slight sifting that might be sand, but when I brought my finger away it had turned black at the point of contact and violet at the edges where the contact was less firm.

I was examining it critically when Hiram returned with the change and a receipted bill. After giving the dray directions where to take the barrel, and saying that he would be there soon to get the warehouse receipt, Hiram intimated that he was through for the day.

"Wait until I change my clothes and I will go with you," he said, hurrying to the little office.

"You see, this is a great system," he began to explain enthusiastically, when he returned in his street attire. 114
"These tracks hold a train of refrigerator cars containing meat that comes in every morning on passenger trains. The packing-house agents get it out first thing in the morning while it is cool, for the early market. Then, you see, fruit steamers from Gulf and South American ports come alongside the wharf, load bananas, oranges, and so on, into the same cars. The refrigerator system keeps them cool in the summer and prevents freezing in the winter. Then they return north as special, fast, perishable. The packing-house centers at Memphis, Chicago, Kansas City, and Missouri and Mississippi River points get fresh fruit each twenty-four to thirty hours. The train has got to be out of here before three p. m., after which I'm through. Looks pretty nice when it's all cleaned up," he enthused, waving his arm about the wide dock about eight hundred feet long, paralleling the river, now swept and clean.

A refreshing breeze came from Algiers across the wonderful Mississippi, now literally jammed with ocean-going and river vessels.

"I imagine it is very interesting work, but will require great care and diligence," I suggested, as we walked out to Canal street and started uptown. 115

"Yes, but not so hard. The fruit is easy, but the meat comes in with three seals—a Government seal, the shippers' seal, and the railroad seal. Three of us open the cars. A Government inspector breaks the Government seal, I break our seal and the packing-house agent breaks their seal. Then the car is checked on the spot. You see, there is not much chance for error that way; besides, meat is all billed 'Shipper's weight and count,' but the freight agent—you know I am under the New Orleans freight agent—has cautioned me to be very careful. From the way he acts and talks I think my predecessor got into some kind of trouble, but no more trouble for your Uncle Dudley. What could be worse than sitting on a case of dynamite every day and scratching matches on it?"

We had now turned off Canal Street, and arrived at the warehouse where the barrel was sent. I was given a regular receipt, and we resumed our way uptown.

"Hiram, there's something else in that barrel—it's not iron filings; it's something that may be worth much more, and 116
now I'm going to take you in as a partner on it. Give me three-fifty, half what I paid, and we will go fifty-fifty," I said, with little apparent concern.

Hiram stopped still and looked at me keenly, then gave me the money.

"Ben, if you were to tell me to jump in the river I would, knowing I would get out and get something for it—after that

deal at Quarrytown. I started to say what Anna Bell said about you in connection——" He was abruptly interrupted by our meeting a man from the Department who wanted me at once, so I told Hiram I would see him later.

CHAPTER XII

THE next day I returned to the warehouse, and with great formality drew samples from both ends of the barrel into small manila envelopes and, as anticipated, this resulted in quite a talk with the owner of the place, whom I interrogated closely, for I wanted to learn just what kind of a business he was doing, although it seemed legitimate enough. The Department said it was worth seven dollars to get that information, and I intended to return Hiram's money.

The presumption was that some frugal machinist had saved his bench filings until he had a barrel full and sold it as junk. But how did it get there without an address marking?

The big interrogation point was up on everything at that time, owing to the acute stage of the war. Steel filings were not soluble and would not blacken my finger. The stuff looked more like rifle powder. I finally decided to mail a sample to a chemist in New York for analysis.

The whirligig of events took me out of New Orleans the next day to various Gulf ports and along the coast as far north as New York. In his first communication Hiram said he was doing fine, and the remainder of a six-page letter was a laudation of the charms of Anna Bell Morgan. There in New Orleans she was realizing her lifelong ambition, and taking a course, but he did not say what kind. Soon after I heard from him again and he hinted at trouble, but finished with a lengthy encomium of the Quarrytown young woman.

The third letter was unmistakably a storm signal, a cry for relief he was sure I could give were I there; not a wail, but a courageous man's request for suitable weapons with which to battle. "When did I expect to get back?" Directly or indirectly he asked this question several times in his communication, but did not mention Anna Bell Morgan, and by which token I concluded his trouble lay in that quarter. When we did meet again there was no mistaking his concern about his troubles, and his esteem of my ability to aid him.

Three months had worked a most remarkable change. There was no doubt that his buoyant optimism and sense of humor had received a shock. About his up-curving, laughing, clean-chiseled mouth had crept a curious drooping tendency. Fear, corroding, soul-destroying fear, had found a footing there. His eyes had retreated under a shelf and his black brows moved down, while his remarkably straight nose appeared more prominent; his upstanding, wavy raven hair evidenced neglect, and instead of a resounding whack on my back came the firm, sure, hearty grip of a man.

He would not let me look over my hat full of mail, much of which bore many redirections and additional post-office stamps. I had retained my room adjoining his while away, and it was there we were now seated.

"You know, Ben," he began, after leaning his chair back against the window sill—there was a sort of dogged intensity in the manner he raised both his feet to the corner of the table—"the general freight agent hinted at trouble down on the wharf when I went there. I didn't pay much attention because I knew I could do the work, and, being on the level, why should I care what had happened previously?

"Well, for a month or more everything went on splendidly. Then I became aware that my work was being scrutinized closely. I learned by accident that all my records were checked and double checked, which was altogether unusual. I seemed to be getting under a cloud, and the cloud kept getting darker all the time. The specials came nosing about,

first from the consigning packing houses, then the railroad and finally the Government inspectors from the Bureau of Animal Industry, under whose supervision all meat is shipped interstate. I paid no attention except to be more careful. If I did my work right, why should I care if the packing-house agents and meat inspectors that break the seals on the cars with me in the morning began looking at me as though I had horns and a forked tail concealed about me?

"I lived quietly—in fact I had to. When you get out at three-thirty in the morning, you've got to be in bed before nine; besides, the old life doesn't appeal to me any more. In fact, I experience loathing and actual nausea when I happen to think of it. And then, while my salary is pretty good now, I had no money to spend when trying to save every cent. It is 121
true that for a long time I had my dinners with Anna Bell—you know she is here—but lately I don't even do that.

"Now the losses run up into the thousands—and—and I am suspected—suspected of being a thief, Ben——"

"How do you know you are?" I asked abruptly.

"Well, after a lot of this mysterious stuff, the agent, Mr. Powell—who appears to be a pretty nice fellow—came over to my office and let it out. He said he believed in me and had decided to tell me, but I think it was just a smooth plan to trap me—to make me the goat. I was shy and chary of him, and am yet.

"He told me that since I came the meat cars were checking up short, and in one instance fresh hams were short ten or fifteen tons, and the packing-house people, the Government, and the road's inspectors, who have been working on it for months, were stumped.

"No, he didn't accuse me—he asked me to see if I couldn't help find some clew to the crimes. But, Ben, maybe you can't 122
quite see how much alone I feel. You were away, I don't see Anna Bell any more, and I haven't a soul to talk with about it."

"Where is Anna—Miss Morgan—now?"

"Oh, she's right here, and that is the devil of it. I was getting along fine and so was she, and she promised, after she got a little further advanced and I had saved a little money on which to start, we were to be married. But, after this infernal thing came up, I not only stopped all plans, but quit going to see her. I made up my mind not to go near her as long as I was suspected of being a thief."

"Maybe you are going too far—are you sure she could not ——"

"This is no youthful escapade, to make young women smile and older ones nudge each other and the Gold-Beater pull his check book with a half hearted protest. This is a felony, a penitentiary offense. I may be railroaded up against bars and perhaps stripes.

"Anna Bell Morgan is as pure as she is beautiful, and if I don't get out of this clean, I love her so much that I don't want it known that she ever knew me. It would be the act of 123
a dog, and a downright coward—and, I am not a coward." He ended by glaring at me with burning eyes, as though I might have been the author of his troubles.

"But, Hiram—it may be you are somewhat morbid, and magnify the gravity of the matter—there is always a way out for clean hands—pinch and kick yourself into a normal condition and answer a few questions as though it were another man's trouble."

"Well, I will admit at the sight of you I do feel better," he said, still keeping his feet almost as high as his head, on the corner of my table. "I am on the rack—go ahead with your third degree stuff," he said, with a trace of a smile as though daring me, and pulling out a plebeian pipe, began filling it.

"When did you see Miss Morgan last?"

"Five weeks ago to-morrow."

"Have you written or telephoned?"

"Neither, I tell you——"

"All right," I said, raising my hand in tolerant good humor; "you feel certain there were shortages before your time on the wharf?"

"Yes, I know it—that's why my predecessor lost his job." 124

"But you don't know just what has been done?" I asked, idly fingering my mail before me.

"No, I don't; but Mr. Powell, the agent, said the packing-house and railroad specials were at a standstill, and the government was so short of men they could not do anything just now. He also said that he had personally asked the local office of the Department of Justice to take it up, and while it was something outside of their line, they promised to coöperate as soon as they had men available. Hang it!" he exclaimed, passing his fingers through his hair, "it ought not to be so hard to smoke 'em out."

"Hiram, I will see what can be done to-morrow. In the meantime lose that 'going-to-hell-sure' long face, and cheer up. I've been living at Barns & Sheds for three months, taking Greek insolence and grease at Greek restaurants until I feel polluted inside, and want one of those——"

"Real porterhouse steaks," he interrupted, laughing as though they had become only a memory.

"Give me a few moments to glance over this mail before we go—here, this ought to interest you, Hiram," I said, discovering one from the chemist to whom I had sent a sample from our partnership barrel in storage. 125

"Why—how?" he asked, looking sharp as though expecting a joke.

I tore open the letter, first noticing it was nearly three months old. The chemist had replied promptly. I read aloud:

> "Your sample suffered a little in the mail and is too small. Will you oblige me by forwarding a larger one by parcel post? If my guess is right, the market is particularly bare of this class of goods, and I can assure a prompt sale at fancy prices."

"You mean that old barrel of junk—those filings you made me pay three-fifty for a half interest in your foolishness?" he asked, with an incredulous smile.

"Hiram," I began jestingly, "that barrel will make us rich some day; but seriously, I do know it is not castings nor junk. However, this letter is now three months old, and perhaps our best chance has gone."

That night I wired a certain person a code message to the effect that I was willing to handle the New Orleans case. It was either that or some day I'd miss being made best man at Anna Bell's wedding. 126

CHAPTER XIII 127

THERE was little trouble getting the assignment; in fact, the authorities were glad some one was willing to tackle the case, for it had become a nightmare and a stench, but it was a case of "don't begin unless you can finish it." Others had given it up, perhaps because of the press of other work. I was amply warned that it was a hard nut to crack, and I had a fair chance of making a failure of it. Yes, the railroad and packing-house people would coöperate and do all they could. I was told to go over and see Mr. Powell, the New Orleans agent, who all but went crazy over it, and work out a plan with him.

Before night I was on the payroll of the Yazoo, with a private

office and a sub-title of some sort under the auditor, having decided to begin on the perishable freight records, or rather it was necessary for me to have them under my hand, as they were set down each day, though with little confidence that they would yield results.

"I don't know what kind of a clerk I can give you, for the whole system is short of help, but I will do the best I can," Mr. Powell assured me, placing at my disposal the voluminous reports on the cases settled, and those that were still pending, unsettled, with the shippers.

There was hardly room for the female clerk and myself to move about in the room after the perishable records were all in there—big volumes of yellow tissue made it look like a storehouse, though they only extended back to the time of the first loss.

In addition to this arrangement it was generally given out that the night business on the wharf tracks had been so largely increased by the heavy movement of fruit that an extra man was to be put on to work opposite Hiram, who went on at four a. m., and came off at three p. m. As the general office was uptown, more than a mile from the dock tracks, it was unlikely that I would be noticed working in the dual capacity of night clerk on the wharf and something or other under the auditor in the general offices. But in this we soon found we had miscalculated.

When Hiram learned the arrangement he was jubilant. In an incredibly short time he had come to look on my capacity to clear up a mystery as unlimited. The joy of anticipation supplanted fear, but he did not fully recover his old, buoyant, optimistic self.

He never mentioned Anna Bell Morgan, but I was sure he thought of her about all the time he was not busy.

"Ben," he began one night, laughing, "did you send your friend in New York another sample of those steel filings on which we are paying storage? I believe you will soon graduate into the 'Prince of conmen,' or a second-story worker. I tell you it takes a pretty good man to stop me in the middle of the street and subtract three-fifty from my jeans for a half-interest in a barrel of junk."

"No, not yet, but I expect to soon."

But after I had been working in the dual rôle of wharf night clerk and assistant auditor for a week and nothing happened, he began to get uneasy, but somehow did not doubt the final outcome.

We usually ate dinner together, then we would come down to his little office in the corner of the wharf and he would stay with me until his early bed-time.

"How long are you going to stand this night-and-day business? I don't see when you get any sleep?" he asked, evidently edging over for some information, not volunteered.

"One doesn't need much sleep on a loafing job like this. You see, there is little to do here nights, and less in the day time, so I manage pretty well." I had told him little about my office work.

"Why can't I stay here every other night for you, so that you can get more sleep? I can stand it."

"I don't look as though I was getting thin, do I? By the way, who is that fat party I notice about here occasionally, who seems to be interested in loading for Becker & Co.?"

"You mean that fellow whose face looks like over-ripe cow's liver, and waddles, and whose clothes are smelly?"

"Yes, I think that is the man," I replied, smiling.

"That is Becker himself. He buys all the rejects of the city's provision inspectors and almost anything that's got grease or fertilizer in it. He used to load that stuff during the day, but they got to making a fuss about his taking it through the street and made him handle it at night, when graveyards hold their noses. Gad, I always hate to see him coming."

"Becker & Co., fertilizer works?"

"Yes, somewhere up the river."

The next morning I was late and was hurrying into the building occupied by the auditor, in which I had my office. It contained more than four stories, was about two hundred feet long, with a wide hall through the center of each floor. The room assigned to me was on the third floor, and was reached by narrow stairs.

When I passed the second floor I saw Becker at the far end of the hall talking to a young woman clerk, and I was sure I saw him pinch her cheek, and furthermore, I was absolutely certain that the object of his frolicsome caress was my clerk, who entered the office immediately after me. She appeared to be somewhat flustered, and her cheeks flamed with color.

The incident was not particularly significant, but enough to make me want to know all about Mr. Becker, of Becker & Co., fertilizer manufacturers, and also about the young woman who compiled my data and wrote my letters. 132

I recalled that our association had been so perfunctory that I failed to remember her name. She took dictation well, was a good typist and her records were neat. Withal she worked hard. Like good oil on bearings, she made the wheels go round without attracting my attention.

Ideal office assistants try to make themselves into humanized machines. Miss Bascom had accomplished this so well that I had to inquire about her name even after a week's service.

My desk was near the hall entrance, while hers was over near the window, partially obscured by stacks of records. She was, on closer inspection, more than comely, and the way she punched the keys of the typewriter indicated she was purposeful—not an accident. That she could allow a greasy, uncouth man like Becker to make up to her seemed absurd. More to amuse Hiram, I mentioned the matter to him that night.

"My Heavens," said he, holding his nose between finger and thumb, "it would take a pretty strong stomach to stand for that fellow—but you can't tell! Maybe there are enough dollar signs on his face to make up for his smelly clothes and age. But, even in my palmiest days of riot, the 'beauty and beast' idea was a shock—too much 'bargain and sale' to suit me"—and I believe he was wondering if Anna Bell Morgan would ever succumb to such a love for the sake of money. 133

"Hiram, I don't quite sympathize with your attitude toward Miss Morgan. Are you sure you are doing the right thing?"

"Perhaps not," he replied, thoughtfully, as we walked down the wharf. "It may be the pendulum has swung the other way and I am at the farthest point away from her. But after all, that is something one must settle for himself. She promised to wait in absolute silence until I had the matter straightened. And again, perhaps you don't understand—they have a different code here."

I waited for him to continue, looking westward across the shipping in the river at the setting sun, now enlarged into a great ball of dull red fire. Another moment and it would perish from sight behind the waters of the Gulf.

"You see, Ben, down here they have a way of making a man feel he is either something or nothing. If something, he respects women, and must protect them. Women are either good or bad. If good they receive every consideration; it is expected—demanded. The ways of New York would not be tolerated here, and it is perfectly right they should not be. 134

"Mormonism, and other degeneracy, usually dubbed 'Bohemianism,' doesn't go here. Fathers, big brothers, or next of male kin stand guard for the women of the South. When they put a bullet through a licentious scoundrel the judge shakes hands with them. And it's the same way about honor. If a man's honesty is in question he has no business to compromise a good woman's name by forcing his attentions

upon her. When he has cleared himself it is time enough to straighten things out. So, if our love will not stand the strain of waiting it's no good—not love, at all."

The next day at the noon hour I saw my female clerk in a certain situation that led me into all sorts of information. Miss Bascom of the golden locks was openly dangling her feminine charms before Chief Clerk Burrell. 135

I had only to glance through an open door from the hall on my floor into a long room occupied by a lot of clerks of which he had charge as chief. Evidently he was a married man, and of a species easily susceptible.

I would have continued to think it was a case of old-fashioned man hunting to win free board and a little credit at the stores, had it not been reported by a man detailed at my request to see just what kind of smoke Mr. Becker was making during his stay in New Orleans. There was a lengthy conference that night between Burrell and Becker, of Becker & Company, with liberal quantities of gin fizz on the side, in a private room back of a prominent hotel bar.

This was exceedingly interesting and filled with possibilities —a party of three, two men and a woman, an unusually attractive young woman at that, and all were interested in the movement of freight, with this difference, that Becker might be the chief beneficiary, and both men might be rising to the lure of beauty.

I spent most of that night looking up the antecedents of this interesting trio and did not go down to the wharf, but went to bed just before Hiram arose to go to work. Burrell, I found, lived with his wife and two children and was inclined to be sporty; Becker was a rounder, and the girl was just a clerk before she came to me. 136

I heard Hiram leaving the house and had not been sleeping long before a messenger came from him, requesting me to hurry down to the wharf. I had asked him to send for me the instant the next irregularity was observed.

He was very much excited when I got there, as were also the Government meat inspector and the packing-house representative. The three of them, together as usual, had broken the seals of a Kansas City car of fresh sausages in ten-pound cartons, and about half of it, from the center of the car, was gone. This could be seen at a glance.

The four of us went into Hiram's little office at the corner of the wharf. He was so furious that he had become stoical, even sullen, which was promptly misunderstood by the Government inspector and the packing-house agent as proof of guilt. In order to protect him and get a full expression from them I took the attitude of favoring their view. He did not quite understand this and felt it keenly. 137

Each of them was ready, like dogs held in leash, to spring at his throat. But it might have been a sorry leap: Hiram was magnificent under such fire. Surely the Gold-Beater had given him good blood and a fighting spirit if nothing else.

"Strong," I began, in a somewhat authoritative manner, "have you preserved the railroad's seal that was on this car?"

"Yes—here it is—I have been saving and marking every one."

Then it developed that the Government inspector and the packing-house agent had been doing the same thing, and all three were handed to me. After that, at my suggestion, we went out and removed the seals from the unopened door on the other side of the car, which I took charge of after they had been carefully marked. I then suggested they go about their duties and routine as though nothing had happened.

I had decided on a secret, drastic inquisition. The ax must fall now and cut where it would, the details of which shall be avoided, only so far as they concern this son of a man who was given the credit of beating gold—who owned the gold instead of it owning him. 138

I could still feel Hiram's flesh quiver under my touch when I tried to assure him, by a pressure on his arm, as I was

leaving.

Notwithstanding the fact that it was four o'clock in the morning, I began the job by summoning by telephone the rotund and hairless Superintendent Kitchell from his bed, and reminding him of his promise to help me at any time. Besides, this was his funeral anyhow, that was to be held at ten o'clock that morning in Hiram's little office on the wharf.

I then demanded the presence of every man who had handled that car—the loaders, the icers, weighmasters, conductors, dispatchers and the yard-men between Kansas City and New Orleans, something over a thousand miles of road. Those who could not be there in so short a time must telegraph a transcript of their records, in affidavit form. The sworn records were finally decided on as the only thing possible in so short a time. 139

"I will come down to the general office and start the necessary machinery, but the time, less than six hours, is too short—it can't be done," he said, evidently lashing himself out of the drowse and comprehending the magnitude of the order.

"The iron is hot and now is the time to strike," I warned.

"All right, we will do the best we can. I'll get the agent and be there anyhow."

"No; that's just what I don't want. This investigation must not attract attention. Your presence there would only advertise it. After we are through you can have all the data, and do as you wish," I insisted, having in mind to assume an attitude that would allow Hiram to work out his own salvation if possible. The only way is to expose a weak or yellow spot, so that he would see it for himself.

Superintendent Kitchell again demonstrated that he was not an accident. Before ten o'clock that morning he had accomplished almost the impossible. The wire that Hiram worked for a while was soon hot with sworn statements from every man who had anything to do with that car, from its loading until it landed on the wharf. It remained for Hiram, the Agent of the Bureau of Animal Industry, and the local packing-house agent to open the car. 140

I glanced over the mass of stuff before handing it to Hiram.

The shipping clerk of the packing-house swore that there was put in the car six thousand cartons, each ten pounds net weight, of prime loose sausages. This was verified by the affidavit of a checker, then a second and third checker, before the doors were sealed by agents of the Government, packing-house and railroad agents. The railroad weighmaster's figures on the track scale verified that. It was loaded and iced in zero weather, so that no delay was necessary for re-icing all the way to New Orleans.

A verified transcript of train sheets of all the train dispatchers of both roads showed that the car came in a solid train of perishable provisions, over the Kansas City, Fort Scott & Gulf Railroad to Memphis, without longer pause than to change engines at the end of each division, where it was delivered to the Yazoo and weighed again—which weight tallied with the Kansas City weight—and traveled into New Orleans on passenger time. All this without incident or delay of any kind, and delivered on the unloading wharf track at 2:30 a. m. 141

When I took the records to Hiram and told him what they were, I found him going about his work as usual. His attitude was disconcerting. Were his hands clean? One could have taken him for a man who had been caught with the goods. If guilty, I had little chance to shield him.

He carried his head erect, his stride was sure and determined, but he had a glitter that indicated a tumult inside, with an attitude of suspicious aloofness. The erstwhile mirthful smile on his lips was now supplanted by one of sarcastic severity, but a smile that evidently meant much. I would have given the world just then to know what.

However, all he would say was: "Ben, this is a devil of a mess and I am in the center of it."

CHAPTER XIV

142

AFTER leaving the sworn records with Hiram I started for my temporary offices uptown. I wanted him to have time to thoroughly digest them.

At that time we had not been at war long and the public mind of New Orleans was in a very excited condition. The big interrogation point was raised on every person whose acts did not bear instant analysis. Pacifists and enemy aliens were promptly and vigorously coerced into outward decency at least. No trifling was permitted.

These continued thefts from the railroad might mean much more than a risky enterprise for profit. I was given to understand that while time enough would be allowed, definite results were expected soon.

When I reached my office, my clerk, Miss Bascom, seemed to be expecting me. Her greeting, though intended to be casual, was so gladsome I wondered if she was trying to practice on me the same brand of coquetry she used on the chief clerk—Burrell—or was it to be a wheedling process? 143
Surely I was justified in expecting something and I awaited the onset with great interest, convinced that she was playing a rôle. One of Miss Bascom's duties was to prepare for me each day a record of every car that arrived on Hiram's wharf or departed therefrom.

The first sheets of outbound records of the day were of cars from Becker & Co. to Becker & Co., Becker's Landing, Louisiana, and the time of departure was marked 3:30. I began to wonder if it was purely accidental that they were on the top; then came an exciting moment when I recalled that a car of sausages arrived at 2:30. But the insuperable difficulty of making the transfer, replacing the seals, and the like, reassured me.

I gave Miss Bascom the two slips and requested her to get me a memo of the contents of those two cars. As she went about the errand I wondered how such a refined looking young woman could ally herself with that carcass of rancid tallow whose very clothing emitted an odor which advertised his business.

Miss Bascom returned in a few moments and laid the two 144
slips before me without comment, hesitating at the end of my desk, indicating interest and willingness to be of further assistance. On the bottom of each slip was delicately penciled "Soap Grease." I knew that plebeian soap grease was worth more than prime lard had been a short time ago, but why the precaution of shipping in refrigerator cars?

"Do you happen to know this shipper—Becker & Co.?" I decided to venture, uncertain whether Miss Bascom knew I had seen them together in the hall.

Miss Bascom backed to the end of my desk and laid a very pretty elbow on top, the better to display her figure—palpable acting, so it seemed to me. Her speech had a Southern accent which lends itself to dissimulation. "Yes," she replied, "he is an important patron of the road, and is about the office considerably. Everybody knows him." She did not meet my eye, but looked at the door leading to the hall expectantly. At that moment a boy burst into the room wholly unannounced, laid a telegram addressed to me on my desk, and was gone as quickly as he came.

"I wonder why they ship that kind of freight in refrigerator 145
cars—the rate is much higher," I said, shoving the telegram back unopened.

"I think I heard him tell Mr. Burrell one day he could afford to pay extra in order to receive his freight the same day,"

she replied with a naïveté difficult to simulate.

"Miss Bascom, stop the work you are now on and prepare an abstract from these records of all freight sent by refrigerator cars to Becker & Co. during the last twelve months," I requested after weighing the chance that she might be working with Becker and Chief Clerk Burrell and the disadvantage of their knowing through her that an investigation was proceeding along those lines.

Miss Bascom seemed unwilling to think the interview ended or perhaps was disappointed it had yielded so little, but finally removed her elbow, and, nonplussed, passed her small white hand over her eyes and hair, so unusually bronze that one might suspect that it was "chemically pure." As she slowly passed behind me to her desk she half murmured to herself, "I wish I were a man."

"I suppose you would be wearing a soldier's uniform if you were," said I, assuming a semi-preoccupied attitude. 146

"That's on the basis that a uniform makes a dull person look intelligent," she rejoined, looking seriously out of the window over her desk.

I was reading my telegram and was too much astonished at its contents to reply. It was from the chemist in New York to whom I had sent a larger sample from the partnership barrel Hiram and I had in storage.

CHAPTER XV 147

THE dispatch was very interesting indeed. I was about to go down and show the telegram to Hiram, the contents of which would astonish him more than it did me, at least cheer him up a bit, but when I reached the street something happened to intensify my interest in Becker & Co. I ran into a man I very much wanted to talk with.

"Taylor, you are just the man I want to see," said he. "Come to lunch with me." It was the chief's assistant who grabbed me by the arm and led me into a nearby restaurant.

"I have just left the chief," the assistant continued, after we had seated ourselves, "and he has given me a hard nut to crack; complaints have piled up from wholesale and retail dealers that bad meat, hams and lard—even horse-meat—have appeared in this market, which bear the genuine stamps and tags of the Bureau of Animal Industry, and it has started a devil of a row," he whispered across the table. "You are still working on that car robbery case, and I thought you might pick up something for me. Who is Becker & Co.?" He ended by asking this question so suddenly that I could scarcely conceal my astonishment. 148

"I know there is a concern by that name, with a plant up the river somewhere. They are quite heavy shippers," I replied easily.

"You can get the freight records and perhaps give me a line on their operations, can't you?"

I knew then that Becker & Co. had been mentioned in some of the complaints. Before parting I promised to have some information for him by the next morning.

I spent the rest of the afternoon obtaining commercial reports on them and making arrangements to have their mail censored, and I did not reach my room until dinner time.

The door was open as usual between our rooms. Glancing into the other room, I saw Hiram lying on his bed asleep, which was something unusual for him, and there was something about his color that drew my attention at once. He did not stir when I came alongside the bed.

He was lying on his back with his head comfortably pillowed and his arms relaxed at his sides like a corpse. His face was bloodless, and his high, wavy black hair intensified by the 149

white pillow. It reminded me of the time I saw him in the hospital at Hampton, Virginia, after his fearful experience in firing on the steamer; but his body had now filled out and was even athletic.

He was either very tired or—or had he lapsed into drink again—or was it drugs?

Though usually a light sleeper, my touch on his wrist did not arouse him; his pulse was regular, and bending low, I could not detect the fumes of liquor. No, Hiram Strong, Jr., was just tired out—worried into fatigue that called for sleep. He was going through the fire that either refines or destroys. Would he stand it? That was my anxiety as I returned to my room to prepare for dinner.

"Ben, is that you?" he called presently in a sleepy voice.

For answer I came to the door, wiping my hands and looking interested.

"I fell asleep waiting for you to come, Ben. I want to tell you that I acted the damned cad this morning." Then coming over, he put two strong hands on my shoulders and looked straight at me with clear eyes. 150

"Ben," he continued, as though suddenly realizing he was taking himself too seriously, "I know you are on the square with me, I know you are doing everything you can for me, but your movements are maddeningly deliberate. You act as though you were an old-stager at the game and was going sure. But I feel like I was bound hand and foot with these fellows darting javelins into my skin every time they look at me; and you know I can't see Anna Bell Morgan until——" He dropped his hands from my shoulders and looked out of the window. "Perhaps I am expecting too much—you cleaned up that Quarryville matter so——"

"But, Hiram, this is a big matter, reaching God only knows how far. It involves a number of men, clever in crookedness, and perhaps women. There's more to it than a bone-headed, love-sick German and a case of dynamite. The amounts involved are big, and it must move slowly. I know how you feel, but you've got to grin and bear it. But about Anna Bell Morgan, I think you are foolish. If she is the kind of girl you should marry she would want very much to stand by you. But 151
if you adopt a drastic code of your own and insist on living up to it, how can she or any one help you in that respect?"

"Ben," he began deliberately, after taking a chair and cocking himself back against the window-sill, "I know that Anna Bell Morgan wants to help me. I am nursing the delusion, perhaps, that she would give one of her hands—make any sacrifice—but I don't believe a real man, under similar circumstances, would bid for help from the woman whom he really loves. If this thought proves a delusion I must stand it somehow, but I don't believe I will ever have faith in a woman again. I am beginning to see things differently now. I can see more and more why the Gold-Beater was given that name by friend and enemy. He fought fair and in the open and took punishment without a whimper. Ben, he made a mistake with me, but he gave me a decent sense of honor, and lately I realize he has given me a good-sized body that will stand real punishment. No, sir, my 'drastic code,' as you call it, has got to go. And now, with that out of my system, I am going to give you a real shock."

Then, with exasperating deliberation, he lighted his pipe, 152
drew his feet up on the lower front rungs of his chair, meanwhile watching me as I walked back and forth before him intensely interested.

"I am going to quit the railroad and——"

"No, you are not—not now——" I warned. But he interrupted me as I paused in front of him, pointing a finger at him, and I soon saw that I might as well have raised my arm to stay the flood of Niagara.

"I expected you to protest until——"

"But they will think——"

"I don't care a damn what they think now. I've got to do it and you've got to help me," he said with set jaw.

"But just now that would be suicide——"

"No—not after I explain—I don't intend to run away—I am going to stay right here the remainder of my life if necessary and clear this thing up; I've got to. But I can't do it working all day until I'm woozy. Now, you have got to help me."

"But I think you are hasty——"

"You won't think so after I have stated my case. I am going to constitute you the court, attorney for the prosecution and defense, and the jury; in fact, give you all constitutional 153
rights except my right of appeal; that will enable a quick decision and that's what I'm after right now—before we go to dinner," he ended with his wonderfully contagious smile that seemed impossible only a few minutes ago.

He continued to sit cocked back in his chair against the window-sill with his legs drawn up so his feet rested on the lower rungs, blowing smoke at me, as I paced back and forth before him across the room.

"Well—go ahead," I said finally.

"First let me tell you why you've got to help me. You have the know-how and more general experience, and can do it. I take it you are 'in right' in New Orleans. You can help me when you are helping yourself. I believe in you thoroughly—except—except perhaps when you go off on a little tangent, like you did when you put that barrel of iron filings in storage, and made me pay half——" He hesitated, smiling broadly. I did not reply, and he continued, "but even that has its advantages, because it makes me smile whenever I think of it and that's worth something. And that brings me to the second reason why you must help me. There is something 154
about your long nose that seems to smell out things pretty well, your general attitude toward me and everything, that awakens a sense of humor. If they put me in jail, and you come to see me, I believe I could see the humorous side of that, even. Now do you understand?" he asked, relieved and confident.

"I am waiting to hear why you propose to resign," I insisted, ignoring his complimentary terms as directed toward me.

"I'll make that short enough—as long as I stay at work there I don't have time or ginger to do anything else. I believe that Becker is the head of the stealing—I have got several tips lately and I believe he's the man. Several train-men, who learned I was in trouble, informed me that his place up the river is queer. In ordinary water it is an island, between the track and the river, the switch running to it over piles, and several times when they rode cars into his unloading doors they have seen things they believe will bear investigation. But it's going to be hard to get into the old fox's place. He receives by rail from here and the north, too, but ships out everything by an old boat on the river."

"Now"—hesitated Hiram shrewdly—"that car of sausage that 155
was short the other night sat on track One—exactly opposite two cars that were loaded for him on track Two. The space between cars on those two tracks is so narrow that I was nearly killed one day between them; the time between the arrival of the sausage car and the departure of his cars was only a little more than half an hour, but it was between 2:30 and 3:30 a. m., when no one was there, and I believe the transfer was made in that time—do you follow me?"

"Yes—go ahead. But what about the three seals being intact when you opened the car?"

"I knew you would ask that—but I believe, with help from those 'higher up,' and the seals could be had—stolen of course. There are two hard nuts to crack; one is the seals, and the other is to get into his place—and that's where you must help."

"Now here is another funny thing." Hiram hesitated to bring from his hip pocket an envelope. "Some one who knew my

full name sent this to me, care of the office," and he read from a typewritten slip of paper,

"Why does Becker & Co. get freight by rail and ship out only by water?" 156

I stopped in front of him and reached for the slip to examine it critically.

"Hiram—let me keep this?" It looked like railroad stationery.

"Yes—help yourself."

"Have you any plan to get into Becker & Co.'s plant?" I asked, recalling that I had not mentioned that I suspected them, and that this was the third definite lead in that direction.

"He is a foxy old rat and would take any ordinary bait off a trap and send it to you by mail. The only thing I can think of is a boat—maybe I didn't tell you it is a fertilizer plant and uses lots of dead animals. With a boat to take him some of this stock, one might finally get to carrying his river freight at a cut price and that would open the door wide."

"But boats that will carry even a little freight are scarce now."

"Yes, I know that—but we've got to have a boat. Buy it, build it, or dig one out of the mud somewhere."

"You have made out a pretty good case, Hiram. I will think it over—in the meantime this may interest you," I said, handing him the telegram I had received from the chemist. Though half fearing it a joke, he sprang from his chair and took it eagerly. 157

CHAPTER XVI 158

STANDING in the middle of the floor Hiram read the missive several times. He seemed amazed as well as incredulous. Finally, as he read it with evident desire to grasp its meaning thoroughly, his face lighted up with joy. "Bully stuff!" he exclaimed. Then he read it aloud:

> "The larger sample of color received. The market just now is particularly bare of this grade. Can get you unusual price of a dollar a pound. If satisfactory ship Morgan Line, send memo. of weight and will forward check at once.
>
> "MORGENSTEIN & BRUN."

"Then it's not steel filings—you never told me," he said finally, laughingly grasping my shoulders.

"You insisted it was filings, your railroad insisted it was junk, and you sold it for junk as instructed, so why the argument?"

"No argument at all, Ben; the Morgan Line steamer sails to-morrow. Sell the stuff and buy a boat. I've saved some money, but boats are scarce and high. I haven't enough—what d'ye say, eh?" 159

"You haven't found a boat to buy yet, and maybe you will not need one—besides, if Morgenstein & Brun offer a dollar a pound and are in a hurry, it may be worth more—I only asked them for an analysis to know for certain what it was. I didn't ask for a market," I insisted formally.

"But you may miss the only chance—and—we need the money. We've got to have a boat," he said, visibly disappointed.

"So far we are out less than a ten-dollar bill and can afford to take a chance—as I say, we must first decide definitely that a boat is necessary, and then the hardest part comes—everything from a row-boat up is working overtime now."

"Maybe you are right, but if it was up to me I would sell it so infernally quick it would make 'em dizzy," he replied,

manifestly consumed with the single idea of releasing himself from suspicion.

"Don't resign, Hiram," I said, hesitating, before going out of the room to dine, "until I have had a chance to speak to the Super to-morrow. I think I will be able to arrange it so that you can be released to devote all of your time to clearing up this matter and remain in the employ of the company. You will see the decided advantage of the plan, later."

"All right, Ben—but bear in mind that as soon as I get out of this I am going to quit 'em for good; there's something else for me to do in this town. The railroad game is too strenuous at best for the returns. It's good drill and I'm glad to get the experience and discipline, but the returns are a minus quantity."

During the meal he mentioned his father several times, to whom he always referred as "the Gold-Beater," but he more frequently mentioned Anna Bell Morgan. In fact, had I not purposely changed the subject he would have talked of her constantly. I could not tell him I thought it a great error for him to completely suspend communication with her. A big city offers enticements that a country-bred girl does not always understand at first. I could see he writhed under the stigma of being thought a member of a gang of crooks, and was most powerfully propelled by two most laudable motives. He wanted to redeem himself in his father's eyes, but most compelling was his desire to be able to go back to Anna Bell Morgan with clean hands. His affection for her was deep and sincere, a mighty thing to him, accounted for in his prominent, broad, round chin, but difficult to harmonize with his conduct during his first score of years.

He seemed to sense my perplexity.

"Ben," he began, with every evidence of chastened bigness, "I have been trying to discover one single good reason why I should impose my personal affairs on you, unless it is because you let me. So far, I have been unable to reciprocate in a single instance. I feel at times as though I am a great care and trial to you—a responsibility the Gold-Beater would assume if things were right. I feel as though I were on my way but with some one else at the wheel and compass, with a disturbing and perhaps ungrateful feeling that the navigator is on uncharted waters, and is himself in doubt. I think I must have a yellow streak up my back as broad as the moral law."

At this I chose to assume a lighter attitude. Scanning him smilingly, I replied, "Can't you see that just now, at least, my professional reputation is at stake?"

"That's so, Ben. You take to investigation as a duck to water and I believe you are much better suited for that than sea life. But, my dear fellow, you move so maddeningly slow and deliberate," said he; but I made no reply. I could have said:

"Real genius and cleverness apparently do move so slow and deliberate that most any one would feel as though he could do much better." But I merely laughed as we arose to leave the little French restaurant where we had dined.

There was no difficulty in arranging for Hiram's release and also for transportation good on any passenger, freight or work train of the entire system, in order to work out a solution of the robberies that had spread over the entire system from Kansas City and St. Louis to Chicago, where the consignments originated.

His first suggestion was that he should take a look at Becker & Co.'s plant, and he purposely boarded a train that had a car for delivery to them.

After he left I went to my office in the main building to find both an extended report and a short one from a man assigned to watch Becker's movements while in New Orleans, and as I began to read I could feel my hair rigidly standing on end.

My clerk, Miss Bascom, had met Becker in a private room,

known to but few, back of the bar of a prominent hotel. For the purpose of detecting enemy aliens many dictaphones had been installed by the Government in such places and with a certainty, almost uncanny, the Government possessed itself of information that could not have been gained in any other way.

As soon as I reached Miss Bascom's name in the report I stopped short and looked at her at work over by the window, less than twenty feet away. If she was conscious of my undisguised wonder she gave no sign of it. She worked so fast and dexterously as to give the impression that she fully lived up to the axiom promulgated by well governed corporations:

> "If you never do more than you are paid for, you will never get paid for more than you do."

As I looked upon her I decided that although Becker was exceedingly ambitious, his taste was discriminating, indeed. 164
Miss Bascom in a good light revealed a velvety skin and a neck, rising column-like from her plump chest and shoulders as though chiseled from rare white marble. A tiny ear peeped from under a plethora of wonderful hair, tastefully arranged, and I noticed that her nose, chin and lips were perfect. I wondered why I had overlooked these points of feminine charm when she first came to me. Seemingly oblivious to everything but the work she was doing, I wondered how she could maintain the attitude after such an affair as had occurred the night before. There was no evidence of fatigue or loss of sleep, or over-indulgence of any kind. I was astounded that a woman of her general charm could fall for the Becker type, and I shuddered at the knowledge that she had gone with him to such a place. My next thought was that she might have given out some very confidential information. There was but one thing to do, and at once—find out how she came to be sent to me.

I rushed through the several pages of close typing, then began again for detail and analysis.

She drank nothing intoxicating according to the report. His 165
brutal proposal, that came in due course, she met with astonishing diplomacy and succeeded in staving off time and place. But the details, recorded minutely, indicated that she was compelled to submit to his embrace. The record revealed that the young woman had exclaimed, "Don't—don't, Mr. Becker," indicating that the fossilized degenerate of fifty years was trying to caress her. It required little tax on the imagination to know that his big, greasy hands were drawing her tightly to his huge frame. Why had she laid herself liable to his advances? What kind of a game was she playing? I was on the point of calling her over and demanding an explanation, but there was the second report to analyze—concerning Burrell, the chief clerk. I decided to wait.

When Miss Bascom left Becker the night before at the side door of the hotel, he entered the lobby and joined Burrell in a pretty wet dinner, spending several hours thereafter at a questionable resort. Evidently Miss Bascom knew something of their whereabouts, for here she was standing at Burrell's 166
desk in close conversation with him, occasionally laughing as though recalling some ludicrous incident. There was nothing to do but await events. She was up to something and I determined I would lose no time in arriving at the facts.

CHAPTER XVII 167

When Hiram returned late that night he looked as disreputable as a bull dog that had been out all night in the rain and mud, defending his title as a neighborhood boss. He had evidenced some cleverness in preparing for such a trip, but when he got through he looked as though he had

overdone it. An unbecoming cap of Bolshevik origin, nine cents pre-war push-cart cost, flannel shirt, open at the neck, and covered with mud from head to foot, he reminded me of a smuggler or bootlegger who had taken to the swamps to avoid capture. But his enthusiasm seemed to blind him to his appearance and to the fact that he had not eaten since morning.

"Well," he began, "I believe I am right—not so much on account of what I saw to-day, but of what I didn't see."

"Yep," said I. "Go on with it."

"Their plant is on an island except at very low stages of the river and then it's swamp on one side. It is a big place but mostly one-story. Their switch, of course, is on a trestle built by them, and some one has to come out and unlock a high gate before a car can be set in. The man at the gate stated that they do this so that there will always be a man there to warn the train crew that the trestle is not strong enough to support the engine." He looked at me somewhat knowingly while filling his pipe. 168

"Well, I went inside on the car we had for them and saw all there was to see—which wasn't much. Their black help live in cabins on the island. Becker is building a big addition—the car we set in contained cement for that purpose, presumably. All of the train-men believe that the place is phony.

"We saw a packet coming down the river and the train boy slowed up a trifle to let me off near a landing, but I made a bad jump, rolled over twice in soft mud and came out like a cray-fish, but I made the packet coming to town and just arrived."

"Fine, go on," I encouraged.

"The fertilizer plant shows nothing from the river but a floating wharf. On the way down we passed Becker's boat going up. It isn't much of a craft, and the packet captain said it wouldn't carry five tons and has hardly power enough to beat the five-mile current of the river, even when empty. A boat, Ben!—a boat is all we need to catch that fellow, and he's the boy we're after. If some one would offer to carry all the material he will need for that new construction he will fall for it—and say, I believe I am on track of one." 169

"But you are not sure of anything yet."

"Yes—I am sure they got the two refrigerator cars that sat alongside the car that was robbed of fifteen tons of sausage, and that they use anything that contains grease. Of that I am as certain as any one can be without being able to prove it, and we've got to get him, and we can't get him until we get inside of the plant," he insisted, his jaws coming together with a snap.

"He has a regular castle—moat and all," Hiram continued, "and we can't storm it. His people are all black and speak only Creole."

"What about this boat you are on track of—but wait, Hiram, don't you want something to eat?"

"Yes, I'm hungry as a wolf. I've seen the time I would give ten dollars for the appetite I now have—but wait till I tell you about the boat. For some time past there has been an old fellow coming down to the wharf to pick up bananas, those that break from the bunches when they come out of a ship on the carriers. After a while I noticed that he talked good English, Creole, Spanish, French, in fact he seemed to be able to talk with almost any of the rats that work on the fruit steamers. After I had talked with him I asked what he did with the bananas. He said he kept them until ripe and ate them. Later he told me he lived on a boat as caretaker and had not seen his boss lately. Evidently he has run out of money. He hinted that if he could get his back wages he did not care what became of the boat. I saw him again to-day and he says he has starved long enough, and I am going to see the boat in the morning. It is not in the river, but is in 170

the canal just above the Yazoo station. And say, I've got another scheme to make all the money we want after this matter is settled," said he, coming to his feet as though unloosed by a steel spring.

"What is it, Hiram?" I asked, amused.

"Wait until I clean up a bit. Then I want you to come out with me and watch a real hungry man eat. I have a long story, 171
and a good scheme. Your blood will be on my hands if you say it isn't. How much is a thousand feet of lumber?" he called to me through the communicating door, just after I heard his wet, muddy shoes go down like a cord of wood on the floor.

"A thousand feet of lumber is a thousand square feet an inch thick. In boards a foot wide and an inch thick they would reach a thousand feet," I explained.

"That's what I thought, but I can't recall ever having been told."

After seating ourselves in the restaurant, Hiram, his mind filled with many notions, began to talk.

"I never see a cargo of lumber go by that I don't think of it as something immensely valuable. I don't understand it, unless —well—of course, I can't figure out who is to blame, but do you realize I actually don't know what business my—I mean the Gold-Beater—is in? I never knew whether he ran a pawn-shop, a gambling-house, or a real business; my knowledge of his activities is limited to a vague impression I have, an indistinct memory of hearing him talk one night at our house with some man—and he was some man, too, if the Gold- 172
Beater brought him home—about stumpage, stump land and market conditions. I don't recall much, for then I was about as much interested in it as I would now be in a divinity student's theory on Heaven and the other place.

"I don't know whether it's in my blood, but anyhow, a nice, newly sawed, clean board of timber looks better to me than anything—except a certain girl. I figured it out to-day, that she is the only one I don't want to disgrace. The Gold-Beater has nothing better coming to him—if I have to go to jail in the clean-up of this gang——"

"Come to the point, Hiram. You're wandering all around Robin Hood's barn," said I laughingly.

"I know I'm long-winded, Ben, but I've got to speak my prologue, or you won't understand. You know I have stood on the dock day after day and have seen the river carry down big trees and big logs, some real saw-logs, some days lots of them, and to-day, up the river, I saw a great many floating along down stream. Some of the bayous are full of them. There's a mass of logs in that moat back of Becker's smell factory."

"Well,—what is the answer?" I asked languidly. 173

"Here's what I propose: Arrest these fugitive logs, cut 'em into lumber and put 'em to work. I saw logs up the river that will make a thousand feet of lumber and they tell me even rough lumber is worth fifty dollars a thousand. It won't take many of them to amount to the hundred and twenty-five dollars per that I'm pulling down monthly from the railroad—eh? You know, just as soon as I get out of this I'm going to marry, and——"

"But they tell me those logs have been in the water so long they are dead sea fruit, rotten in the center?" I interposed.

"I noticed that in some of them, but many are first class—you watch me after I get out. Do you know, I feel sure this river is going to make me some money. I'm going to be out to-night, down on the wharf. The packet men say that Becker's old tub, the one we met going up this afternoon,—called the *Turgia*—and she is well named—goes up there every afternoon and brings down a load in the night. I've got to find out where she lands and what she brings down. I forgot to tell you he gets dead animals from the city, in barges, and 174
has to hire a tug to take them up. A good chance for a deal

there, if we have a boat big enough to do his work, don't you think so?" he asked, pausing from his food.

"He seems to have an eye for bargains—why not in towing?" I agreed, much impressed with his determination, amounting to a mania.

"Now, there is another thing, Ben. Suppose this old half-starved geezer's story is right, and they owe him a lot of wages, and the boat is something we can use, isn't there some quick, legal way in which we can get possession of it?"

"He would be classed as a seaman, with wages due, and I think there is a Federal statute to reach such a case quickly—I will find out, Hiram."

"Do that, Ben, and if I don't show up in the morning you will know I got knocked in the head by the water-front gang, but I'm going to see what Becker sends down here in the night, or die in the attempt."

CHAPTER XVIII

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I HAD to be up that night too, and I had not been in long before he arrived—just before daylight.

"Ben—Ben, awake, and get up! I've got it—I've got it—see here!" he persisted, holding a piece of cardboard before my eyes now dazzled by the sudden light. "Do you know what that is?" he roared, standing on tiptoes while I gazed at it. He was more energetic and enthusiastic than the night before, although he had not been to bed. His eyes appeared to be a bit bloodshot.

Raising up in bed, I took the piece of cardboard and sat blinking at it when, all of a sudden, Hiram lost patience.

"Damn it, Ben, can't you see what it is?—that's a piece of a ten-pound sausage carton, and it came from Becker's place. Now then, we've got 'em," he said with suppressed voice. What he handed me was unquestionably a part of a folding box, one of the corner locks, and a part of the end on which there was tell-tale printing.

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"You see, this sausage that was stolen was in ten-pound boxes, and this is part of one of them," he insisted.

"Where did you get this, Hiram?" I finally managed to ask.

"I had to lie on one of the wharfs upstream until after midnight when Becker's *Turgid* came slipping down the current, like a thief, and I had to leg it hard to keep up with her. About a mile below she slid in alongside a Mexican, bound for Vera Cruz, unloaded a hundred and fifteen tubs of something—it went down on the manifest as lard, and I guess it was grease, anyhow. On her deck there still remained five bales of something. I wanted to know what it was. The *Turgia* then slid downstream to the Southern Pacific docks and unloaded there. They billed five bales of waste paper to New York. Yes, I got the name of the consignee—Cassinis & Cassinis, Water Street—but I wondered how Becker collected waste paper up there in that swamp and I didn't believe it was waste paper. It was covered with burlap and baled tight.

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"Do you see what this crafty old crook has done? He took the sausage out of the folding boxes, which he laid out flat, then baled them carefully and is shipping them to New York to get the best price and put such evidence clear out of the way. Well, it cost me I don't know how many drinks of water-front whiskey to get those watchmen in condition—there were two of them—before I could dig into one of the bales for a sample. I know it was tough on the watchmen, but there you are, and as sure as shooting Becker & Co. got the stolen sausages and we've got to get Becker before he has a chance to try to hang it on me, or some other boob clerk.

"Ben, are you awake? do you understand what I am saying?"

he asked, giving my shoulder a tap that made me sway as though kicked by a mule.

"Yes, Hiram, I understand. Was there a Southern Pacific ship at the dock?" I asked, rubbing my shoulder.

"No—the next ship is due to-morrow, and they're always late now."

"I believe you have something really tangible. I'll stop that shipment this morning, but you'd better get to bed. And," I hastily added, "we must have more than empty sausage cartons to make a case against him."

"I know that, and there is nothing doing in the way of sleep for me now. The old man is down at a rummy, waiting to take me up to the canal to see that boat. If the boat looks good to me, will you come and look it over?" he asked, getting up and walking the floor like a caged lion.

"Yes—meet me here at noon, and in the meantime I'll try to learn something about the matter——" But before I had time to finish he was out of the room, going downstairs two steps at a time.

When I told Superintendent Kitchell that morning in his office as much as I thought good for him to know at that time, and especially about Hiram's plans and what he had already accomplished, his face began to glow, and he otherwise evidenced intense interest.

"Taylor," he began, without any attempt now at inscrutability, "I would give ten years of my life to have that robbery matter ferreted out quickly. All the other division superintendents on the system are laughing at me and the General Super and President are raising Hell. It seems to me that the boy's theory as to how to round up the gang is good, and I will help you all I possibly can. I've looked at Becker's plant several times while passing and I think the boy is right. You can't really get the goods on him without getting into his plant, and that must be done by starting some kind of trade. Do you think he has any chance of getting a boat?"

"He will, or rather may have, something definite about that before night."

"I wonder——" hesitated the man of many troubles; "when I was up in Memphis the other day I met the man in charge of the Illinois division. He happened to mention that the state was killing whole herds of tubercular-infected cattle there. I wonder if I couldn't get a few carloads sent here and let the boy—Strong, did you say his name was?—get in by boating them up to him—but you are not sure of obtaining a boat?"

"I feel sure we can get some kind of a boat."

"Here is something—Ever since we entered the war Central and South America have been revolution incubators, especially for Mexico. Some never hatch but die in the shell, others hatch but die before they can walk, then once in a while, out of the great number one of them grows big enough to buy all sorts of ridiculous stuff they think they need or want, and ship it down here. Then they get shot, macheted, put in prison or exiled, and a lot of this stuff is never claimed, so we have to sell it for freight charges. We've got a whole warehouse of that kind of junk we should have disposed of long ago. Go down and look it over—anything you can use I will see that you get it pronto. We've had about everything except industry, virtue and honesty."

"Wire the Illinois division regarding the slaughtered cattle, and I will look over your unclaimed freight. I may find something——"

"And do you think," he interrupted, sore to the bone at the thought, "that it involves any one in the offices?"

I hesitated, recalling that I had not mentioned either Chief Clerk Burrell or Miss Bascom, or their conversations with Becker. "Yes—Becker couldn't work without some one to give him information about arrivals and keep him posted at the river."

"Rotten—rotten!" he exploded; "just think of it, a mess like this putrefying right under our noses and we don't get wise until they smell it in Kansas City and Chicago. And now, Ben Taylor, while I feel sure you are on the right track at last, and are going to make good, you seem to be moving so maddeningly slow and deliberate." He said this with a deep sigh from the depths of his waistband, his chubby hand fingering a number of yellow slips used for official railroad messages and reminding me of the mysterious one sent to Hiram about Becker & Co. receiving freight by rail, but invariably shipping out by water.

"But, Mr. Kitchell, haste in this matter will be fatal to final results," I said casually.

"Yes, perhaps—at any rate I hope that's so, but I'm so damnably worked up over this matter that I am about wild. Then another thing, I don't quite understand why you have so much confidence in this young Strong, though I'll admit he shows good mettle. I recall at our first interview you said he was well connected in the North?" said he, still glancing nervously over the messages on his desk.

"Hiram Strong is well connected. He has inherited a great pride and along with it what seems to be honor. He feels keenly the onus cast upon him in this matter, but has withal a saving sense of humor. He is working out his own salvation and feels he is heading off an attempt to make him the goat —to him it is simply a matter of keeping out of jail. He has, I believe, demonstrated that he can do head work as well as leg work, and I feel like giving him room to turn around," I insisted, perhaps too testily.

"I wonder if he is kin of this man Hiram Strong, who was reported this morning as coming in on our system at Chicago in his private car. Do you know, Taylor, I wish every private car was in hell—as though we didn't have enough trouble already! Our passenger engines are loaded with every pound they can keep rolling and every once in a while we get a private car of some millionaire pork-sticker or quick-rich, who wants to come down here to shoot ducks or some other fool thing. Do you think it is the same man?" he demanded.

"It might be."

"Do you suppose the boy has got word to him, and he is coming down here to raise the devil?" he asked, eyeing me as though I might have something to do with it.

"As I understand it, from the boy, he was thrown out entirely on his own resources—disinherited—and as far as appearances go, is completely estranged from his father."

"Well, by Heaven, if he shows up here with a chip on his shoulder, I'm going to turn him over to you—do you understand?—I'll turn him over to you. You know all about it, and I've had a stomachful of educating rich men's sons, and all the other troubles I want," he insisted, disgustedly, as I started to go to my office.

"I will be glad to do all I can for you, Mr. Kitchell. Let me know as far as possible in advance."

"I can tell you that right now. He is hooked to Number Seven, and is due here to-morrow at 11:15, unless his old special car makes her late."

CHAPTER XIX

So far I had regarded Miss Bascom as one of the hundreds of others that just chanced to take the place of the men who had been drafted from the railroad employees. They came from everywhere, cities, villages and rural districts, and substitutes for man-power were in such demand that "no questions" was the rule; no disposition to "look a gift horse in the mouth" or even to see if they had a spavin, ringbone, or inflicted with "string halt."

Very likely she may have written the anonymous suggestion to Hiram. I did know that she entered the back room of a hotel with Becker and had received his embraces and proposals, which would surely shock a maiden's ears, but admittedly she did not drink, and she had acted with singular astuteness.

I knew she was flirting with Burrell, the chief clerk, and that Becker and Burrell frequented low places together. Altogether it looked as though she was playing a double rôle and I was not at all sure just where I fitted into the planning 185
going on in her head, although I'll admit the latter was very attractive.

At once I decided to put her to a test that would make each blonde hair stand without support, and the opportunity came sooner than I expected.

As the warehouse to which Superintendent Kitchell referred was not far away, I went there before keeping my noon appointment with Hiram. It was, as he said, a veritable graveyard of disappointed hopes and plans gone wrong—bleached, grinning skeletons of blue-sky finance and religio-political scheming reduced to the irreducible. They couldn't even pay the freight to New Orleans, not to mention their Gulf and Caribbean destinations.

Shippers always receive money in advance for antiquated or experimental devices from their "bone-yard" and therefore they had no further interest. Cannon, more deadly at the breech, airships that would do everything but fly, rifles rejected by shop inspectors, cartridges that wouldn't explode, and so on. Threshing machines and engines, sawmills and agricultural implements, cases of rifles and cartridges and other war-like material in astonishing abundance—but nothing apparently for our purpose. I did 186
observe a big case made of two-inch lumber, heavily iron-bound, that might contain an engine or motor, but I needed help to reach it.

When Hiram returned to the room, a little ahead of time, his pep and ginger seemed to have been largely augmented. His energy appeared to have no limit, but with it all there was a shade of disappointment, or apprehension. He began at once about the boat.

"*Fearsome* is her name," said he. "She is just what we want, a dandy for our purpose, but I'm afraid she's too big. While fitted with a propeller and rudder, and steers from a chicken-coop up front, she has no power. But she's a peach for size and width!" he exclaimed, with breath no faster from running up the stairs three steps at a time. "How the devil are we going to get something to make her go?" he added, sitting down in front of me, holding his left knee between his hands, and looking appealingly at me.

"How big a boat is it?" I asked, suppressing my amusement.

"About a hundred and fifty feet long and twenty five or thirty 187
beam. Not deep in the water, but she draws enough. She looks like an overgrown canal boat. But I brought the captain along; he can tell you more; do you want to see him? It's only a matter of getting power into her."

"How much will it cost to get possession of her?"

"Well, that is another thing—the captain says that it's to be auctioned for the crew's wages. He hints that the owners may have gone to jail, or back to the mountains to resume their legitimate business as highwaymen."

"Who is the captain you refer to?"

"Captain Marianna—I told you about him. He's the caretaker, and has been living on her—starved out, is an Italian, has a shipmaster's license from the Government. He has it hanging in the boat. I'm sure he will stay with us if we want him. He is downstairs now—want to see him?" Then, coming toward me, he asked in an earnest undertone, "Can we raise the money to put some kind of power in her? I can root out the Becker crowd, clean my slate and then make a

fortune with her if we can," he insisted with fierce determination.

"When is it to be sold?" I queried. 188

"The time is up now—I'd say to-morrow or next day."

"I don't know, Hiram, it will be a pretty big lump to swallow. We don't know how high they will bid it up, but perhaps, with luck, we can manage it." I knew he was thinking of Anna Bell Morgan, and, as a close second, the Gold-Beater.

The captain was undoubtedly an old salt, past middle age, looked dependable, repeated the same story about the boat, but not within Hiram's hearing would he tell from whence it came, or how, or why they brought it through the canal instead of up the river, the usual way of getting into New Orleans. However, I was doubtful about power.

As soon as the captain had gone we started for the unclaimed freight warehouse to investigate further. While we were on the way Hiram caught me by the arm and, bringing his face nearly in front of mine, half whispered:

"Ben, I have some money—I did not spend all the Gold-Beater gave me as my last dot. I've got the money we pried from the old captain who was going to drown us, and I have saved my wages, but the heck of it is to get some kind of 189
power. No one will pay much for the boat. How about selling that barrel? The last offer was something like seven hundred dollars, wasn't it?" His tone was of the wheedling variety.

"Perhaps I had forgotten to tell you, Hiram, that I have had some favorable news about that barrel of steel-filings," said I, at the same time giving him a gentle nudge. "But as soon as I can get in touch with the right market I expect to get a much better offer. I don't want to sell that just now, but I, too, have saved a little money we can use if necessary." I then explained the possibility of finding something in the way of a motor in the warehouse for which we were then bound, and if so, no immediate outlay would be necessary, but of course that was only a chance, and besides, we were not sure some fool would not bid it well up.

"I don't care how fast it goes, just so it can beat the river current," he urged. "Oh, she looks tough. No one will bid much, that's certain."

"Have you figured on the fact that this boat is in the canal, and while only a mile from the river, you must go a long way by water to get there?"

"Yes, I know it is two hundred miles or more, clear out 190
through the Mississippi and Chandeleur Sound, but that won't take long if she can move at all," he replied without hesitation. "You see, it is practically inland water all the way," he added.

"Hiram, are you still keeping away from Anna Bell Morgan? Don't you hear from her at all?" I asked this question suddenly, as we approached the warehouse, and the change of subject appeared to have startled him.

"No—and, I never shall unless this matter is cleaned up completely. If I go to the bow-wows I won't take any one with me," he said, looking far away down the sidewalk.

"You haven't seen her for some time. Are you cooling off?"

"No, Ben, not one bit. That girl is the only one who has ever held me. I don't believe there is a half hour of the time that I am awake I do not think of her, and I believe it is the thought of her that makes me fight. I tell you it must be no halfway business. If they try to pin anything on me and have me arrested, which they may, some people will always believe me guilty even if I am acquitted. And if that comes to 191
pass I don't believe I will ever see her again; in fact I told her so. It is a fearful thing to think of, and while we are making headway, the delay almost drives me wild when I stop to think about it," he said, still downcast.

"You'll forget—most men do."

"Yes—I may forget—I may not be different from other men,

but I don't feel that way now, and I don't think I ever will," he replied with a certain convincing firmness. But when we got to the warehouse, the possibility of failure, suggested by the reference to Anna Bell Morgan, seemed to lend strength to his body. He lifted big cases with ease and smaller ones left his hands with a toss until we uncovered the big case that had attracted my attention.

A sledge broke the iron binding and I lifted one of the thick planks. When I told Hiram it was a steam engine, and worthless to us, it was the first time I ever heard him use voluble profanity, to which I listened, amused.

But in uncovering this case, bigger ones back of it were revealed. We went at them. The next one we opened contained an antiquated automobile, not worth the expense of packing for sea-shipment. Another case that had just been unloaded from a car that morning promised something and our hopes arose; it was much longer and larger than any of the others and readily answered to the blows of the sledge. It contained the body of an air-ship. Hiram was about to sulphurize the warehouse again but sat down instead, wet with perspiration.

"Ben, that infernal thing contains a gasoline motor—is it possible to use it?" He waited expectantly for a reply.

"Perhaps; rip off another plank so that I can see."

Two more blows from the flying sledge sent another plank flying.

"There you are!" he exulted.

We were astonished to find a twelve-cylinder motor of standard manufacture, which I thought might be used in a boat. And, of course, a self-contained plant, ready for running.

Hiram's spirits rose to the heights with this information and he began his habit of cavorting like a colt, apparently forgetting the sad disappointment of only a moment before. In many respects he was yet a boy.

I called Mr. Kitchell on the telephone, told him briefly about the boat and of the motor in the air-plane.

"Yes, take it, and anything there you can use; you know we can requisition anything we want when necessary. Take it quick if you can use it to get us out of this nightmare," he snapped back at me. "A complaint from Washington has reached the president of the road, who has passed it down the line with a stinger in every word. Both the railroad administration and the Bureau of Animal Industry are riding on my neck without a saddle. Go as far as you like, only hurry."

CHAPTER XX

HIRAM suggested that he and the captain would get the motor out on the floor and test it in order to make sure that another crooked revolutionist had not met a crooked manufacturer.

While they were doing this I went to my office to get a better line on the traffic between that very interesting trio—Becker, Burrell and my clerk, Miss Bascom.

Captain Marianna helped Hiram, so they soon had the motor on skids, and 'phoned me to come down and try it out. The working test was satisfactory and after computing its horsepower, we decided it would drive the boat, and, possibly, at a fair speed. Before leaving the warehouse Hiram called my attention to a small portable sawmill outfit.

"If this works out, that's mine, too," he whispered, evidently still clinging to the idea of capturing logs in the river.

Hiram was right, nothing like the hull of the *Fearsome* had

ever been produced before. A hundred and fifty feet long, and over thirty foot beam, and with a bulwark not more than a foot high about the entire outside. It looked like an immense skimming dish. Hiram thought it came from the canals of Mars, possibly a cup challenger there. Captain Marianna assured us, though she didn't look it now, she was very sturdy and seaworthy and she did not leak even a little since he had been on her. No doubt it had previously had gasoline power in it, for there were left intact the foundation beams. Hiram said that the captain, now penniless and almost starving, if given some cash and a good job, would likely be distinctly different from now on. I told him I thought the fellow was a fair bet, and left them at work getting the motor ready to move on board. The captain assured me the sale was to take place at nine the next morning. No one had been around to see it and I felt sure it would go for very little.

As I was up all night I did not see Hiram until the next morning. The sale looked as though it had been arranged for our benefit. The officer said the claims were nearly a thousand dollars, sold it promptly for that bid, got away as 196
though in a hurry, and I attended to the details, leaving Hiram serious but jubilant.

It was late that night when he returned, tired and hungry but enthusiastic. He took little interest in a letter awaiting him until he told me all about his progress in moving the motor and getting it aboard the boat.

"We got the motor aboard late this evening and it fits as if made for the foundation beams, and it will connect with the propeller shaft and clutch with little trouble. But, say, the captain says we must have an air compressor for the whistle and an auxiliary gasoline tank,—and, say," he continued, while stripping down to wash—"I believe the captain is going to prove a jewel—he's all right."

"You still think him reliable?"

"Well, if he is as loyal to us as he was to his old employers he will be all right—and willing to turn his hand to anything."

"Did you see the letter that came for you?"

"Yes, I'm going to read it in a minute—it's nothing, for I don't know any one who would write to me. I've got something more important to do now than keeping up a line of 197
correspondence," he said, as he finished his ablutions and buttoned his flannel shirt at the collar. Then he reached for the letter and as he opened it his face changed to astonished resentment.

"Say, who the devil can it be that is writing me these notes? This is the second one I have received, not dated or signed by any one. I don't understand this one at all," he added, handing it to me.

I took it and read from the same yellow paper and typed as the last one had been:

> "Becker & Co. know of the Railroad's plan to ship slaughtered cattle from Illinois to their plant."

His astonishment was no greater than mine, for instantly I knew that only some one connected with the railroad and telegraph could learn anything regarding Superintendent Kitchell's plan. I also recalled that I had not mentioned anything about the plan to Hiram, or any other important thing concerning the case. I wanted him to move uninfluenced by anything I knew or suspected.

After examining the note critically a few moments, I said:

"Hiram, these notes may come from a woman—they have 198
such earmarks. Do you know—have you anything to do with a woman?" I asked, really alarmed at the moment, and scrutinizing him closely.

Hiram stood straight before me and looked me square in the eye with magnificent candor.

"Ben, I have scarcely a speaking acquaintance with any woman in New Orleans except Anna Bell Morgan—and I have not seen her or communicated with her since—well, you know how long—ever since this damned thing came up like a black fog from Hades, out of which it seems impossible to get—and——"

"The plan of getting into Becker's plant is yours. I mentioned it to Superintendent Kitchell. Getting some slaughtered tubercular cattle from Illinois is Kitchell's idea. He wired or wrote, or both, from his office and this is the result. Somebody inside, sure—somebody for them and somebody for you—who is it, Hiram?" I ended by demanding of him to speak only the truth.

"I haven't mentioned one word to a soul other than you," he stoutly insisted, his face as open as a printed page.

"Have you mentioned your boat scheme to any one?" I asked, 199
fearful of the incaution of youth.

"Not a person knows of it from me but you and Captain Marianna, and he doesn't know much yet. But this is absolute evidence our finger is on the right spot," he observed shrewdly, then added, less confidently—"they must have some organization."

"Go ahead, Hiram, I still think your boat scheme a very good one, but be very discreet and see if you can think of any one who would send these notes to you," I added darkly, much puzzled and annoyed.

"He is building and must have lumber—he'll fall for some cheap stuff and the river is full of logs—and it's perfectly feasible to saw them——"

"Maybe so, Hiram—provided he doesn't keep on knowing what we have for breakfast. I will learn more in a day or two—go ahead as fast as you can about getting ready, but again I ask you to have an interrogation point in front of you all the time."

"Ben"—he began, walking about the room nervously, as though he felt his soul in danger—righteously angered, but as one who showed real bigness—"I am convinced that they have power enough, so that when they get ready they can 200
for a time make me the goat. I was in sole charge of that wharf when the big thefts were pulled off; what would be easier than to link me up with some poor teamster and send the two of us to slaughter, and even by arrest plant an imputation that could be cited against me all my life? I could take this Becker and tear his purple tallow person into bits with my bare hands and throw the pieces into his own rendering tanks with pleasure!" he shouted, and he looked as though he could do it.

"Yes, Hiram, that possibility is present, but perhaps you magnify it." Then believing his efficiency would be augmented by a little less fear, I told him, for the first time, that the provision market was flooded with spurious goods bearing a genuine government stamp as having been inspected and passed, and that on this night I was going with a Federal party in a move against Becker for that.

"What are you going to do?" he asked quickly.

"Locate him as soon as he leaves his New Orleans office, then a safe expert, employed by the government in alien-enemy work, will open his safe for evidence, and possibly 201
will find the stolen seals, stamps, and ink of the Department of Animal Industry."

"I have figured the case in just that way and supposed you had, and that is why we must get inside his plant. Opening his safe may help—finding the seals don't prove the larceny—suppose they should secrete those seals about the wharf, or worse still, put them inside, or under my desk, in the wharf office, what chance would I have to escape the implication?" he asked, still walking about the room looking at the floor.

"A dog having the bone will not prove he stole the ham," I

suggested.

"But that won't save the dog's ribs when he's found with it," he retorted, relaxing.

"It is true, Hiram, their organization must begin in Kansas City—and is pretty well oiled—but perhaps not as efficient as you imagine; crooks always forget something with a certainty that suggests fatality."

"Let us hope so. But these notes—what makes you think they are from a woman?" He stopped and looked squarely at me. 202
"I don't like it," he finished with a snap of his jaws.

"My reason just now is scarcely more than an impression, hardly more than 'because,'" I replied.

CHAPTER XXI 203

THAT night at dinner I asked Hiram how much he knew about gasoline engines, and he looked up at me sharply.

"Not very much; very little, in fact. The Gold-Beater gave me a car once—a pretty good one—and I was learning about motors fairly fast when something happened. I knew motors needed water, oil and gasoline, and that when I did certain things it went, and sometimes it moved pretty fast. That was the trouble—I met a bigger car and we both went over in a man's front yard. I lost two wheels and other things—I never saw it again. The Gold-Beater and the insurance company settled somehow.

"Do you know," he continued after a pause, "I don't blame the Gold-Beater much—two thousand was my share for putting an innocent pedestrian in the park on the bad side—I wonder he didn't get the marble heart sooner." As he said this his lips curled with self-criticism.

"How soon will you have the motor ready to start? I am 204
going to be very busy to-morrow. Can you and the captain manage to start it alone?"

"To-morrow at noon we will have everything ready for a try-out and if I don't feel safe we will not attempt to start without you. Don't want to take any chances; there's too much at stake," he insisted with rare judgment.

"Everything is fair in love and war," is the libertine's comfort in the case of a love contest—and in war it depends on the kind of an enemy we have. In this war any means of obtaining evidence against our enemy was justified. That was my firm belief. That night Becker & Co.'s office was entered as planned and his safe opened. While there was plenty of evidence that he was trading illicitly and with the enemy, I was disappointed in finding no evidence of his thieving propensity, except a letter he had received that day from the captain of a Swedish ship, *Sparticide*, then in port, who in poor English explained that he had "received the sample and thought it would do, though the price was altogether too high. If he would pack in half barrels and 205
deliver as suggested, he would take the lot for cash, delivered alongside."

This letter was carefully copied and replaced.

When I reached home just before daylight, Hiram, Jr., was fast asleep, but when I awakened later in the day he had gone.

I spent the greater part of the morning getting the five bales of waste paper that had been unloaded from Becker's boat on the steamship docks, into a private fireproof room in the storage warehouse where we had our barrel of "steel filings" stored, and secured an affidavit from the steamship company that they were received from Becker & Co.

When I found leisure to examine them, I drew samples from each bale and carefully estimated the number, finding they checked up with the amount of filled sausage cartons stolen

from the car.

Before leaving the warehouse I had our barrel put into the same room and secured it with a special Government padlock. Recent correspondence had developed that it contained a very rare German aniline dye, which American manufacturers had as yet been unable to produce, and offers for it had risen to such a fabulous sum I was afraid to tell Hiram about it for the present.

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When I reached my office, my clerk, Miss Bascom, was out to luncheon, but I had not been there long before Superintendent Kitchell came in and formally introduced Mr. Hiram Strong, Sr., whom he had mentioned as being in transit over the system in his private car, and asked me to extend any possible courtesy, after which he bowed himself out obsequiously.

I knew I was in the presence of a man. He was tall and his full chest and very broad shoulders impressed me as they had impressed Hiram. His hair was iron gray and his very hat seemed to be made to order for him. His eyes appeared to penetrate without effort the object on which they turned, and one knew instinctively that he could and would note any discrepancy between what a person thought and what he uttered.

I saw at once how Hiram, Jr., had come by his nose piece, also his fine, clear skin and chiseled mouth.

Superintendent Kitchell, contrary to his boast, had told him all he knew about Hiram, Jr. He did not seem to want to hear more from me, but did want some information about getting down the river to the Hunting Club, where he was going to shoot ducks.

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"I left New York supposing I could dispense with my secretary for a few weeks anyhow, but in that I am disappointed. Would it be too much trouble to obtain a stenographer to write some letters for me?"

Hiram Strong, Sr., like his son, was one to whom anything within reason could not be refused.

"Such talent is very scarce in New Orleans now, but if you can manage with my clerk, Miss Bascom, who is fairly efficient, you are welcome to her services—if she does not object," was the only thing I could say.

"I think she will do; in fact, almost any one," he assured me.

But somehow I felt that I was doing the wrong thing, for it suddenly occurred to me that Miss Bascom's attitude or position was so clouded and mysterious that, until I knew more, I should not trust her with anything important. But Hiram Strong, Sr., was not a man to be refused.

When Miss Bascom came in I introduced her and was about to explain what was wanted, when I stopped in amazement. The moment I mentioned the name "Mr. Strong" her face became white as marble, she raised her hand as though to advance and greet him, but it fell and she stood as though petrified, while I explained what he desired.

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"I—I hope I will be able to serve you," she managed to say, while she gazed fixedly at him. I could not guess whether it was fear or other excitement.

"My work is simple correspondence, and I am sure you will be able to manage it," he replied assuringly, and I was not certain whether he was admiring her quail-like figure and unusually pretty face, or, like myself, was trying to divine the unusual excitement under the light bronze hair.

"I will do my best," she managed to say, beginning to edge away toward her desk by the window.

"Would it be asking too much for you to come out to the car? It is just under the train shed."

"Not at all, with Mr. Taylor's permission," she replied quickly, in a more natural tone. I nodded approval without looking at her, but did not relax my endeavor to see if Hiram Strong, Sr., had missed anything and decided he had not. He

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was not of that sort.

She went to her desk, obtained notebook and pencils, and stood expectantly looking out of the window as though steeling herself for an ordeal.

"I will undoubtedly see you again before I go, Mr. Taylor—I hope I will not greatly inconvenience you by taking away your clerk," he added suavely, going to the door and opening it as a sign for her to go with him.

"Anything more I can do for you will be a pleasure, Mr. Strong," I said, meeting his eye and getting a full message from him.

After they were gone I remained at my desk endeavoring to reach a logical conclusion as to the attitude of this girl, who, at that moment, I was ready to pronounce "infernal," probably because she had so far baffled me. It is true I had not given her any serious attention; perhaps I should have done so. I reviewed in my mind her traffic with Becker and the chief clerk, Burrell, and the fact that I was quite positive she was the author of the anonymous notes to Hiram. I decided to put a rod in pickle for her, at once.

I asked that her movements be accounted for every hour, and something positive be dug up concerning her antecedents, as soon as I reached the Department office, which precaution was rewarded sooner than expected.

The remainder of the afternoon was spent in securing an auxiliary gasoline tank and an air-compressor, which Hiram, Jr., had said he must have to complete his running outfit.

"Old man," he began, as soon as he came in that evening, looking as dirty and disreputable as a longshoreman, "we have a dandy outfit—the captain says we can run away from anything. You've got the tank and air-pump? Fine, old man, we will soon kill off Becker and the whole crowd. All we need now is that saw-mill in the 'Dead Hoss' warehouse, and we are ready." He finished with great enthusiasm, stripping his upper body for a complete clean-up before eating dinner.

"Did you start the engine, Hiram?"

"No, but we are all ready. The captain wanted to, but I thought we'd better wait for you. You've got to go out there the first thing in the morning,—you can do that, can't you?"

"Yes, maybe—but don't you think we had better give it a pretty good try-out before we put anything more into her?—she might prove a flivver."

"Never on your life—she's going to run like a wolf—but maybe you are right about giving her a good trial—suppose we bring her around into the river?—that ought to be trial enough," he concluded, coming close and displaying a wonderfully well developed torso that with age would be as broad as his father's, which I had been admiring but a short time before. For a moment I speculated on how he would feel if he knew that his father was in New Orleans at that moment and that I had been talking with him.

"Wake up, Ben; you seem to be dreaming. Did you hear what I said?" he insisted, making me dodge to escape a whack on the back.

"I believe you said it was over two hundred miles through Ponchertrain around into the river?"

"Yes, over two hundred miles by water, but by land, right through the city, only about a mile. But we've got to get into the river."

"Yes, if she will go two hundred miles she will go any distance."

"All right; I'm going to pack up to-night and move aboard to stay until Becker and his crew are all in limbo headed for the penitentiary—do you hear me, Ben?"

I heard what he said, but was lost in considering plans which at that moment required radical change, and must be done with tact and judgment.

Hiram became thoughtful and remained so throughout dinner, and as soon as we returned he began, without further comment, to get his belongings together and ready for transfer to the *Fearsome*, fully convinced that his abode there would last for a long time.

I remained in the attitude of the "immortal," who waited for something to turn up, and I did not have long to wait.

A messenger came with two rather startling bits of information; the *Sparticide*, the Swedish ship, had asked for her papers and wanted to clear at five the next morning, and the more mystifying knowledge—even to me—that my clerk, Miss Bascom, had arrived at that moment at the St. Charles hotel and was dining there with a distinguished stranger. Would I also check up the stranger? 213

Both situations needed immediate attention and I could not be in two places at the same time. I called Hiram, Jr., from the room where he was busily packing.

"Hiram, come here and sit down long enough for me to funnel a bit of instruction into your think tank," said I, recalling that I had not mentioned the *Sparticide* matter to him.

He came and sat down in front of me, the corners of his mouth slightly elevated, folded his hands in front of him and waited in a slightly humorous and bored attitude for some inkling of what he was about to draw.

"Hiram, a Swedish ship, bound for Stockholm, is in the stream on the other side, just below Algiers, and is asking to be cleared to-morrow morning at five. It is thought she has, or will have to-night, a considerable quantity of Becker & Co.'s product on board. Foodstuffs of any sort to Sweden are forbidden, and if taken are contraband. His clearance papers are blocked until we are satisfied. Principally, what we want now is a liberal sample of what they take aboard from 214 Becker. You will be there in an unofficial capacity, so use discretion, but get the samples. Here is a copy of the captain's letter closing the deal."

I had not half finished when his eyes began to glitter and dance as though they might jump from their sockets, and I had barely completed my instructions when he grabbed the letter, threw on his coat and bounded down the stairs three steps at a time.

CHAPTER XXII 215

Those who say that any man will naturally fall for a pretty young woman are pessimistic. Age, unspoiled, will crave association with youth, but a young man will quite adequately fill the bill.

When I reached the hotel I had no trouble in finding Hiram Strong, Sr., the Gold-Beater, in a forest of millinery and subdued lights of the hotel dining-room. He was the most prominent figure in the big room, and sitting opposite him was my clerk, Miss Bascom.

He was not a victim or an intended one—a lion who, with playful stroke, could crush the beautiful flower in front of him. His lids would narrow occasionally with intense interest or curiosity. I could not get close enough to hear what was said, but she was quite voluble. I had no immediate interest in him; he was fully able to care for himself, but my interest in her was intensified. It seemed to me that I could see on her beautiful shoulders, now bared in dinner garb, the mark of the huge, pudgy, filthy hand of Becker, in gross caress. 216 The brand of suspicion was upon her the moment she had come into contact with him, when he pressed her to his vile self, and her lips were violated by contact with his lumpy, purple, filthy mouth as he kissed her. Could her ears ever be maidenly again after listening to his vile proposals?

I was not at all sure of her relations with Chief Clerk Burrell, but I felt sure there was an understanding; nor could I account for her anonymous notes to Hiram, Jr. But here she sat comfortably dining with his father after six or eight hours' acquaintance, all of which was most disconcerting.

Truly a remarkable young woman, whatever her impelling motive, was my thought. I felt that the time was fast approaching when I could compel her to hold up her last page for me to read.

At a reasonable hour the Gold-Beater put her into a cab and sent her home. I hurried back to our rooms expecting to hear from Hiram, Jr. His mission was most difficult and important—would he be successful?

There was no mistaking his bounding step on the stairs, some time after eleven, and I was not surprised when he 217
grabbed my foot and dragged me from the bed where I was dozing.

"Get up, Ben; I've got it—the Swede was a hard nut to crack, but I made him open up—I've got a whole barrel full downstairs.—It's the stuff we want, all right—come on and see it!" he exclaimed, greatly excited, but suppressing himself with discretion.

"Are you sure?" I asked, barely awake.

"Of course, I'm sure—come on down and see it—I wouldn't take his word for anything. I made him open up before he lowered it into my boat. He tried to play innocent—jockeyed for some time, but I finally showed him the copy of his letter and flatly told him, 'No sample, no sail, also jail and his ship interned.' A half barrel of that stuff is heavy and I had the devil of a time getting it out of the boat onto the levee. Then I got hold of Billy Swope's taxi—he's safe—I've known him about the docks for a long time. Where are we going to put it at this time of night? Come on—wake up—you act as if you'd been taking dope," he hissed, coming threateningly toward me, playful but intensely excited.

"As a matter of fact I was planning, Hiram——Leave it in the 218
cab—go down and tell the driver he is engaged for the night."

When Hiram came back to the room he saw me taking two full-sized cartons from my drawer and asked with great excitement, "Where did you get them?"

"From those five bales of waste-paper you saw come off of Becker's boat onto the S. P. wharf: didn't I tell you about it?" I asked, knowing I had not told him and that there was still a great deal more I could not tell him for the present.

It took us a long time to locate the agent of the packing-house. The time seemed interminable before we could rout him out of bed to identify the goods as those that were stolen, but as soon as he knew what we wanted he was very much awake and ready for all requirements.

He came out to the cab, drew a liberal sample from the barrel setting on end beside the driver, took it to the light, felt of it, tasted it raw, but before pronouncing it solemnly and unqualifiedly theirs, he cooked and tasted it. We then made him accompany us down to his plant, unlock his cold storage house and there we left the barrel in his charge to 219
preserve as evidence, after I had filled a full carton for further use that night.

We then drove back to the rooms where I had left Hiram to finish his preparations for going aboard the *Fearsome*.

"By Heaven, one man now knows I didn't steal—and the rest of them have got to know before we get through," said Hiram, wringing my hand before I left him in order to drive to Superintendent Kitchell's residence and give him a bad half hour.

Mr. Kitchell grumbled at first, but when he learned my mission he, too, was jubilant and unstinting in his praise. I had exhibited the full carton of sausage and told him as much as I thought necessary.

"We can have warrants issued at once, can't we?" he asked.

"No—no, not yet—the most important work is yet to be done. The evidence we now have would only convict Becker & Co. of receiving stolen property. How they were able to replace the Government, the railroad and the packer's seals on the car must be answered before we prove larceny. Young Strong's idea of getting into their plant is the best, and we are ready to try it." 220

"Of course, you know best—we want to stop it for good and all by sending every one to the Pen. Taylor, have you made up your mind as to whom it is in our office that is working with them?" he inquired guardedly, wrapping his bathrobe about his shins.

"Yes—pretty sure—but——"

"Well, as I said, you know best—whatever you say goes a hundred per cent with me now—what do you want?" his bald spot taking on a deeper red.

"Discontinue my office and give out freely that any further effort in the case has been abandoned as a failure. Besides, the robberies have stopped now. I am going with young Strong to try and get into their plant, and hope to secure the rest of the necessary evidence in that way."

"Good idea; I will do what you ask to-day."

"One thing more, Mr. Kitchell, it seems necessary, in fact extremely important for me not to lose sight of my clerk, Miss Bascom——"

"I understand—I can attend to that easily," he assented, as I left him to spend the remainder of the morning getting ready to board the *Fearsome*. 221

Hiram, Jr., was silent most of the time, but moved with such energy and determination that the thought of failure was terrifying. In fact, I began to feel almost as though I was getting on thin ice.

So much depended on the new motor and many other sailing details impossible to think of at the time.

Captain Marianna only claimed to be a navigator, but he displayed considerable knowledge about gasoline motors. He had attended to the many details and was waiting for us with a confidence that was reassuring.

After breakfast aboard, we all took a hand in starting the motor.

"It runs as though made for the job," exclaimed Hiram, hardly able to contain himself. He had not shaved for several days and with dirty working clothes he looked indeed a longshoreman, but was oblivious to the fact.

When the motor had run long enough to get warm I told him to throw in the clutch that started the propeller, which he did without skill and so suddenly that the *Fearsome* took up the slack of her lines and before I could stop the motor or get to the clutch she snapped them and was free from the wharf. 222

Hiram realized he had blundered from inexperience and his face flushed.

"Ben, will that hold us up? It was a devil of a thing for me to do," he said, catching my arm, greatly alarmed.

"Captain, have you plenty of line aboard?" I called.

"Yes, plenty," he assured.

"Let's give her a few turns and if she moves all right we'll head for the entrance of the lake."

"I think we're safe in that," he replied, and Hiram's look changed to one of confidence at once, evidently concluding his first blunder was not fatal to the enterprise in which his whole soul was wrapped.

The captain took the wheel, while I gave the motor half speed and Hiram stood in wonder, watching as we moved swiftly up the canal, and when clear of it I gave the motor

full speed and the captain without more ado squared away towards Mississippi Sound, the gulf to New Orleans on the river.

"She runs like a *greyhound*," Hiram said, after watching her go at full speed for a short time. "How fast is she running?" he asked, apparently forgetting his first disappointment, and consumed with a fierce satisfaction that his complete vindication and success was at hand.

"Perhaps eight or ten knots," I replied evasively. As a matter of fact we were going over twelve and I had to stand over the new motor with oil can and grease bucket, so I paid no more attention to him.

We got out into the sound before noon. It is unwise to run a new motor too far without stopping, so I advised that we make a port and appealed to the captain.

"We can make Gulfport in a short time," he replied, to which we all assented and he changed his course. When we got there a most unlooked for incident occurred.

CHAPTER XXIII

WAS the Gold-Beater's luck going to attend his very vigorous and now virile son? There is no such thing as luck; follow the smoke of the so-called "lucky" and we soon conclude that they earn what they get by sheer force of intense action.

The captain had hardly reached the Gulfport dock before he was approached to take on a cargo for New Orleans. Lumber was piled everywhere, with no bottoms to move it to New Orleans.

The captain referred them to Hiram, Jr., as the owner. He talked with them, then the three of us went below. We were bound for New Orleans; could we take a cargo of lumber?

Hiram's eyes danced and glistened with the possibilities.

"Ben, you know about our power; and you, captain, know how seaworthy she will be." He wisely interrogated both of us at the same time, looking from one to the other.

"What do you think about the power, Ben?"

"I think she will handle a load," I replied vaguely, and added, "for a thrown-together, patched-up affair, she performs wonderfully."

Hiram looked at Captain Marianna, as a man born to lead. He wanted that officer's opinion.

"Well," hesitated the captain, "I believe she is seaworthy and if you can get a load of timber we can fill the hold and even take a deck load. Timber loads and discharges quickly. Our course, nearly all the way is protected, and if a blow comes we can easily find shelter," he concluded with suppressed eagerness.

"That's all right, but how about time? I don't want to lose a lot of time. We didn't start in to carry freight," said Hiram with determination.

"Go and see how soon they can load and be careful to settle the freight rate," suggested the captain. Hiram sprang to the deck. His mind seemed to be working like a trip hammer.

"Ben, can they do that?" he asked excitedly when he returned; but before I could reply he continued: "do you know, they threatened to commandeer our craft if we don't take timber to New Orleans. It's for Government work—can they do that?"

"Yes, they can."

"And they say we have nothing to say about the freight rate—that is fixed," he said, his eyes wide and keen with wonder at the new situation into which he had so suddenly plunged.

"The freight rate will no doubt be liberal enough," I

suggested.

"Then we might just as well get the credit of doing it willingly," he wisely concluded, and was away again.

In less than half an hour we moved up about a thousand feet, and all the men available were busy crowding timber into the *Fearsome*, continuing the work far into the night. The captain looked after the stowage and I was busy getting an emergency supply of gasoline, oil and sundry necessary supplies. Hiram provisioned and attended to other details. He was in an element natural to him and seemed to forget everything else. By daylight the next morning we had the hold full and a deck-load six feet high. In fact, the *Fearsome* looked like a floating, sawed timber raft, bound and tied together with log chains.

After breakfast as we were feeling our way out of the river into the sound, Hiram came down very soberly to where I was attending to the engine. He was evidently well pleased. Hands that but a short while ago were manicured twice a week were now broadened, manly, brown and grease-stained.

"Don't you think we are short-handed?" he asked. "I tried to get some one but couldn't. I hate to have you stand by that motor long hours at a time. Perhaps I can help?"

"If the weather is good we ought to make the mouth of the river by night, anchor there, get some sleep and complete the journey to New Orleans to-morrow in daylight."

"Ben! do you mean to say we can make New Orleans in two days?" he asked in open-eyed wonder.

"If we don't get bad weather."

"Say, do you think I am awake—pinch me—take something and hit me on the head to be sure I am not astraddle a 'Night-Hoss,'" he suggested, pulling himself up on the head of one of the galvanized barrels of emergency gasoline near me, holding his head between his hands to keep his nerves from running away with him.

I looked at him and smiled but did not reply.

"Do you know we have two thousand dollars' worth of freight here, and you say we can get into New Orleans in two days? I must be dreaming."

"But have you figured all the expenses—bar pilotage—river pilotage, dockage and everything?"

"No—not all—but it can't possibly be five hundred dollars; and we can make the round trip in a week. Fifteen hundred dollars a week, Ben; and they say they have enough timber to be moved to keep us going for a year! Ben, I'm dreaming—a coke-eater's dream—and if it wasn't for that infernal Becker matter, how we could clean up!" He charged about savagely as though he had drunk mixed liquor and cocaine.

"You were up all last night; better get some sleep," I suggested.

"Yes, I haven't had a real night's sleep for a long time," he added, with a note of sadness, "and I don't want any yet."

Elated with success, the Becker matter was emphasized as a knife in his heart, and it was keeping him away from Anna Bell Morgan. Success has a way of trying men's hearts in the most unexpected manner.

We made the river as calculated and on the second morning were fast to the dock and the much needed timber going off as fast as it went on. Although busy and most of the time reticent, Hiram, Jr., never failed to call my attention to the numerous logs and floating trees in the river, which he insisted would make good lumber, and just for the taking. I hurried to our rooms as soon as possible to get my mail.

There I found several notes of different dates from a man from New York then in New Orleans and waiting to see me about something very important. Entirely in the dark as to what he wanted, I arranged by telephone and met him at

once at the Monteleon Hotel. I was disgusted. Great effort, loss of sleep and singleness of purpose to help Hiram, by cleaning up the case, made the business world appear as the full glare of a searchlight to eyes accustomed to thick darkness. It was about the barrel—he said he had come down from New York about it and exhibited one of the samples I had sent there. Bluntly, he said:

"We want the stuff and want you to put a price on it." 230

"But I don't want to be bothered about that stuff now." The fellow's lack of tact half angered me; his nervous eagerness undoubtedly whetted by his days of waiting for me did not fit in with my mood.

"Well—we need that color badly on Government fabric orders and if you refuse to put a price on it we may have to find another way," he said, with deliberation which, engrossed as I was, insulted me. His New England drawl grated on me somehow.

"Oh, if that is all you want, I'll name a price—you can have it for a hundred dollars a pound," I said, rising. I knew I was needed back on the *Fearsome* as soon as possible.

"Do you know that the pre-war price of that color was about seventy-five cents?" he quietly asked me.

"I don't know what the pre-war price was, but that is our price now," I said, walking away abruptly. I felt that I had much more important matters to consider then, and hurried down to the wharf where I supposed the *Fearsome* was being speedily unloaded.

Before I got within a thousand feet of where the *Fearsome* was I knew something was wrong. The boat was gone; Hiram Strong, Jr., sat on the end of a pile holding his head between both hands, and as I came still nearer I noted there was between Hiram's hands and head a paper folded like a legal document. 231

I had lately found myself wondering how Hiram, Jr., would behave when Dame Fortune landed her knuckles between his eyes with a staggering blow. I knew it had to come. I had become so attached to him that I dreaded it as one dreads to see a lovable child punished, though to its manifest advantage.

He did not say a word or move until I came up to him. There was something of a sneer and a contemptuous curl in his face when I looked the question I hesitated to ask. He sneered openly at the Jinx that had come to harass him.

"Well, Ben, I guess we have made the fatal mistake of underestimating the resources of our enemies—they've got us."

CHAPTER XXIV 232

HIRAM still retained his nerve, but his anger and disappointment had become stolid as he handed me the paper and pointed to the *Fearsome* across the river—the tug still alongside.

I stood before him, astonished and silent, hastily examining the paper. It was an injunction the court had issued, restraining him from interfering with the lawful owners of the boat *Fearsome*, of which he had obtained possession by an irregular and fraudulent sale.

"The officer has just left," Hiram volunteered. "The captain and I were on the dock checking up when the tug came alongside. I thought nothing until they slipped our lines and she was away before I could walk twenty feet," he said, letting his foot drop to the dock despondently.

"Ben, I thought we had a right—she was sold for crew's wages. We had nothing to do with that. We only bid her in," he began, but with no note of censure, although I had

attended to that detail.

"We have to know that." 233

"And has any one the right to take her—isn't that stealing?" he asked, suppressing his fierceness.

"They have her now in their possession and you are enjoined by the court from interfering," I said, half to myself, trying to think if I had heard of any hint of this procedure.

"Ben, do you suppose it is the Becker crowd—have they got wind of our plan, and are they doing this?" he asked, with wonderful self-possession.

"It may be, Hiram, but I doubt it—I am afraid the owners have shown up and are trying to regain their property in this way, alleging an irregular sale. They had to make some such showing to get the injunction."

"What can we do?" he snapped at me, as though becoming incensed at my deliberation.

"My boy—when passing amid rocks the captain must——"

"I beg your pardon, Ben—you can understand," he said quickly.

"Whether they are right or wrong to fight the courts means months' and perhaps years' delay—the only thing possible is to compromise."

"We must eat out of their hand Ben?" he started to heat up 234
anew. We were so intent that we did not notice the approach of a quiet, middle-aged man who asked very politely for "Mr. Strong."

"Mr. Strong, I come from the office of the plaintiffs' attorneys. They have decided that they do not wish to interfere with the unloading of freight for the Government, and we will bring the *Fearsome* alongside and let the cargo be discharged, provided you or the captain do not go aboard her—that is, not to attempt to dispute our possession."

"I was wondering how they were going to get away with that," Hiram jerked out impulsively.

"No, sir—we don't want to interfere that way—and more, Mr. Strong, I am to say that if you will come to our office possibly something can be arranged."

Then it was that impulsive youth and inexperience burst out, and while I was glad to hear him say it, I knew it was indiscreet. It was perhaps just what the Gold-Beater would have said at his age, and, in his present power, likely to do so now:

"You can tell the attorneys for the plaintiffs to go to hell," he 235
said, springing to his feet. "This is plain stealing and there's a penitentiary for them. No—we won't go aboard; that timber must come ashore," and he posted off to get the crew of longshoremen to work at unloading again.

The quiet, polite man from the attorneys' office remarked to me: "The young man shows considerable mettle. If you are interested you had better come down to the office," handing me the firm's card and departing.

In another half-hour the *Fearsome* was in full mourning, black longshoremen swarming over it and the edge of the dock, but the tug remained lashed alongside. The long timber, sawed ten by ten and twelve by twelve, seemed to have some means of locomotion as though anxious to get on the wharf. I could see Hiram had a way of getting things done.

During this time I sat on the end of the pile where I had found him and watched the operation, thinking that my job was getting rather strenuous. I was as completely in the dark as to this last move as was Hiram.

Presently he came over to me. He had evidently been both 236
working and thinking hard.

"Say, do you still think this move is made by the owners to get value for their property, or is it a rascally deal to block

us?" he asked doggedly.

"I don't know—it may be one or the other, or even both—anyhow it's our next move."

Hiram rubbed his stubbly chin with one hand and then the other, and looked at the *Fearsome* as though in some way it had become a part of him.

"Somehow I feel it is the owners—perhaps this is the only way they could proceed—of course, she is worth twenty times what we paid—if it is, they ought to be reasonable. The *Fearsome* lying out there rotting, without power, and the *Fearsome* with power and at work, is very different, but they may rightfully expect more than the crew's back wages."

I nodded assent, wondering where his line of reasoning would lead.

"Now it may be only money they want—as soon as this load is out of her we can collect two thousand freight—and, Ben—you—you have not said anything lately about that barrel—is it possible to sell that now? Whatever it will bring will come in handy to get time enough to pay this claim—there's lots of 237
timber up there and they want it moved. If we can get enough help I believe we can make two trips a week instead of one. Three thousand a week will soon wipe them out—and sooner or later we've got to pay the railroad for that motor."

"But, Hiram, what about Becker & Co.? We started out to get into their place and we must not lose sight of that now."

"I know—I know—but if these men mean to be fair they must allow us time. Ben, you are a better diplomat; go down and see these attorneys."

"All right, I'll go at once—also I'll see what I can do with the barrel of *steel filings*," I said, rising with a smile, and digging him in the ribs jokingly—he was in good humor now. But it occurred to me that in my shabby treatment of the prospective buyer I had been as indiscreet as Hiram when he invited the attorneys to brimstone land, whereas they possibly meant well enough.

Hiram did not smile, but I was sure he felt a little relieved at my attitude when I left, intending to hunt up my caller from New York, who emphasized the first syllable of Bos'ton as 238
though born to the manner of speech used in that great eastern port.

On my way back to the rooms to clean up a bit, I decided to see the attorneys first, and was considerably irritated to find the man after our barrel standing at the foot of my stairs, waiting sentry-like for me as though I had committed a crime. Something about the undersized fellow aggravated me, though I knew I had great need of him now. The impulse was strong upon me to put my foot on his stomach and shove him across the street into a curio shop. I was sure he wanted that barrel of color, but I didn't like his face. If I didn't sell it to him I could elsewhere, so I was obdurate. One hundred dollars per pound, cash, current funds in hand, take it or leave it, but say so quick, was all he could get out of me, as I kept thinking all the time of the necessity of washing up and getting over to see the attorneys.

He finally took me to his bankers, who told me his credit was practically unlimited with them, then he said he would take it on my terms. We went to the warehouse, got the barrel and weighed it carefully. He even paid me for the odd 239
ounces and it was not until we went back to the bank and the money was actually in my possession, that I realized the size of the transaction. He then told me it was a very rare color and that only a small amount was required for blending, which was the reason they could pay so much.

It took most of the day, but I did have time to go to the attorney's office, and begin more jockeying for position. I soon learned they wanted money, not the boat, were even willing to take it on the *excitement* plan, as Hiram suggested. It was worth more but they would take twenty thousand dollars. I thought they were distinctly disappointed

when I offered cash.

I obtained some allowance for what we paid at the sale. I then returned to the rooms with a bill of sale for the vessel, knowing it would not be long before Hiram would come. I felt disposed to laugh. Some one's plans had miscarried.

I heard his step on the first stair. He came up this time one step at a time, as though carrying weights on each foot, and when he came in I saw he was tired and hungry, but mystified and still fighting. 240

He came by way of his room, through the communicating door, into my room, where I was busy looking over a considerable mail, placed a chair back toward me, sat down on it reverse way, resting his arms on the back, let fall his big unshaven chin and looked from under the visor of his cap like a young lion ready to spring.

"Ben, you old dog, what have you been doing?" quick to gather assurance from my attitude. "Just before I left the dock the tug and all the men left, saying they were through so far as they knew."

"Yes, the *Fearsome* is released, and all claims against it settled."

"Yes—yes—but how did you do it?" he demanded.

Somehow at that moment it occurred to me that it might be best to tell the whole incredible story of the sale of the barrel of color which had been a standing joke between us. It was one of those extremely rare things that could happen only in war times, and I thought the flog of resistance better for him than the stimulant of easy success.

"Well, I induced them to cut their claim down some——" 241

"Yes—yes," he interrupted; "get to the point—how did you do it?"

"Well," I began again, "this morning I was too busy to tell you that a man came all the way from New York to buy our barrel of steel filings,—he's been waiting about all the time we have been gone on our trip—when I got through with him I had enough money to release the *Fearsome* and——"

"Ben," he interrupted, his eyes glittering, "you are an infernal—no, I won't say liar, because I don't believe you would lie—but you are romancing now to make me feel good, but——"

"All right, then, have it your way—all you need to know is that the *Fearsome* is released and you are free to do with her as you like—but just now I advise a shave for you and some stimulating food—for instance a beefsteak as big as ——"

"Ben, it's got to be as big as the state of New Hampshire this time and as thick as the crust of the earth——" He interrupted himself by springing over the chair, as I thought to thump me on the back, but instead he grabbed my hand affectionately. He craved relief from a long strain; my information took effect upon him like the champagne he used to take, and at that moment refused to consider what it cost or its ultimate effect. 242

CHAPTER XXV 243

We both cleaned up a bit and went out to dinner. I found he had done a good deal of planning. He knew what he wanted but did not know exactly how to get it. He was firm in the plan of getting the saw-mill we had seen in the unclaimed freight house onto the deck of the *Fearsome* and going up the river for the double purpose of making lumber from the "floaters," but most of all to have an excuse for getting into Becker & Co.'s plant. He was very sober most of the time, even morose, but occasionally his youthful buoyancy and humor would break out in the most surprising and delightful

way.

We canvassed the details of using the motor to run the saw, and decided that we would try it the next day.

"But, Hiram, suppose the timber people insist on your going back for another load? They can force you."

"They know, or think, we are still tied up with litigation. Besides—can't you explain to some one—a few days will turn the trick," he reasoned. "After we get Becker we may want to see them as badly as they want to see us," he added, with an eye for the main chance.

"Hiram, have you seen or heard from Anna Bell Morgan?" I asked suddenly to surprise him.

"No, I haven't—but as the time approaches—and you know it is coming—when I can go back to her with clean hands, I feel as though I can hardly contain myself. That's what keeps me up and doing; of course, I want to make out the Gold-Beater as a damned poor prophet about my future, but the main thing is her. Do you know, I actually feel her beside me urging me on and making me do things. It will be my happiest day when I can go back to her clean—actually clean." While he spoke he was digging away at the remnants of the great steak he had consumed, and for the first time I saw the harbingers of real manhood as he looked at me through eyes unabashed and unashamed.

The next day was a very busy one. He collected his freight and we moved the *Fearsome* to dock near the unclaimed freight house. I arranged with Superintendent Kitchell by telephone to take the sawmill, and by night it was bolted to the deck, with power from the motor applied. A derrick with outrigging, so that a log could be grappled and brought to the deck by power, and laid on the saw carriage to be solidly locked down for its terrible shining fangs that become invisible in full career, moving through a dirty, slimy log.

"Yes," Superintendent Kitchell had said to me when I asked him about my clerk, "I have taken Miss Bascom into my private office and found work for her there—perfectly safe any time you want her," he assured me, after getting a brief account of our progress.

At the first sign of daylight the next morning we left the dock with our queer looking craft and started up the river. Through an employment agency Hiram had secured three additional men, a sawyer and two laborers.

Hiram's interest amounted to intense excitement when the first log was cut. He had waited until he saw an unusually promising one go through. One of the laborers rowed to it, fastened the grapples and it seemed to want to come aboard, as though tired of life in the river, and there it lay quietly, without one flinch before the saw that passed through it. The sawyer understood his business, four slab cuts were made skillfully, the log squared and finally reduced to wide, clean, inch boards and stored below in less than ten minutes. Hiram found it hard to contain himself. His intense joy and elation threatened his dignity. He had made something useful, valuable, beautiful, with the delicate odor of the spring woods, from hitherto waste material. I knew what would have happened had we been alone. He would have tried to throw on me his now brawny person and pummel me from sheer exuberance.

"Ben," he said, in a tense undertone, "over five hundred feet of lumber in that log that they will mob us to get at five cents a foot." I knew he wanted to cut a big caper and cavort. "Twenty-five dollars, Ben, in less than ten minutes. Say, if Becker don't fall for cheap lumber—well, we'll get him sure with such bait, and the bayou back of his place is full of logs—we won't be there an hour before he comes for it—just you watch. We can be there by to-morrow morning," he went on, his eyes roaming the river on both sides for another good log that had eluded the lumber men in the long reaches of the Mississippi as far back as the Great Lakes.

That night we tied up at a bank across the river and a little

below Becker & Co.'s plant. It had been a busy day and every one except Hiram was tired and glad to stop for supper. I was sitting aft smoking when I noticed him come up from below, looking for me.

"I've been down taking stock and checking up the day," he began, squatting down before me on his heels, keeping his pipe in his mouth. "We captured just thirty-nine logs, you know a few of them had rotten centers, but we've got over twenty thousand feet of clear lumber besides nearly three thousand feet of culls. Figure it out at fifty dollars—it's worth more delivered—eleven hundred dollars—first day—all amateurs—we've got the big idea working."

"Why do you say we, Hiram? I claim no credit or interest or wages; I'm paid—it is your plan—don't be so modest."

"Yes, I did get the idea of capturing this waste, but how far would I have got alone—a hundred and twenty-five dollars per from the railroad and a certainty of being accused of stealing. In a thousand years I never will be charged with ingratitude—if we win, you've got——" 248

"The weak spot, Hiram, is that you will soon clean the river of logs, and then what? Sit still and wait for the once-a-year highwater to bring them down?" I asked, interrupting him purposely.

"Wait till we get Becker over there," he said, suddenly sobering and looking across the river, but making no other sign—something as a wolf looks at his prey within easy reach. "It's a hundred and fifty miles from here to the Gulf and lots of logs all the way. But with our big job done, once get actually free, and we run out of logs, something will turn up; in fact I've got another idea hatching. Do you see the foundation he has started over there? That's why he must have lumber. Doesn't his plant remind you of a quarantine station—or a pest house?" He asked this question as though he did not expect an answer.

CHAPTER XXVI 249

THE next morning it occurred to me that, while our plans were made with great care, the weak point was, that if Becker himself was at the plant he might recognize either of us. I mentioned this to Hiram, and for once since I had met him he laughed loud and long.

"I don't believe your mother would recognize you in that greasy, dirt-soaked, bifurcated night dress you wear," he yelled at me, "and the work you owe the barber, too; but look at me—I am worse yet, covered with mud and slime. Besides, I don't believe Becker ever had a good look at me, and if he did he couldn't pick me out as different from any other deckhand now," he said, grinning. Then he looked himself over, at his muddy shoes, browned hands, long hair and unshaved face, and it did seem to him as though, without effort, during the past few days, he had prepared a genuine disguise. Nevertheless we decided it would be safe to allow Captain Marianna to be the spokesman, although the captain should be kept in the dark concerning our real designs. Marianna should sell Becker lumber, cheap for cash, if he bit at our bait. 250

We sawed one or two logs, then crossed the river and began working up the stream toward the bayou back of Becker's plant, apparently with no more interest in it than if it had been a cemetery. The bayou was, just as Hiram said, full of logs—enough to keep us there for a day at least.

By the noon hour we had worked pretty well into the bayou and in back of the big fertilizer factory, with no apparent attention from it other than a terrible offense to our nostrils. If Becker was there he did not show himself and it began to look as if we would have to make overtures.

But when we had suspended operations for noon-time, a

negro with a boat made out from the Becker place and came alongside. He clambered on our deck, but no one paid any attention to him.

"I wants to see de boss," said he to one of our blacks resting well aft.

"You wants to see de Captain? He's up dere somewhares aroun' de wheel-house." We overheard this inquiry and the 251
answer with great interest. This was likely to be the first nibble at our bait.

When the captain was pointed out he acted well the part of a trader who had desirable goods with a liberal demand, but evidenced little interest in the emissary who approached him hat in hand.

"Is you de cap'm?"

"Yes, me da capitan," Marianna replied, assuming strong Italian accent without effort.

"Yas'sa—yas'sa," the darky echoed, looking about the boat, wet, dirty and littered with bark, slabs, and sawdust. "My boss, Mista Becka, wants to know—would like to know," he corrected, "if you kain't cum ashore to see him."

"Whata yo' boss want?—we start upa quick, gotta not much time."

"Wal, he did'n zactly say, but I done reckon as how he wants to see you 'bout somp'n pa'tic'lar."

"Go back, tella da boss we starta to work soon—I talka with him here after we getta da start," the captain said, pointing toward the deck.

"Yas, I'll tell him dat," replied the negro, fidgeting as though his mission had been a failure, but immediately started for his boat.

"You tella heem we be here alla day; he come any time," 252
Marianna called to him as he rowed away.

In about an hour the negro made out again, but this time he had the bulky figure of the man we wanted to see above all others. Of course, while we were running I had to stand by the engine below constantly, while Hiram, anticipating Becker's visit, had taken to a boat ostensibly to look over the logs carefully before fastening the grapples that brought them aboard.

Becker had not been aboard long before it was clear that Hiram had planned better than he knew. There is something about a saw in full career that the most blasé cannot resist. He stood watching it for some time. A huge wet and mud-laden log was hauled aboard, laid on the carriage, where steel teeth clenched it down. In a twinkling four side slabs came off and it was transformed into a square timber, clean and white, in strange contrast to the slimy thing it had been but a moment before. Then the whirling teeth began to travel through it with an ease that suggested a much softer material, laying out inch boards which disappeared below.

Captain Marianna brought him below to see the stock on 253
hand, and it seemed to fill the bill, but as he was leaving our big motor attracted his attention. Becker was not the debonaire Lothario he affected to be when in New Orleans. Now sadly unkempt, it seemed to me that his great midriff exuded grease, but it might have been sweat.

He was greatly interested in learning how the big motor, originally intended for an air-plane, not only propelled a boat and ran a sawmill, but yanked in the logs, and hauled in our rigging.

He finally came over to where I stood trying my best to look bored and tired.

"Do you ever have any trouble with it?" he asked, jerkily pointing a pudgy thumb toward the motor.

"No-o-o—but of course it's got to be watched."

"I've got one over there running an ice machine, but I don't

know whether its the nigger I've got running it, or whether it's overloaded, or no good, but it makes lots of trouble." I could see he wished to get some free technical instruction.

"It's likely your man doesn't know all about it," I led him on.

Our talk ended in my promise to go ashore that night and take a look at it. 254

Yes, he wanted lumber and the captain's price seemed satisfactory. In addition he wanted some lumber sawed half an inch thick for crating—and more—he would like to have all the sawdust we could save for him. He needed it in some insulating work on a cooler room—so he said.

That night we were to come alongside his wharf and he would have his negroes unload during the night what lumber we had so we would lose no time next morning.

"Oh, yes, I've got lots of niggers to do it," he explained when leaving.

When Hiram heard of the turn things had taken he could hardly contain himself. He acted like a man who had been in a dungeon for months and suddenly caught a glimmer of light. As for myself, I saw only that we were nearing the end of a very unpleasant bit of investigation.

"Be careful, Hiram," I cautioned, "the least bad move will spoil it. This man has a low cunning—hypnotize yourself into thinking it is not of much importance and you have a year to do it. A show of haste will be fatal." 255

Hiram was quick to see the point and began to grin. I knew he was about ready to jump out of his skin with excitement.

"Do you know," said he, "it is now only a little after two and we have sawed more logs and made more good lumber than we did all day yesterday!" Evidently he was trying to control himself. "The sawyer tells me he must have nice clear logs to make half-inch lumber on Becker's order. I guess I'll spend the afternoon picking them out."

It took longer than we thought to work our way out of the bayou and up to Becker's floating wharf. As soon as we were tied up he came down with a lot of negroes, who began at once to unload the lumber, carrying it piece by piece back near his building operations. Captain Marianna checked it as it left.

Now on the windward side of the plant it was possible to eat. It was a long rambling building, painted the color of a freight car, occasionally rising to two stories; on one end were the posts driven in the ground for a considerable addition.

After supper we sat smoking, well up on the bank. It soon became evident that Becker did not intend to lose a chance to get expert advice on his gas-engine troubles. He waddled over to us with some real Havanas and with little tact reminded me of my promise. 256

Though the sun was low, Becker was still in his working togs, bareheaded and stripped to an undershirt. In this array he was a sight to behold, with his sagging jowls, from which great billows of fat formed rolls about his neck.

"This boy here is my assistant, Mr. Becker—he has found engine trouble even when I couldn't," I said, pointing toward Hiram, as we got up to go with him.

How vitally interested Hiram was in this move would be hard to estimate. Much more experienced, I could only contain myself and be natural by refusing to think of the tremendous importance of our acting now, and, without coaching, I think Hiram did the same thing. The slightest false move would render worse than useless planning that had consumed much time and large expenditure.

Hiram walked beside Becker as nonchalantly as though strolling along Broadway, while I followed slightly in the rear. Hiram's now wonderfully developed physique seemed ready for action, ready to break loose with overpowering ferocity. I watched him furtively out of the corner of an eye to make sure he did not precipitate an affair that would "spill 257

the beans."

Becker led us around the outside of the buildings—I was sure there was a short cut through them—to a lean-to shed containing the troublesome engine now laboring with its burden as a locomotive starting to move an overload.

"Ben, the engine is overcrowded," said Hiram, as we stood by it, addressing himself to me just loud enough for Becker to hear. Becker stood slightly apart from me as though he had turned a patient over to us for the time being. I was glad his big black engineer was not there. My policy was never to kill, but my duty was to get what I went after.

We spent ten minutes examining the details of the engine, narrowly watched by Becker. Hiram's conduct was wonderful. He acted as though there was nothing under Heaven or on earth that interested him so much as discovering how we could help cure the sick motor. We 258
asked to see the load on the driving belt that disappeared from the driving pulley through a board partition.

Becker, fairly assured, took us inside into a dark space to a ten-ton ice machine, developing about half its capacity because of slow speed.

Glancing about it for a moment, we returned to the engine room and went outside as though about to return to the dock, considering it a hopeless case. Becker followed us, greatly concerned.

"Mr. Becker, it is a plain case of overload; you must lighten the work of your ice machine. You are attempting to make the motor do too much. The engine might be helped a little by readjusting, but that would not be enough," I said, with a sort of hesitating finality, as we both edged away in the direction we had come.

Becker followed and came close up beside us.

"How can I do that?—you see I am so far away up here I can get no one to do such things," he pleaded.

"The only way is to reduce the circulating distance of the ammonia mixture, and then what you have left will cool more 259
space than it does now," I said, actually feeling sure that was the case.

"How can I do that?" he urged, noticing quickly our inclination to leave.

"That might be very easy or it might be quite a job. We could not tell without examining your piping system," I replied as one who had done a big day's work and was thinking more of sleep than of his troubles, particularly since he had not offered us anything to remedy. Becker had enough sense to see this.

He screwed up his face in a way that brought prodigious wrinkles upon his forehead. Then followed an attempt to be patronizingly generous.

"Boys, I'll tell you what I'll do. I know you've been working all day and are tired, but if you will take time enough to look the whole system over and help it some, I will give you five dollars apiece—I must do something or I will have a lot of stuff spoiled—in fact, I have had some spoil already," he ended half to himself.

Hiram glanced at me quickly, and Becker thought that this swift movement to take down his pipe was caused by the lure of his cash offer.

CHAPTER XXVII 260

We spent two hours examining the remotest part of the refrigerating plant, piloted and aided at first by Becker. As it grew darker he furnished us with a torch. By this time we had made certain adjustments to the engine, the necessity of

which we had noted on first inspection, and left it running merrily away with its load like a horse relieved of a choking collar. Becker saw this, gave five dollars to each of us, and after the fashion of a boor, tried to appear grateful. Then he paid cash for all the lumber now stacked on the bank, with the understanding we were to bring as much more, after which he left us to go, as he thought, to our beds. But that was not our plan; we had work ahead of too much importance to think of sleep.

While we were making the examination of a large part of Becker's plant, for that is what it amounted to, Hiram controlled himself and behaved like a veteran, but at times I think he shrewdly guessed that I displayed more skill than an amateur. In fact, I was so mightily interested in the 261
outcome that I made no attempt to disguise the fact that under the guise of gasfitter, steamfitter, electrician, or refrigeration expert, I had gained access to the very bowels of buildings and manufacturing plants for a similar purpose.

When Becker had gone Hiram presented a curious combination—elation and disappointment. He fairly trembled now with suppressed excitement. He turned fiercely upon me and whispered hoarsely:

"Ben, we got a lot, but not the most important. We didn't find the seals, did we?" He asked this in a suppressed tone, but not until he had gone forward to make sure all the crew were on deck and asleep. Captain Marianna was snoring loudly in the pilot house.

"No—but all those hams, dried meat—horse-meat—and tubs of lard—renderings from dead animals—were freshly stamped, 'Inspected and passed,' with a Government stamp, and with Government ink."

"But the stamps and seals we want, Ben." I could not see his face in the dark, but his tone indicated that the day's hard 262
work had not abated his tremendous energy one whit.

"No, Hiram, but we have everything but the stamps and seals—we can convict him with what we now know—I mean with the addition of what we saw to-night—but that would not make a clean job. We have got to get the rest of the men with whom he must have been working, and who are most likely in the railroad service," I replied, rapidly analyzing.

"Where can we go?—what can we do to get them?—the nearer I get to the end of this thing, I feel almost as though I would go insane," he whispered, at the same time grabbing me by the shoulder as would a petulant child, and shook me until I thought his last statement was conservative.

"The old fox is very sly—doesn't trust any of his help—the stamps are not so important—the seals he keeps in or about his office in New Orleans—our next move is there. Hiram, can you stand a run to New Orleans to-night?" I replied, as though thinking aloud.

He sprang to his feet like a cat and leaned over me.

"I can stand to do anything, without eating or sleeping, if it 263
takes a whole week," he replied with set jaws.

The next morning we tied up at the wharf in New Orleans. During the night I had worked out a plan. There are times when cunning and strategical violations of the law must be matched in order to secure and convict criminals and the courts have uniformly justified it. I was going to take a big chance and finish the job quickly.

I left Hiram on the boat and went to our rooms for the mail, and to get other bearings. When I returned he was walking up and down the wharf like a caged hyena, almost frothing at the mouth.

"We are up against it again—it does beat the devil—why can't they leave us alone for a little while, anyhow?" he demanded, his eyes shooting fire as he stopped stolidly in front of me.

"What is it now, Hiram?"

"It's these damned shipping people—they say we can make two round trips a week to gulf ports for lumber, and if we don't do it willingly they will make us—just take the boat, that's all," he exploded in righteous wrath.

"That pays, doesn't it?" I asked with a smile, more to arouse his sense of humor. 264

"Yes, of course it pays, but haven't we got something more important—at that, it won't pay half as much as sawing logs from the river—and we can let the Government have the lumber," he replied—somewhat mollified.

"Hiram, you will have to go—but let's get some breakfast while we talk it over there."

We went below to where a darky was frying two big slabs of ham and a dozen eggs, also watching a large coffee pot steaming on a three-dollar gasoline stove. He prepared to serve the breakfast on a table made of the head of a tobacco tierce, with three square sticks for legs, placed in an open space back of the engine. The chairs were a four-inch cut-off from the end of a log, accoutered with legs as was the table, but all cleaned and trimmed, with good rustic effect. The entire hold of the boat had been washed, cleaned, and put in perfect order, and the men at that moment were scrubbing the upper deck. He must have everything clean and orderly.

Hiram sat down opposite me at this rustic round table, and placed two bare arms upon it. A deep pink rim about his eyelids was the only evidence of fatigue after twenty-four hours of continuous work without sleep, and while he had combed his hair with his fingers, and still needed a shave, a novice could see in him a big man, with tremendous energy that chafed at delays. 265

"Well——?" He looked eagerly the question as if to save words.

"Hiram, have you stopped to take stock lately? Don't you think we have made pretty good progress in the last ten days?"

"Indeed we have, Ben—don't think I am finding fault—what bothers me is—could we have done more?—have we worked up to the limit?—and it does worry me to think we have not done away with this man Becker, and squared away to take advantage of the tremendous opportunities, and—and you know the other thing—perhaps you cannot understand how fearfully anxious I am to go back to Anna Bell, clean—and successful."

"I do believe I understand. We—well, I'd rather say you—you have done it pretty much yourself—you have been successful."

"Heavens, yes—a month ago I was working for a hundred and twenty-five per, and no immediate prospects—and I would have been there yet, unless railroaded to prison as a goat for this crowd that you have——" 266

"No more of that, Hiram," I interrupted, raising my hand in protest—"let us talk of our immediate movements—the way matters stand now. You are so near out of the woods you can easily see the clearing, but there is more work getting through the underbrush—where there may be some snakes or other reptiles—but that ought not to worry you. Everything comes to those who hustle while they wait."

"But you have done the most——"

"Never mind now who has done the most—we can talk of that later. The way the case now stands, we have been to the butcher, the baker and the grocer for the goods to provide a sumptuous meal for Becker and his crowd, and perhaps we have the cook, but to make 'em eat will require just a little more time and strategy. As far as your being clear of implication, every one knows it now—it remains only to make it a matter of record.

"My plan for the next move may take a week or more, but doesn't require your presence, and as long as you are compelled to go anyhow, make a virtue of the necessity. Get 267

away for Gulfport as soon as possible and—temper your anxiety and impatience by making money. Fifteen hundred a trip—two trips a week—is not so bad, is it?" I asked, smiling, as I saw a shade of old-time exuberance creeping about his mouth. He had followed my review with rising spirits. It may be that the great piece of ham and the half dozen eggs and steaming coffee set before him helped a little.

CHAPTER XXVIII

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We sat and eyed each other for several quiet moments. Finally Hiram spoke. Said he, "Do you think I can help you here? If I can, we'll let them take the *Fearsome*—they'll have to pay well—then we can get another one. I won't rest well until this matter is cleaned up, lock, stock and barrel——"

"No, my boy, that would be an unnecessary sacrifice—boats with any such carrying capacity and speed are scarce; in fact, are now unobtainable. While I am not going into details now—truth is, I haven't yet worked out the details—I think seeing you twice a week will be enough." It really seemed to me that he would be only in the way, but I thought it unwise to mention that to him.

While I was looking up an engineer to take my place on the boat, Hiram went to the shippers and drove a hard bargain, arranging for loading and unloading at night so that he could make his run by daylight, requiring only one shift of the crew. Thus he surprised me again with his keen sense of 269
things commercial. One would have thought he had spent years about the docks and shipping. In fact, Hiram Strong, Jr., had been a continuous surprise.

When I returned with an engineer to explain and show him about, general merchandise was pouring into the *Fearsome*, with black stevedores swarming about like ants.

"You see, I am going to take just enough of this merchandise to pay expenses of the trip, then our lumber freight will be all velvet—the freight will come out at one end while the lumber goes in at the other and we won't lose any time, see?"

Yes, I did see, but didn't say much, for I was busy planning. I remained until I saw him off and waved to him as the *Fearsome* headed down stream. I afterward learned that when they reached the locks into Lake Borgne, they found the *Fearsome* could squeeze through and save over two hundred miles on the round trip and be running in inland water all the way. Surely nothing got away from that boy.

I returned to my old room in the general railroad office and 270
took possession again. I sent at once for Superintendent Kitchell, whom I knew was exceedingly anxious to hear of my progress. Nothing had been removed from my office except Miss Bascom's desk and typewriter.

The superintendent came in puffing, and was slightly indignant that I had not come to him, until I explained that I did not want to take the slightest chance of our conversation being overheard.

"We have been successful in getting pretty well all over Becker & Co.'s plant and have secured enough evidence against them to convict, but to finish the job and get the railroad men implicated I need some help from you," I said, as he looked at me with undisguised astonishment.

"Mr. Taylor, anything but the road-bed is yours, to help you clean up this infernal mess. Only this morning the general superintendent wired me asking if I had anything new to report. I suppose he was only 'passing the buck' that started away up—with the Government maybe——"

"Tell them not to be in too big a hurry—it may clear up soon, and it may take time yet. Mr. Kitchell, can you invent a plausible excuse for sending your man Burrell out of town, 271

some distance, for a few days?" I asked, casually.

Had the points of a dozen pins been suddenly introduced into the bottom of his chair, the effect on him could not have been more electrical. He sprang to his feet, indignant and angry to the point of apoplexy.

"You don't mean to say—you mean our chief clerk—you should be very cautious how you attempt to besmirch—do you actually mean him?" he fairly shouted, moving toward me menacingly.

"He is either used as a tool or is directly implicated, and with him out of town I propose to find out which. If implicated, I want to know just how far, but he must be sent on a half-hour notice—without even a chance to telephone."

"Well——!" he exploded, and began to polish his bare cranium with a big handkerchief. "I'll see—that must be arranged—it can't be done in a hurry——"

"Just as soon as you can without arousing suspicion will do, but I can't move, however, until that is done," I interrupted.

"I'm so astonished I can't think now—give me a little time." 272

"All right—and another thing, I wish you would have Miss Bascom transferred back here to me immediately."

"That's easy—I will have that done at once—the girl is all right, but Burrell," he said, shaking his head sadly—"Burrell takes my breath," he added as he went out, leaving the impression that the bed of a railroad superintendent was not bowered with roses.

I went out to luncheon and, although in a crowd, not a face appeared distinct. I was so absorbed in formulating plans to force an immediate issue that I didn't know what I was eating.

Upon my return I found Miss Bascom's desk in its accustomed place by the window. She bowed and greeted me as one whom she had not seen for a long time. I couldn't decide whether it was pleasure or disappointment. I was delighted to find a note from Superintendent Kitchell, saying he had found a way to hurry Burrell out on the twelve-thirty on a special errand to Kansas City that could be lengthened at will.

Glancing over at Miss Bascom, I noted her hands in front of 273
her as she sat looking out of the window, waiting for me to give her some work. I felt that her knell had rung, the supreme moment had arrived. Knowing that, I pitied her, for I proposed to tear away the mask and reveal to her the duality of her life.

The sunlight fell on her reddish brown hair, which appeared unusually attractive that day. I smoked half of my cigar in an endeavor to keep my poise and steel myself against the pity I would have for her during a fiery ordeal. As I had promised myself, I would force her to hold up the last few pages of her life for me to read, and I would use her as a lure, an instrument, with which to fasten a crime where it belonged—even if upon herself.

Swinging squarely about, I attracted her attention. She nodded, and supposing she was to take dictation, gathered her notebook and pencils and came to me at once. I had the decided advantage of a full light upon her face, while mine was shaded.

"Miss Bascom, it is not letters I want, but a somewhat serious talk, and while I may ask some exceedingly personal 274
questions, I would like you to feel it is not a desire to pry into your affairs."

She took the advantage of remaining silent, looking fully and frankly at me, and I thought there was the slightest smile about her delicate lips which I had believed—but now wondered—if Burrell had ever touched them.

"Miss Bascom, you know a Mr. Becker who has a plant up the river?"

Her eyes only evidenced the shock of hearing his name, but without outward sign she replied simply—"Yes."

"How well do you know him?"

"I don't think I know him very well," she replied with attempted frankness.

"You had not been here with me long until you knew I was investigating these railroad thefts, and that he was suspected?"

"I was not quite sure—you let me know so very little," she replied with an ease that was somewhat exasperating.

"Yet, during that time you were with me in—well, rather a confidential capacity—you went out with him to public places, drinking places, and could not be in ignorance of his real purpose; in fact, his proposals were outright?" 275

"Y-e-s," she faltered, raising her eyes, now lighted with a fire I thought impossible. I could not determine whether from resentment toward me or the recalling of certain indignities she had experienced.

"What is your attitude toward him now?"

"The same as it has always been," she replied, her bosom heaving as a result of her mental agitation.

I knew I was master now, so leisurely lit another cigar and blew a cloud of smoke between us, contemplatively.

"What is his attitude toward you?"

"I think the same as it has been." Then, looking down at her pretty hands in her lap, she half murmured, "Such a man does not change much."

This admission sounded to me like a cannon shot and I immediately asked:

"You say that your relations with him are the same as always, but you do not say what they were."

This time she looked down at the toe of a very small, neat shoe which she raised slightly to contemplate. She remained silent for some moments, the veins in her forehead swelling until they showed blue through her delicate skin. 276

"I—I—would like to see him punished—it seems to me that is what you want to know," she said in a low voice in which I thought there was resentment, but whether directed against me, Becker or some one else I could not determine. "I would do *anything* to have him punished," she added with suppressed emphasis.

"Miss Bascom, what are your relations with Chief Clerk Burrell?" I asked suddenly.

Taken completely unawares from this quarter, she drew a very short but deep breath, recovering quickly.

"They—well—I know Mr. Burrell," she admitted slowly.

"You have carried on quite a flirtation with him?"

"Yes—of course, you do not know—it would be hard to make you understand——"

"Does Mr. Becker know of your attitude—rather, I mean, your relations with Mr. Burrell?" I interrupted.

"I—well, he knows that I am well acquainted with Mr. Burrell, but I don't think he quite understands all," she admitted with some show of humility, inclining me to the conclusion that she loved Burrell and would save him. But I didn't care whom she wanted to save. 277

I was perhaps somewhat brutal in saying, "I have your word you would do *anything* to reach Mr. Becker—of course, with the understanding that you will be protected?"

She opened her mouth, showing pure white teeth, then drew her lips tightly until no red was visible, all the while looking squarely at me as she repeated slowly, knowingly—

"Yes, *anything*. I would go through Hell Fire!"

CHAPTER XXIX

278

SPIRITED, maidenly purity will work itself into a sort of ecstatic, swaggering turbulence, similar to a hardened degenerate, frequently to the chagrin, disappointment and dismay of the most practiced.

When through with Miss Bascom, I will confess I could not tell in which class she belonged. War had brought to our shores hideous flotsam, whom I did not care, did not want, to know. I wanted trap bait, and why not her? Had I mentioned my belief that she had sent the anonymous notes to Hiram, or that she had been seen dining with the Gold-Beater, Hiram Strong, Sr., after six hours' business acquaintance, her attitude would have instantly developed.

A certain cold-blooded brutality in what I proposed must be admitted. I wanted to clear Hiram and finish a long-drawn-out case, and one doesn't want to know the pedigree of the lamb used as bait for a lion. But I proposed to save her from the fate of the lamb in such cases, although she had consented, without duress, to act. I felt that it was Burrell she wanted to save.

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I gave her some work that would occupy about all the afternoon, and took measures to prevent her leaving the building or telephoning without being overheard.

Becker was in the city and about his office. His business was flourishing.

With the coöperation of the hotel management two communicating rooms on the second floor were arranged for at the hotel frequented by Becker, and these were prepared for my purpose.

At four o'clock when I asked her to dress for the street and come with me, she did so without hesitation—in fact, she seemed eager—but I could not be sure of that.

As we walked silently down to the hotel she appeared to be sure of herself, and if she was surprised when we entered the ladies' entrance and walked up the one flight to the rooms, she gave no evidence of it. I felt assured she had the necessary self-control.

She was quick to notice that the door between the two rooms was open, but made no comment, and apparently as though in her own lodgings, removed her hat, to make herself comfortable. She went to the glass, touched her wonderful hair here and there as though to add something to its alluring arrangement, impressing me anew that she was in point of beauty, at least, a most attractive girl, and I again complimented Becker's ambitious taste and selection. As for throwing herself away for the married, sporting Burrell, I pitied her for her lack of discrimination.

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She took the chair I pointed to in front of a writing desk on which was the room telephone. The way she rested her elbow on it and half turned toward me suggested that she awaited my signal of "what next?"

"Miss Bascom," said I, taking a chair facing her, "I feel like warning you that you are undertaking a most delicate, difficult, and even dangerous enterprise. If you fail through inability, it will be understood, but if you fail by reason of half-heartedness or any sort of treachery, I will not be responsible. I am positively in no mood to condone such an offense, besides I am not the only one involved in this arrangement—there are others who are less likely to be trifled with than myself." I spoke good-naturedly and with something of a plea for her own welfare.

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"Mr. Taylor," she began, in quiet, sweet, Southern accent, "I have consented to act a part in good faith, and if I fail it will be because it cannot be done." Then, with charming assurance, she glanced into the other room and at the telephone before her, and said, "Explain just what you want

me to do."

She seemed almost too willing and a certain nervousness in her tone left some doubt. But we had arranged for duplicity, and though I felt the ice a little thin, decided to go ahead.

"Miss Bascom, your motive in maintaining relations with Mr. Becker is something of a conjecture that I am not much interested in now. It may interest you, however, to know that I know of your meeting with him in a wine room of this hotel." Then taking from my pocket a typewritten report of the meeting, I continued, "The least sound that was made in that room at that time is here recorded as nearly as possible in words and sound of voice. I know what you drank, what he drank, that you submitted to his caresses, kisses, that he made salacious proposals, and there may have been subsequent meetings of which we do not know." 282

She started visibly at this and moved uneasily in her chair, laid her chin in her palm and looked straight at me with eyes burning like fire—I thought slightly mixed with alarm and amusement, but she did not utter a word, so I continued:

"In order that you proceed intelligently in this matter I will tell you that Becker is a criminal and that we have ample evidence to convict him, but in order to make it easier, and to reach others, I want you to get him to come up here to this room, then actually lure from him what we want."

She made no sign and I went on:

"There are times when fire must be met with fire, crime sometimes has to be uncovered by finesse, strategy, trick, even downright subterfuge, and this seems to be one of the times. His weakest point is his penchant for pretty women."

Miss Bascom evidenced intense interest in what I said and seemed to weigh every word I uttered. But she did not appear to want to reply or suggest anything, though she seemed to take on an exultant attitude.

"We have ample evidence to convict him of robbing cars of meat products, and to do this he must have in his possession the seals of the United States Bureau of Animal Industry, and the shippers of the goods in Kansas City, as well as the railroad seals, and the instruments for adjusting. These we want. 283

"We believe that he has them secreted here in New Orleans. The plan is that by your protestation of interest, affection or whatnot, you will induce him to place them in your hands for safekeeping. We are certain he has been furnished these things with help from Kansas City. Do you think you can do it?" I ended by asking suddenly.

"What will happen if I fail?" she surprised me by asking.

"If you fail and can show a clean slate, nothing unpleasant will happen," I replied rather coldly, suggestive of what might happen if the reverse were true.

"*I—think*—I may be able to make some headway, but it may take more time than you anticipate," she warned me quietly.

"I don't care how much time you take, or how much expense, but it must be a continuous performance—nothing more than an intermission will be allowable. This telephone will be permanently connected with mine in the next room. If he wants you to drink, do so, and nothing containing alcohol will come to you, and though he is copper-lined, we will contrive to put him at a disadvantage and you can easily use the 'phone to ask for instructions when you are not sure." Then contemplating her critically for a moment, I added —"You said you were willing to do *anything*." 284

"I know I did—and I will—and I begin to feel safe—you will protect me, won't you?" she asked me with a delightful appeal in her eyes that could not be refused.

"Every precaution has been made for that—you will not be disturbed; the waiter who serves you is one of our men—but you must act, you must succeed. Becker is probably in his office now; call him up," I added, giving his number.

There was no doubt about her eagerness and distinct intention to succeed, to do *anything*, but I could not decide whether she was moved by fear or a genuine desire to coöperate, get revenge, or to save Burrell.

Becker fell incontinently during the first round. 285

There was in every word a purr, a coo, an invitation—she assumed the attitude of permitting him to come up, to see her for just a little while at the hotel.

Her low laugh of triumph was more of a chuckle as she turned to me for approbation.

"Fine—so far very good," I commented as though the result was no more than expected and prepared to go into the other room and lock the door, where she did not know I could overhear every whisper that passed, though she may have suspected something of the sort.

Becker's haste to get there was evidenced by the speed with which he came, and his entrance was Falstaffian. But the real Falstaff had no such intrigue arranged for him. He was not a criminal.

The meeting between Bascom and Becker lasted over six hours. The stenographers at the dictaphone in my room made over a hundred pages of evidence to be used at the trial.

When it was over, just before midnight, and I led Miss Bascom out of the hotel to a cab, her sturdy body seemed a wreck. She leaned heavily on me and seemed to have aged 286
greatly. As she was about to enter the vehicle, she looked back into the building, horrified, as though reason was unseated by wild imaginations that she was pursued by a legion of dreaded devils. She did not utter a word until she was seated inside, when she reached her hand, delicate and soft, for mine, and with gentle pressure, exclaimed as though waking from a terrible nightmare:

"Mr. Taylor, I have lived a hundred years in the last six hours—but—but"—she hesitated, gasping for breath—"I have done what I—we—what you wanted me to do."

Of course, when Becker first came the overture was drink; it always is. Having full control of that through the waiter we saw that the first ones had more punch than he expected, but we gave her a mere counterfeit of what he thought she was drinking. The sumptuous food he ordered was carefully served. Later we had to weaken his potions so that his mad desire would run at its height, waiting on neither discretion nor reason. I heard every word, every sound. Her acting was perfection. The indignities she suffered were terrible and could not have been endured except for the reason that they 287
were fortified by a deep, enduring, sacrificial tendency to be loyal. This conclusion forced itself upon me. His protestations were repeated over and over and merged into a plea for sympathy.

Her generalship was superb. He promised her everything. She patiently, cautiously led him to the point where she told him, that by reason of her position in the office she knew he had been *led* into certain transactions that might lead to her disgrace, in view of the alliance he proposed.

"But that is all stopped," he reiterated a dozen times.

Then, with wonderful acumen, she let him understand that she knew of the existence of various stamps and seals, finally that their very existence was a menace and she could not feel any security in his promise until she knew they were destroyed.

"I will put them at the bottom of the river to-morrow morning."

"But if you are really in earnest and mean well, you will do that now, this very night—let me see you do it, or bring them to me," she coaxed, wheedled, insinuated.

And then finally with the blood fired by alcohol and that 288
quality that makes men putty in the hands of beauty and sex

lure, he ordered a cab and in an incredibly short time returned with quite a large package wrapped carefully in burlap. He left the room for a moment in his preparations for the anticipated night. I opened the door between the rooms, admitted her with the package, about all she could carry, and he never saw her again. The mad, inflamed bull was stalled with a ring in his nose.

This blazed the trail to Kansas City, where I started on the next train, and did not return for more than a week.

CHAPTER XXX

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As soon as I saw Hiram I knew he was a different man. It was not necessary for me to tell him. Details were published in every daily paper. He had gone back to Anna Bell Morgan clean, unsullied, unbesmirched—his conception of what a man should be, and prosperous beyond dreams. A solid, forceful man, ambitious without limit, he was much interested in the brief information I gave him of how I had successfully uncovered and apprehended in Kansas City all the others involved in the crime, who evidenced a power of organization which, if directed in legitimate channels, would have made them rich.

He had rented and furnished offices, where I found him at work.

"Had to have headquarters, Ben—just one room, with an adjoining one for you—let me introduce you to it," he said, putting his hand affectionately on my shoulder, leading through a connecting door into a big, well-lighted, expensively furnished office.

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"Sit down and see how it seems to have a home of your own," he went on, pushing me into a big leather chair and throwing up the top of a commodious mahogany desk. Everywhere showed evidence of the feminine touch.

"You see, Ben, I could not have done so well. This is Anna Bell's idea and selection—I have told her so much of you she feels, in fact acts, as though she knew you as well as I do, but you will meet her soon and she will tell you about that herself. I never would have thought of the carpet, but she said carpet, and there was carpet," he mused reminiscently, as he pulled up a chair and sat down near me where he could look out of the window.

"I've got to leave to-night again on the *Fearsome* and there is so much to tell you—something I want to ask you about."

I was too astonished and delighted with the enterprise and zeal of the fellow to know what to say.

"Ben, why don't you say something—don't you like this?" he asked solicitously, leaning toward me and scanning my face. He was the boy again.

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"Hiram, give me a little time—I was wondering how you managed so quickly to do all this——"

"There—that's better," said he, a relieved smile creeping about the upturned corners of his mouth. "I told you I didn't—I couldn't—have done it alone—you see, Ben, I am making three trips a week to Gulf port instead of two, and carrying enough general merchandise back to pay expenses," and then turning his chair so as to look squarely at me, he continued. "It is pouring prosperity, though we are making a willing, patriotic sacrifice while doing it, and we must hustle like sixty until the rain is over."

I looked at him more astonished, as I felt sure something bigger was coming. Was there no limit?

"We are making money pretty fast now, but this won't last—I know now the logs in the river will disappear soon after we get at them again, and you know we have got to look ahead. I can buy a tract of timber up there at Gulfport—cheap—

enough timber to keep us sawing for years. Now don't look so alarmed—it will take a lot of money, but we've got to do it if it is possible. I've opened a bank account here and talked 292
to the president about it—but everything now is going into Liberty bonds and you can't blame them—but it's got to be done, Ben," he repeated in a tense undertone, bringing his hard hand down on my knee with a loud slap.

Looking at him in wonder for a moment, I finally asked,

"How much will it take, Hiram?"

"Now don't fall over when I tell you—that's why I got a big chair with a soft cushion, so that you could sustain a shock once in a while without injury. Ben, it will take about a hundred thousand dollars to get it, but it's got to come," he ended, passing his hand rapidly over his chin as though glad it was out.

"You have not forgotten, Hiram, that you must settle with the railroad for the engine in the *Fearsome* and the sawmill, too?"

"I know we have, but I've got enough in the bank for that and more besides," he replied quickly. "What do you think, is it possible?" he asked, making me feel he was not to be resisted.

"I don't know, Hiram; you are placing a pretty big order—we'll see—I don't believe I told you just how much I sold that 293
barrel for, did I?" turning to him with an affected smile of derision.

"Yes, I know you will have the laugh on me as long as you live about that barrel; in fact, I will laugh myself every time I think of it even if I am at a funeral, but that couldn't happen again in a million years," he replied, getting up and pacing the room, finally halting in the opposite corner, where he catapulted a question as though he might be coming along with it.

"How much did you get for it, Ben?"

"It was as you say, Hiram, a thousand-to-one shot that could not have happened and never will happen again—I don't claim any credit, except in discovering it was not junk, by a little leakage through the chimes which discolored my fingers."

"I know—I know—you never claim anything," he interrupted.

"You see, we had to pay something like twenty thousand to clear the *Fearsome*."

"Yes, I know that."

"Well, I think there is a balance in the bank of something about forty thousand more——"

"You are joking again, Ben," he interrupted, charging over 294
toward me, incredulous, as I took from my wallet a credit slip which he grasped and began to cavort and cut capers on the expensive carpet, much the same as he acted at the first signs of good luck, months before.

"Ben, you are a mascot—you have been one to me, anyhow—now in another month—before this deal can be closed—I can pay the railroad claim for the motor and the sawmill, and every other stiver we owe. And we'll have at least ten thousand more to bring our balance up to fifty thousand. Now, how can we raise fifty thousand more?" he asked, fairly excited—he pronounced *fifty thousand* as though he was used to dealing in those figures all his life—as though it was no more than the price of one of those famous beefsteaks he liked so well. He must have inherited it from the Gold-Beater—as he did the love for new, clean lumber and the lumber business. Hiram admitted he knew so little of his father that he was unaware I knew he was a Lumber King.

I took out cigars, thinking hard, and offered him one.

"No, thank you, I prefer a pipe," said he producing one at 295
once as something he had overlooked.

"Hiram, give me a little time—you say you leave this

afternoon?"

"Yes, I ought to be on the dock now," said he, blowing a cloud of smoke and scanning me as though to learn just what I was thinking. "I will be back day after to-morrow," he added, anticipating the question.

"I'll see"—I said, moving back a little in my big chair and contemplating the end of my cigar—"perhaps when you get back I may have something—maybe there is a way——"

"Don't say maybe—say you will do it," he prodded.

"Hiram, I still say *maybe*," I answered firmly, wondering whether the Gold-Beater was still down the river shooting ducks, and if I could get into touch with him before Hiram returned.

Early on the morning he was due back, a messenger came to say I was wanted on the telephone by some one at Lake Borgne Locks. I knew it was Hiram—he had probably been calling Anna Bell Morgan to tell her of his arrival and knew he would catch me in my room.

"What news?" he asked as though tired of waiting, and more, as though he expected it to be favorable. 296

"The news is all right."

"Oh, I knew it would be," he broke in, not waiting for me to finish. "Say, I will be up to the docks at eight, and be at the office at ten—meet me there," and he hung up abruptly.

This suited me exactly. I was through and had made reservation on a train leaving for the North—for home and a little rest.

I had cleaned up everything except a little writing and was doing that in the office that had been so generously provided for me, when I heard Hiram enter his adjoining room. The door between was not tightly closed, and I was aware at once he was not alone. He had evidently made an engagement also with Anna Bell Morgan. I could hear his voice easily, and as I was aroused from the preoccupation of my writing, I could hear her voice, and as I listened closely there came a shock, a slow, leaden, enervating, numbing shock on recognizing the voice of Miss Bascom, my clerk. The whole thing swam slowly before me. I knew now why she had acted her rôle with such intensity and risk. I felt an 297
impulse to grab my grip and bolt through the door into the hall and take my train without meeting them together, but I didn't have time before he came bursting through the door leading her proudly to me.

"Mr. Taylor, I introduce my wife. I forgot to tell you we were to be married at nine." I arose, took her extended hand as she looked at me squarely, radiantly, but with a plea. I got her message, but I think I made a failure of the greeting and congratulations. I was afraid Hiram noticed it. In fact, I felt sheepish that I had not discovered that she had assumed a name and underwent the disgusting experiences with Becker and Burrell to help him.

"Not going away, Ben?" Hiram asked, noticing my grip—he never overlooked anything.

"Yes, Hiram, I am going to leave you now—I am through here."

"You—you don't mean—when will you be back, Ben?" he asked, glancing in alarm first at me and then at his bride of an hour.

"I don't know when I will return, Hiram. Just now I have to 298
answer the call of others. I may come back to testify at the trial."

"You don't mean you are not going to stay here with me—when things are just getting started right?" he began, coming over and placing one hand on the back of my chair and bending forward to look in my face to see if I was ill.

"Sit down—both of you," I interrupted, looking at Anna Bell's radiance changing to disappointment too, as he brought

chairs up near me. "I have a confession to make, and I like to do the unpleasant things first and have them over with."

"But say, old fellow, you can't leave me now—I need you in so many ways—you see, we have been through so much together——" began Hiram, leaning well forward in his chair.

"It cannot be—just now anyhow—and perhaps you will not want me to do so when I admit to a certain sort of duplicity—but at which I hope in the course of time you will look upon tolerantly, forgivingly—I don't want you to think badly of me—as I have in the last few months become deeply attached to you."

"What are you getting at, Ben—I will never believe you have deceived——" 299

"Wait till I tell you why I came here—left New York with you, was paid a definite sum and expenses for doing so for a definite purpose, and that purpose is now accomplished, and the Government, engaged in a gigantic war, calls me to other activities. I must——"

"I don't care what you have done or been, though I don't quite understand," he began, his voice almost failing; "we are doing work for the Government just as important as any—and I need you."

"You may have needed me, Hiram, but you don't now—you are nicely started and you have better help now than I can give," I broke in, looking at Anna Bell, who was as much affected as Hiram. "She is courageous, a natural diplomat and wonderful at plans, and besides, you can now stand alone and must learn to rely on yourself, and besides, more than two in a firm often complicates matters."

"I know—I know—I can see—but you don't explain—what is this you are hinting——?"

"Hiram, it may be better for it to come to you gradually. Now let us talk about money for my train goes soon and I find I need some money, and I must give you the big check necessary to pay for the timber land. First of all, will you cash these checks for me? These are my salary checks I have never used," I explained as I took them out, turned to the desk and endorsed them, aware that Hiram and Anna Bell were looking at each other and trying to understand. 300

"Ben, I am sure this is only a misconception—a feeling of delicacy—that you may be interfering——"

"No, Hiram, my plans are definite; I cannot change them if I would," said I, handing him the checks as soberly as though not anticipating his astonishment when he saw them.

At first he did not look at them, but laid them on his knee as a mere matter of detail. He was too busy trying to divine what was going on in my mind; finally glancing down at them, he became aware there was something familiar about them, and then his excitement knew no bounds.

"How the devil"—he began, raising half out of his chair, tapping the checks wildly—"how did you get these? Why, these are like the ones I used to—now I understand," he said, subsiding, quite overcome. "Ben, were you paid by my father? My God, is it possible—then he didn't kick me out—it was just his way——" 301

"Just his way to teach you to work and make amends for his neglect, and here is another one, the big one for fifty thousand signed by him, too—you may be surprised to know he is now down in the lower reaches of the river, duck-shooting. When I saw him yesterday, I had no difficulty; everything seemed to be prepared for the proposition," I said; looking quizzically at Anna Bell. Mixed with her delight was a shade of fear and apprehension. I tried to make her understand that she must tell him herself about her captivating the Gold-Beater, securing his approval and further support, of the Becker episode, her assumed name—and all to help Hiram. In fact, I did not have the courage to do it.

"I can hardly conceive my father——" Here his voice broke completely.

"And you can hardly credit that the *Fearsome* might have been placed conveniently in the canal——"

"Oh, heavens, and I thought we were doing it—and did he plan all that trouble in the river—did his men, the lawyers, take her from——?"

"Yes, I guess he did, Hiram; he wanted to try you out—a last real trial——"

"And the barrel, Ben, did he have anything——?"

"No, Hiram, that was a piece of just dumb luck that will always be with you—send me a check for half of it when you get things straightened out," I said, grabbing my grip and bolting. As I rounded the corner of the hall for the elevator, I glanced back. They stood out in the hall, their arms around each other, watching me go.

THE END

Corrections

The first line indicates the original, the second the correction.

p. 196:

an anxiliary gasoline tank
an auxiliary gasoline tank

p. 295:

before Him returned
before Hiram returned

p. 299:

and expenses for dong so
and expenses for doing so

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