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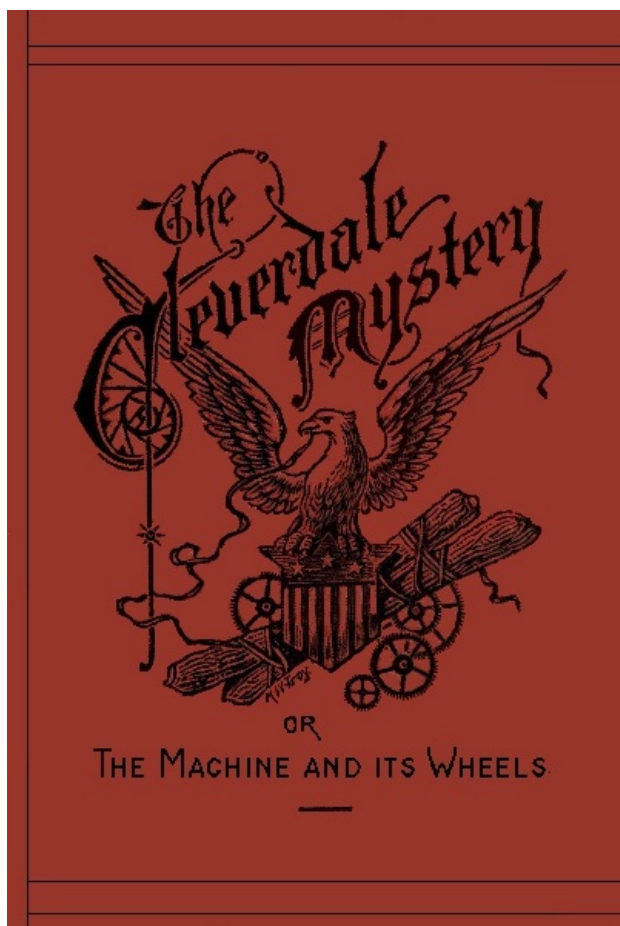
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THE
CLEVERDALE MYSTERY;
OR,
THE MACHINE AND ITS WHEELS.

A STORY OF AMERICAN LIFE.

BY
W. A. WILKINS,
EDITOR OF "THE WHITEHALL (N. Y.) TIMES."

NEW YORK:
FORDS, HOWARD, & HULBERT.
1882.

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PREFACE.

In presenting this volume to the public, the author hopes to impart information to some; reflect their own character to others; possibly point a moral, and by the tale interest the reader.

The warp of the fabric is reality, the woof fiction, the coloring domestic.

Awaiting the verdict,

Respectfully,
THE AUTHOR.

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CHARACTERS.

HON. DARIUS HAMBLIN—State Senator and Political "Boss."

HON. WALTER MANNIS—State Assemblyman; one of the "Boss's" Lieutenants.

ASSEMBLYMAN DALEY—Bolting candidate.

CYRUS HART MILLER—Wily country politician.

GEORGE ALDEN—Bank officer; hero; lover.

SARGENT—Purchasable commodity, convenient to his owner.

JOE RAWLINGS—Editor; wise; in the market.

PADDY SULLIVAN—Pothouse politician; an important factor.

FARMER JOHNSON—Honest; cheap; "*Let me speak to you privately!*"

GEORGE HORTON—Chairman of County Committee; fertile in schemes.

FARMER HARRIS—Avenger.

BELLE HAMBLIN—Sweetheart; oppressed by a father's ambition.

FANNIE ALDEN—Self-sacrificing sister.

MARY HARRIS—Betrayed.

MRS. DARIUS HAMBLIN—Model mother.

MRS. NASH—Good Samaritan.

CAMPERS, FACTORY BOSSES, VILLAGERS, MINERS, POLITICIANS, and other incidental characters.

THE

CLEVERDALE MYSTERY.

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CHAPTER I.

BEAUTIFUL LAKE GEORGE.

The world is full of charming spots that seem to be the original site of Paradise, but none show more perfectly the grace and grandeur of the Creator's handiwork than Lake George. Its limpid waters reflect the outlines of numerous islands—one for each calendar day of the year, yet each possessing beauties distinctly its own. The mirror of the lake's surface is framed by mountains of varying shape and size, yet each with special charms, while between them nestle lovely valleys, over which the eye never tires of roaming. In summer, every isle, hill, and valley is glorious with verdure; in winter they are dazzling in snowy vesture; but no matter what the season or condition, the lake and its surroundings are a constant source of delight to those who are fortunate enough to dwell on its shore.

It is to the credit of humanity that Lake George is a favorite place of resort during the summer, and that hundreds of families delight in building permanent summer homes there. Beautiful villas, picturesque hotels, tasteful cottages, unique cabins, and snowy tents abound on the water's marge, and pleasure boats of all sorts dance gaily on its waves. The vulgar, the dissipated, and stupid classes that haunt summer resorts seem to avoid Lake George; even humanity seems to endeavor to be in keeping with its surroundings at this beautiful retreat, and fair women, robust, active men, and healthy children are the rule at this modern Eden.

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On the forward deck of a steamer that ploughed its way through the crystal waters on a bright summer day in 187- was a small party, consisting of Hon. Darius Hamblin, Mrs. Hamblin, Miss Belle Hamblin, and two little boys, George and Willie, aged respectively ten and six, with their nurse.

The Hon. Darius, a man of fifty-five, had served his district as New York State Senator at Albany for two terms. He possessed excellent judgment, and knew this so well that no one could help seeing that he was vain and inclined to be arbitrary in his manner. Mrs. Hamblin was a small,

brown-haired lady, with whom time had dealt so gently that the unwelcome and indelible lines of approaching age had been sparingly distributed across a sweet and placid countenance.

Devoting her whole attention to the wants and pleasures of her children, she was not merely a kind mother, for with dignity and power she held the reins firmly in her grasp, although the high-spirited boys tightly champed the bits.

While the mother, as she sat on the steamer's deck, was all attention to her youthful treasures, the father discussed the politics and finances of the country with several gentlemen whom he chanced to meet. Thoroughly engrossed in conversation, he scarce noticed his daughter Belle, who, affectionately taking his arm, called attention to a landing the steamer was about to make.

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As the boat drew in, there was seen a gathering bevy of males and females. Small row-boats hovered near the little coves surrounding the dock, and as great waves from the *Horicon's* paddles dashed their snow-crested tops upon the rocks, the little craft danced upon the water, some girlish voices uttering exclamations of fear for their owners' safety. Several persons leaving the steamer were quickly surrounded by friends gathered to meet them.

In a moment the captain cried, "All aboard!" The engine resuming its work, the paddle-wheels lashed the water, many little boats shooting out into the swell. Those on the steamer eagerly watched the merry throng on the dock or the still happier ones rocked by the "rollies."

"Oh, papa," exclaimed Belle, "this is delightful! See that party on the little island—isn't it a funny sight? See that gentleman shaking a frying-pan over his head! See the other campers washing dishes in the lake! Oh, how I shall enjoy this month! We are to stop at the next landing, and in ten minutes will leave the boat. Oh, isn't it delightful!"

The father rising took his daughter by the arm, his manner indicating unbounded love and parental pride. Belle Hamblin was a beautiful girl scarcely nineteen years of age. Of medium height, she possessed a faultless form combining exquisite symmetry and grace. Full of animation when speaking, her tender blue eyes flashed intelligence and goodness, captivating every one who came within their reach.

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She completely won the admiration of those on the boat by the tender and sympathetic way in which she ministered to a poor woman accompanied by four children, giving to the little ones from her lunch-basket oranges, bananas, and cakes, while the mother was offered more substantial food in the way of sandwiches. Tender-hearted and kind when Willie injured his wee finger, she worked over the wound, hugged the curly-headed boy to her heart, stilling his cries with sisterly caresses. Belle Hamblin was no ordinary character, for God had wrought those lovely attributes into her nature which cannot fail to command respect and admiration. She could not avoid being a prominent figure in any life picture of which she was part, for to her mother's instinctive quality of love was added the natural intelligence of her father. Possessing a pride in striking contrast with that so positive in her father's character, she readily assumed her natural position as leader in social circles. Endowed with a liberal education, taught the economies of life, and instructed in the art of housekeeping, she was fitted to be queen of the kitchen or the enchantress of the drawing-room.

The boat nearing the beautiful retreat where the Hamblins were to sojourn, wraps, baskets, and umbrellas were gathered up while Mr. Hamblin was taking leave of his friends. The *Horicon* slowly approached the dock close at hand; the party passed through the cabin to the gangway; lines were thrown ashore and the steamer made fast. Mr. Hamblin led the way, the children, wild as young colts, jumping in gleeful anticipation. About thirty persons crowded to the gangway, a rush was made for shore, when suddenly the piercing shriek of a female startled the bystanders, as a little boy fell headlong into the lake.

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"Willie is overboard! Save him!" The voice was that of Belle Hamblin.

Rushing wildly to the edge of the gangway and seeing the little fellow sink into the water, she was nearly frantic with excitement. Mr. and Mrs. Hamblin were filled with terror, while those standing on shore appeared as if paralyzed. Suddenly a blue-shirted man darted through the crowd, and throwing himself into the lake, seized Willie, and a moment later placed him in the arms of the sister.

Belle, looking into his face, quickly exclaimed:

"Mr. Alden! I did not expect to see you here, but God bless you for saving the life of our treasure."

The curly-headed boy, with water dripping from his locks, lay in his sister's arms. Gasping and moving his head, the water running from his nostrils and mouth, he was carried to the family parlor at the hotel, where a physician soon restored him to his normal condition, and then the family, recovering from their fatigue and fright, appeared on the grounds, their exciting introduction and acknowledged social and political standing making them the observed of all.

Mr. Hamblin, having held many important positions in his party, was soon on terms of friendship with the sterner sex, Mrs. Hamblin and Belle taking their natural places among the ladies.

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Mr. Hamblin was a genial conversationalist, and with his political reputation preceding him was of course much courted by all at the "Lakeside." Having been a State Senator for two terms, a prominent candidate for gubernatorial honors at a late convention, and possessing wealth and eloquence, his power was naturally great. A candidate for renomination the coming fall, he had already started the machinery to obtain control of delegates needed to consummate his desired wish.

American politics are controlled entirely by "wires," those of the great political machine being intricate as the telegraph netting one sees over the roof-tops of a large city. Mr. Hamblin, with a perfect knowledge of the workings of this machine, knew that a successful candidate must be able to manipulate the little wires of the party caucus, for as the caucuses are the expression of each town in the senatorial or assembly district, to obtain needed support requires wire-pullers in every school district. A candidate's personal merit is of minor consequence; he can do nothing without understanding the working of the party machinery, and knowing also how to lubricate the entire apparatus with money.

Mr. Hamblin had been a little uneasy of late, a rival having arisen to contest his field. Heretofore enjoying the monopoly in the district, he was now in danger of meeting an obstacle in his onward course. As he sat on the piazza holding a letter in his hand, he soliloquized:

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"Well, well! Making my way in politics has always been easy as knocking the ashes from this cigar, but if Miller's letter is correct Darius Hamblin is in danger. Let me see; I'll read this over again"—and he closely scanned the following letter:

CLEVERDALE, July 31, 187-.

HON. DARIUS HAMBLIN:

DEAR SIR: It is just as I feared: Daley says he will be a candidate at all hazards, and asserts he can drive you from the track very easily, having your former clerk's evidence to use against you. He is desperate, and has already been seen to visit saloons in the village, spending considerable money to win over the boys. Can you meet Rawlings, Horton, and myself at Saratoga Saturday night?

Answer by telegraph at once.

Yours,
CYRUS HART MILLER.

Mr. Hamblin knit his brow for a moment and said:

"Of course I must go. I must not be beaten this year. The next gubernatorial nomination may be mine if I win this time. I can be elected Governor, and Daley must be crushed or bought off. The die is cast—I leave on the next boat for Saratoga."

Rising from his seat and wiping the perspiration from his brow, he passed on to his room. Mrs. Hamblin expressed no surprise when informed he was going to Saratoga, for she had become accustomed to his sudden moves since he had gone into politics; she had learned that everything must be secondary to his ambition and political necessities. She quickly packed a small satchel, and the boat being due in an hour, Mr. Hamblin walked out to bid his children good-by.

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Belle, leaving the side of a gentleman sitting beneath an arbor, came to meet him.

"Oh, papa! are you going away? That is too bad! I expected to take you out for a row this evening. Beside, a moonlight concert at Cleverdale Camp is announced in honor of your visit. Can't you postpone your departure?"

"No, my pet, business before pleasure. I am to meet a few friends at Saratoga to-night on very important business. By the way, I must send a telegram at once."

Embracing his daughter, he stepped into the office and hastily wrote a dispatch. When he came out Belle took his arm and said:

"Papa, we shall be *so* disappointed if you go. Mr. Alden has arranged to do you honor. And—"

"Belle," said he, interrupting her, "say no more about it, for I must go. By the way, Alden, who seems to be paying you much attention, may be good enough for a casual acquaintance at Lake George, but a daughter of Darius Hamblin, fit to be queen, in choosing associates must look higher than her father's bank clerk."

"But, papa, he is a gentleman—the very soul of honor—and there is not a lady in our party but feels honored by George Alden's attentions. Didn't he save Willie's life? He didn't know who it was, but seeing a child fall overboard his duty was plain. Beside, he always admired you, and you have repeatedly acknowledged that you liked him better than any other clerk in your employ. If you could see his kindness to the boys and myself, you would be more than ever pleased with him."

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Mr. Hamblin's features grew hard; his lips became tightly compressed and the color left his cheeks as he said:

"Belle, my honor and that of your family is in your keeping. Bestow your affection upon that bank clerk and my affection for you will end forever. The Hamblin family can ill afford to make low connections. You hear my wishes—my commands. There comes the boat. Here, George, bring my satchel, and tell your mother I am awaiting her."

Poor Belle! trembling with involuntary emotion, her pale face was a reflection of the countenance of her proud father. She scarcely beheld the boat as it drew near; dimly saw a happy throng on the deck and the usual bevy of glad-hearted persons on the dock; faintly heard the paddle-wheels beating the water, and barely caught a glimpse of the small boats dancing in the steamer's wake, when a flood of tears burst from her eyes. Her mother quickly led her away, but not before her companions became conscious of her weakness.

The stern look upon her father's face and the cold good-by he returned to all was plain evidence

CHAPTER II.

A QUARTETTE OF SCHEMERS.

Saratoga was alive with a brilliant throng of pleasure-seekers, gay with beauty and dress. Handsome equipages dashed along its shaded avenues with horses gaily caparisoned, the carriage occupants being decked with holiday splendor. The grand hotels overflowed with beauty and fashion; the parks, where artistic bands filled the air with music, were perfect bowers of loveliness. The hotel piazzas were crowded with visitors; the handiwork of Worth was everywhere present, and nature's mines contributed sparkling gems to adorn fair wearers.

All was not beauty however, for the presence of shoddy was perceptible, and listeners were amused or disgusted when lovely exteriors shattered hopes as stately matrons uttered words coarse and illiterate. "All is not gold that glitters" is fully realized while spending a day at America's famous watering-place and beholding the shams and deceptions of the fashionable world.

Saratoga is not merely a watering-place; it is also a mart where goods are painted and varnished to sell—in fact where many mothers introduce their daughters, expecting to dispose of them to the highest bidder. Politicians gather there to make and unmake men; "slates" are made or broken according to the amount of cash or patronage controlled by the manipulators.

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As the afternoon train arrived from the north, on the piazza of the "Grand Union" sat three men anxiously awaiting the arrival of another. A few moments later a carriage was driven up, and the three gentlemen—none other than Cyrus Hart Miller, Editor Rawlings, and George Horton, chairman of a county committee—arose to greet the Hon. Darius Hamblin. The greeting scarcely ceased when several other gentlemen leaving their seats quickly moved forward to welcome the new arrival. Passing into the hotel, Senator Hamblin met other acquaintances, and it was readily seen that he was a lion among the men gathered at the great spa to discuss politics and "lay pipe" for the grasping of power and distribution of patronage.

After dinner four men met in Senator Hamblin's parlor. The reader by this time being acquainted with the leading spirit of the party, we will describe the others.

Cyrus Hart Miller, familiarly known as a local politician of the true American type, held a position in the Customs Department of the nation, having been appointed through the influence of his senator. One of those bold and adventurous spirits, who know so well how to control a caucus, he possessed a commanding presence, and when "button-holing" a man would produce convincing arguments that the cause espoused by him was apparently right. He always rallied the "boys" at a caucus, and when unable to win by the preferable method of moral suasion, was abundantly able to resort to bulldozing or "solid" methods. Just the man to take care of Senator Hamblin's interest, he was a standing delegate to all conventions where he could be of service to his chief. Although prepossessing in personal appearance, his hands were ever ready to perform any dirty work consistent with the average ward politician.

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Editor Rawlings, another tool of Senator Hamblin, had been under the protection of his chief for a long time. His paper, like many country journals, was financially weak, but the purse-strings of the Senator, drawn about the editor's neck, enabled him to eke out an existence. When the Senator wished an article to appear in the *Investigator*, he was such a liberal paymaster that Editor Rawlings never hesitated to throw out paying advertisements to please him. The *Investigator* was Hamblin's organ, and Rawlings the superserviceable monkey. Every time the "boss" desired the crank turned, the monkey danced to the uttermost limit of the string, but if the string had broken the monkey could not have been controlled. Rawlings was one of those detestable creatures who have done so much to destroy the influence of respectable journalism. He was of that breed of rodents which sneak into an honorable profession and gnaw only where there is cheese.

George Horton, chairman of the county committee, another lieutenant of the same general, held the office of County Clerk, and although not as willing to perform dirty work as his companions, was an able adviser, with a mind prolific of deep-laid schemes. Being a zealous partisan of the "boss," in all advisory councils he was an important factor.

The quartette was a true type of the American political clique; their deliberations a fair sample of such conferences.

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"Well, gentlemen," said the Senator, "help yourselves to cigars, and let us proceed to business. Miller, what is your opinion of my chance for renomination? Speak out—let us be frank with each other. What is Daley about, and does he intend to make us trouble?"

"Well—y-e-s," drawled out Miller, "he intends to beat you if possible. Approaching Rawlings on Sunday, he began working on him, even offering to help sustain the paper if Rawlings would not be tied to any one individual. If I am not mistaken he actually offered to advance the cash to buy a new press and engine for the office. Eh, Rawlings?"

The latter, turning red, was somewhat embarrassed, but soon regaining his composure, replied:

"Yes, the cuss *did* make a pretty good bid for my influence. You see, he knows he can't get along without a newspaper, and knowing the Senator would do as well as the next man I just dropped

him—yes, dropped him like a hot potato, so to speak. When I go for a man I'm always solid. I'm a thoroughbred, and no man knows that better than our honorable friend, the next Governor of the State BY THUNDER!" and he emphasized the remark by bringing his closed hand down upon the table.

"Never mind that, Rawlings; I know you are all right, but we must head off Daley. That quarrel with my clerk on the Canal Committee was unfortunate, but the young rascal can have nothing to use against me unless he resorts to slander and lies, which unscrupulous enemies may put him up to. We must first get Daley out of the way. He has a little money, but not much; although he claims, you say, that the railroad interest are backing him against me. See here, Horton, what can you suggest? let me hear from you. First we will take a glass of wine. Rawlings, touch that bell. There; a waiter will soon be here. Light fresh cigars, gentlemen; by the by, Rawlings, did you ever visit Lake George?"

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"No, sir."

"No? Well, you must go up there. I shall return soon and you must be my guest."

"All very nice, Senator, but where are the 'spons' to liquidate the minutiae, eh? You millionaires think newspaper men can scoop in all the plums, by thunder! The only time we can enjoy an excursion is when somebody's old steamboat wants puffing up. Now look here, Senator, if the door of heaven could be entered for a cent I couldn't afford to even peek under the canvas."

"Well, well, Rawlings," Hamblin replied laughingly, "we will look after the press, for if we do not keep this great lever of the world in order the world will suffer. Now, gentlemen, let us indulge in a little champagne. Here, waiter, fill up. Gentlemen, your health." And the Senator raised a glass to his lips.

"Drink quick," exclaimed Rawlings, "for Daleys are dangerous."

It was a poor pun, but the point seen by the party the Senator said:

"Ah, Rawlings, you are a cool fellow. The mighty men of the Fourth Estate are the literary and social princes of the day. Another cigar, Rawlings, and then I move the previous question with additional power of debate."

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Thus did Senator Hamblin touch the weak points of his fellow-men. Well knowing flattery and wine were twin demons, attractive and seductive, with their assistance he enticed many men into his net. He had little confidence in Rawlings, well aware that if his antagonist Daley should offer more than he to obtain the influence of the *Investigator*, Rawlings would not hesitate to desert him. Perceiving his embarrassment when Miller mentioned the Daley matter, and well aware he had given Daley to understand the *Investigator* was in the market, Senator Hamblin threw out the Lake George invitation, for Rawlings was susceptible to flattery, and liking the flesh-pots well filled with milk and honey, when approached through the stomach, the gateway to his affection, was at the command of the man desiring to enter. A week of feasting at the "Lakeside" and such private attention as the Senator could show Rawlings would apparently hold him.

"Horton, let us hear from you. What shall we do to force Daley from the course? You must have something to say on the subject?"

"I can tell you where Daley left a bar down, when elected to the Assembly last year," replied Horton. "I know a man who will swear he received two hundred and fifty dollars from him, with which to buy votes. This might be worked up and Rawlings can help us, the *Investigator* sounding the key-note in the editor's well chosen words and—"

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"But see here, Horton, I can't run the risk of being sued for libel. Remember, Senator, I am not a millionaire, although I may put on a million airs," quickly replied the editor.

"Here is my plan," Horton continued, as if not noticing the remark. "Rawlings in his next issue must write a powerful leader advocating your renomination, hinting there is to be another candidate, and say in words like this:

"'At this time there must be no change of horses, for Senator Hamblin has served his constituency faithfully, his hands being free from any taint of corruption. If the voters of this district wish to bring out a new candidate, it must be one who has never placed himself in position to be indicted for committing perjury, by taking the ironclad oath as a certain Assemblyman has done.'

"There, how does that strike you, Senator, and how does it hit you, Rawlings?"

The latter, hesitating, looked toward Senator Hamblin, who arose, took him by the arm, and walking toward the window stepped out on the balcony. They were absent about five minutes, and on re-entering the room, Rawlings approaching Horton, extended his hand and said:

"All right, Horton, old fellow; put it there. The thing shall be done or my name isn't Joe Rawlings. I must go to the telegraph office at once."

Seizing his hat he passed out as a telegraph messenger entered.

"A telegram for Cyrus Hart Miller."

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"Here, boy!" replied that individual, and seizing the dispatch quickly tore open the envelope. The telegram being in cipher, Miller took from his pocket a memorandum, dismissed the boy, and making out the contents his face turned red with excitement, and he said:

"Just as I feared. Rawlings has really sold out to Daley. His paper appears on Tuesday, and unless he wires the boys immediately, we're euchred! Did you make any arrangement with him,

Senator?"

"Yes, I 'fixed' him, and he has gone to telegraph his foreman. An article left at his office, he said, covered the whole ground and he would wire the boys to put it in type. To-morrow evening we will go to Cleverdale and be on the ground to cut off any attempt of Daley to beat us. Go at once, Miller, and secure a copy of Rawlings's dispatch—money will do it."

A few moments later Miller came in, privately handing the Senator a copy of the dispatch, which read as follows:

SARATOGA.

FOREMAN *Investigator*, Cleverdale, N. Y.

Kill double-leaded leader, "A Change of Candidates Must be Made," and substitute article on sanctum copy-hook, entitled, "Senator Hamblin's Great Public Services."

(Signed) J. RAWLINGS.

Senator Hamblin stepping into his bedroom read the message; returning, a pleasant smile illumined his countenance. Touching the bell, he ordered another bottle of wine.

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CHAPTER III.

TEMPEST-TOSSED LAKE GEORGE.

For three days Belle Hamblin remained in her room attended by her mother.

The cruel words of her father sank deep into her proud and sensitive heart, and obstructed a great fount of joy, for during her short acquaintance with George Alden she had become greatly interested in him. A young man of irreproachable character, he had obtained a collegiate education, had never contracted bad habits, and was called a model man and brother. His sister gave music lessons, but that was not a sin in this land.

With Belle, who had often wished herself differently situated in life, the idea of self-dependence was strong. Having all that wealth could give, she envied those who day after day toiled at some honest labor.

Poor, unsuspecting girl, with every comfort at her command, she knew little of the sorrows of female toilers. Admiring the music teacher in the abstract, she knew nothing of the hardships attendant upon her labor. Looking upon the factory girls in her native town with some degree of envy, she was ignorant of the pangs of suffering so many undergo to make their scanty earnings sustain helpless loved ones at home.

During her seclusion, Belle had been greatly missed by her companions. One morning a note received from Camp Cleverdale, accompanying an elegant bouquet, gave her much pleasure, and she exclaimed:

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"Oh, mamma, I *must* go out to-day. I feel better and think the air will do me good. Will you consent?"

"Yes, my child, if your nerves have become quiet. Your father writes he may be absent a week longer. He has gone to Cleverdale and seems to be having trouble about political matters. Just what they are I am unable to say, for he always says 'women have no business meddling with politics.'"

"I agree with him, and only wish *he* would also give it up. Politics make men unmindful of everything else. Papa is so absorbed in it he forgets the feeling of his own flesh and blood, believing everything must play a secondary part to his detestable politics. His mind is in constant ferment, while the companions it brings him are not such as those with whom we like to see our loved ones associate. His only desire now is that I will bestow my hand upon some man who can strengthen him politically. Yes, it is too true that when a man becomes absorbed in politics, he is willing to barter away his birthright to gain his point."

"Belle, you are getting to be as incorrigible a hater of politics as I, but I cannot blame you. If George Alden controlled as many votes as that man Miller, or was as ready to do such editorial work as Rawlings, I believe your father would look upon him with favor. But never mind, child, go out to-day and enjoy yourself. Do just as you have done heretofore."

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Having thus obtained the mother's consent, Belle arose, put on her hat—having previously arrayed herself in her flannel boating suit—and left the apartment. Her appearance was the occasion of many friendly greetings.

In a few moments a boat bearing four white capped young men left the little island at the south, where Cleverdale Camp, named in honor of Belle, was located. The lake was beautiful, the waves running sufficiently high to make rowing pleasant, and it was not many seconds before the boat with its jolly crew shot into the bay. In an instant Belle was face to face with the quartette, the first to greet her being George Alden, whose tender looks betokened his joy at again seeing her.

"Ah, Miss Hamblin, we have missed you at Camp Cleverdale, and as soon as you are able to bear the excitement you must come. We have postponed the entertainment on account of your sudden illness," said Alden.

"I shall be well enough in a day or two," the girl replied; "the lake air is my good physician."

The meeting lasted but a moment, the quartette departing together, but Belle suddenly felt like herself again.

One morning, a week later, the sun arose with more than its usual majesty and glory, and the cool air laden with the sweet odor of blackberry and pine came down from the mountains. The water of the lake was ruffled with little ripples, whose tops rose and glistened in the sun and then flitted on toward the shore, foreboding a pleasant day for boating, so the tiny boats riding at anchor in the bay were put in readiness for excursions or fishing expeditions. Belle, expecting her father, concluded to remain on shore and enjoy the children's society. About ten o'clock, Geordie asking permission to go on the lake, Belle gave consent, when Willie said:

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"Tan't I do too? I wants to wide with Geordie—may I do?"

"Yes, but Jane must go with you."

The three were soon pushing off from shore, the little shell drifting into the bay where Geordie had permission to row around a rock about a quarter mile distant, and backward and forward the craft danced, the oar-blades rising like sheets of silver, dripping diamonds into the crystal waters.

Slowly over the north-west hills began to creep a black bank of clouds. It grew larger and larger, a half hour later spreading overhead like a dark ink-spot on a beautiful robe of blue. Belle, although absorbed in a pleasing book, occasionally looked to see if the children were in sight. The wind blew in little puffs, but she had never seen one of those gales that spring up so suddenly on Lake George. Suddenly she rose from her seat and laid down her book. About a mile from the boys' boat she detected an angry sea, and as her keen eye glanced toward the hills, nearly half a mile away, she saw the boat dancing on the rising waves.

Wildly advancing to the extreme edge of the dock she beheld the angry waters running in toward shore, each wave seeming to push the preceding one as if intent upon running down and absorbing it.

Beckoning to the boys, she waved her handkerchief, and called:

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"Geordie! Geordie! come in—QUICK!" but the winds only dashed by her, while the waves seemed to laugh her to scorn. Drops of perspiration stood on her brow, her cries attracting the attention of her mother and a number of ladies. Only three or four men, employés at the house, came down, and when Belle implored them to go for the boys, they only replied: "Ah, Miss, we are no oarsmen; the waves would swallow us up."

Looking again, the almost distracted girl saw the waves with their great white heads, like ghostly capped spirits of evil, rushing about the boat. Mother and daughter were like maniacs, for the boys would be drowned unless aid was sent them, the little arms of Geordie being too weak for such powerful antagonists. The yawning mouth of each sea seemed to engulf the boat, which, riding for an instant upon another crest, would suddenly dive into the trough of the sea.

"Oh, mother!" exclaimed Belle, "I cannot stand this! I must go to their rescue, or they will be lost. I will save them."

Quickly jumping into her own boat—a perfect little craft, made to ride the waves—she seized the oars and shot forth into the bay, only to be buffeted about by the angry elements. Unable to go straight to the loved ones, she gradually pointed her boat toward the north, and by great effort ran along the dock. As she worked against a chopping sea, banks of water struck the craft and sheets of spray rose above to break and fall over her. The wind dashed down upon her head, clutching at her brown locks. Still she pulled like a little giant. Occasionally catching a glimpse of the three, she beheld Geordie at his post heroically working his way to the rock.

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The winds howled madly at her, and with all their force tried to push the brave girl back. Seconds were like hours, yet she pulled on until about ready to reverse her boat's position, when the waves seemed to say:

"Ah, my fine lady, when you turn, then we will swallow you."

Watching her opportunity—the sea lulling for an instant—she gave a quick pull, and as a huge wave approached, her boat turned and she breathed a sigh of relief as the water passed by her boat's stern. It was an awful time to her; one of those inspiring, grand, but cruel moments when Lake George, so beautiful in all its quiet glory, suddenly becomes transformed into a thing ugly, wicked, and furious.

Within a short distance of the little boat and its precious load, Belle saw a huge wave, looking like a dozen ordinary billows combined, sweeping down upon her brothers.

"Geordie!" she screamed, "put your prow to the sea!" but the words scarcely left her lips before the boat was caught up and the two boys and nurse thrown into the water. Belle unconsciously closed her eyes for an instant; on opening them she beheld Jane standing on the partly submerged rock, with Geordie and Willie clasped in her arms. South of the rock was the island on which Cleverdale Camp was situated.

The frantic girl saw the waves go headlong over the rock, submerging the faithful nurse nearly to the waist, but how dare she approach them? The children were as brave as the nurse, Geordie standing on the rock clinging to Jane, while little Willie was clasped in her arms.

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In the distance could be seen the smoke of a small steamboat, but not a man was visible in the locality, all having gone for a day's pleasure; and Cleverdale Camp was deserted.

Belle's strength fast failing, she knew she could hold out little longer. Suddenly the cloud broke and in an instant the mad seas were partially quieted, as if the flood of golden sunshine that burst through the murky canopy had appeased them. Belle hastily ran her boat on the rock; Jane and the children were quickly seated in the stern; the sun disappeared behind the dark curtain of cloud, and the waters resumed their reckless sport. But the boat was turned toward Cleverdale Camp, and in a few moments shot into the little bay, and ran upon the sandy beach out of all danger. Belle rose quickly, jumped ashore, beckoned Jane and the boys to follow, staggered, and fell fainting upon the greensward.

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CHAPTER IV.

THE BOSS AND HIS AIDS.

One of the nation's prominent beings, indigenous with American politics, is "The Boss."

The Boss is a great man, and stands forth mighty and inscrutable, an autocrat wielding his sceptre with a strong hand.

He must be brave as a lion; sagacious as an elephant; with all the cunning of a fox and the obstinacy of a bull-dog. His hide should be thick as that of the rhinoceros, and he must be as quick as the leopard in the mythical ability to change his spots. Like the hyena he must have an appetite for ghoulish work, while his eyes must be powerful as the eagle's, and his talons equal to those of any bird of prey. He must have a backbone combining all the vertebral rigidity of the whole animal kingdom, and his heels should resemble in their trip hammer power the catapults of the great American mule.

He must be a man of quick conception, ready to comprehend situations at once, and when an emergency suddenly rises he must be able to take it by the coat-collar and make it resume its seat. He must be a positive character in all things. He cannot be a boor, for social qualities are useful to him.

He is not the creation of human hands; he is born, not made, and his qualifications are merely perversions of noble gifts of the Creator. In all deals on the political card-table, the Boss stacks the cards just as really as do such magnates as Vanderbilt, Jay Gould, *ed omnes*, in Wall Street.

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The Boss dictates candidates and sketches plans of political action, and if the man desiring an office does not suit the Boss, he may as well take a back seat without waiting to be sat upon and rolled over afterward.

The Boss does not always act openly, but generally prefers to keep in the background. Sometimes he is a judge "out of politics," as he says. He does not openly take part in the composition of tickets, but when a candidate comes to the surface the question is usually asked, "Does he suit the Judge?"

The Boss has his trusted lieutenants, selected for their fealty to their leader, and no man can expect to obtain an appointment within the territory of any Boss unless the latter espouses his cause. In many cases the Boss is a Senator or an Assemblyman, or even a lesser county official. Oftentimes he holds no elective office, but may be an appointee of the government or State. In office or out, he exists, and seems to be as inseparable from the political machinery of this Republic as the engineer from the machinery driving a steamboat.

Senator Hamblin, the Boss of his senatorial district, had his trusted aids in every town. He knew whom he could depend on when the town caucuses were held, yet feared the attempt of Daley to overthrow him, although confident of his ability to intercept the little scheme.

Monday evening, the four men arriving at Cleverdale, Senator Hamblin and Miller walked together toward the home of the former, while Horton and Rawlings went direct to the *Investigator* office. Rawlings calling for his proof-sheets, an article laudatory of Senator Hamblin was shown Horton. It was read and pronounced good, Horton suggesting the addition referred to in the conference at Saratoga. The words were quickly penned, and copy given the compositor. This was barely done when the sanctum door opened and Daley entered.

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"Ah, Mr. Daley, how do you do?" exclaimed Rawlings. "Just returned home. How's things in Cleverdale? Nothing new, eh?"

"No—guess not. How are you, Horton?" and he extended his hand to the County Clerk.

"By the way, Rawlings," said Daley, "I am told you have changed your mind about carrying out the conservative wishes of the community. Is that so?"

"I don't exactly catch your meaning, Daley. Be a little more explicit," said Rawlings.

"Well, if you want it any plainer, I mean just this: the machine has recaptured the *Investigator*, after its editor's declaring he was with the people. That's all, Rawlings—that's all."

Rawlings, usually cool and collected, at once lost his temper; his lips trembled, his face flushed with anger, and raising his clenched fist, he said:

"See here, Daley, there is the door! and if you don't get out of it d—d quick, I'll throw you out! D'ye hear?" Rawlings stepped forward as if to execute his threat, and Daley quickly turned and left the office.

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The next morning the *Investigator* appeared with the article reflecting on Daley. In the mean time Senator Hamblin visited the bank, and, meeting several party leaders, discussed the

political situation, seemingly anxious concerning the position of every one with whom he conversed. He was suspicious of all, well knowing the hold he possessed on his followers was only retained by the amount of patronage at his control and the sum of money he was willing to spend for the purpose of enthusing "the boys," for no boss must let the boys become low-spirited; they may in such case take a notion to change bosses.

As the Senator dismissed two persons the door opened and Paddy Sullivan entered. Paddy was a large, red-faced, sandy-haired Irishman, his cheeks covered with a long rough beard. Holding a cigar between the second and third fingers of his left hand, he seized his black slouched hat with his right and dropped it on the table. His appearance seemed to please the Senator, for he extended a more cordial welcome to Paddy than to any previous visitors.

"How are you, Paddy?" he said, warmly grasping the great mass of flesh that individual used for a hand.

"Foine as a top, Sinitor, and how's yersel'?" quickly answered Paddy.

"Well—very well. Sit down and let's have a quiet talk. Throw away that old stump, there—try a choice Havana," and he passed a cigar-box taken from a private drawer. "Now, Paddy, how are all the boys, and how goes politics at 'The Shades'?"

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"Politics has been so dull that we're only been able to dhraw about two kegs of lager a day. I've always noticed, Sinitor, that when politics is a little hazy, the boys are busted and the beer-tap only runs driblets. Ah, Sinitor, if I was in Congress, be jabers! I'd go in for a law that would have elickshun hild ivery month. But see here, Sinitor, look out for that blagyard Daley. He bought four kegs of lager lasht week; but shure I sot up six kegs for the b'ys—and—sh-h-h-h, d'ye moind—I tould 'em Sinitor Hamblin had left orders for me to do it—that I did. When the Daleys get the shtart of Paddy Sullivan and his frinds it's whin Paddy's shlapin'."

"You did right," said the Senator, "and you can send the bill to me. By the way, Paddy, are the boys all right? How many of the laborers at the mill can you pull for me? Ah, Paddy, you are a clear-headed man; no one can control as many votes as yourself."

"Ah, bedad! yee's jist roight. Ayven the good Father Burns wid his blissed callin' can't run as many men wid his holy power as Paddy Sullivan wid his lager and whishkey. The b'ys knows who's their frind, and when they was swallowing Daley's lager I tips 'em the wink and says I, 'B'ys, dom Daley, but here's to the hilt of the Boss!' and, Sinitor, ivery mother's son of 'em was rid hot for yees!"

"Well, Paddy, keep your eyes open. The caucus will be held in about six weeks. In the mean time set a keg of lager on tap each Wednesday and Saturday evenings and let the boys drink. If Daley comes around let Miller know. I shall be absent a few days, but on my return we must open the ball. One hundred copies of the *Investigator* will be given you each week. Give them to the boys, and call especial attention to the leading article. Right must win. Daley is engaged in an infamous conspiracy to help the corporations, and if it takes every dollar I am worth I am bound to stand by the people against monopolies. Ah, Paddy, to just such men as you are we indebted for a sound government founded and upheld upon patriotic principles. Without such, America as a nation would be a failure. Yes, sir, a failure."

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"There's where your head is livil, Sinitor, and when yees git Paddy Sullivan's infloence, yees git as thru a heart as iver wint pittypat benaythe a man's vist. But I must go, and niver ye fear but that yee'l bate that Daley. Good-mornin', sir, good-mornin'," and Paddy was gone.

The Senator quickly threw open the window, and the fumes of tobacco, whiskey, and onions passing out, he thus soliloquized:

"Whew! that chap is not a very sweet-smelling bouquet. Gracious! it makes me sick. What a dirty road is the political highway to success. Bah! But a man cannot secure good fruit without the use of unsavory fertilizers, and so it is with politics; the tree must be nursed, and if the gardener wants palatable fruit he must not object to the fertilizing element needed to give the tree life and strength. No, I can stand a thousand Sullivans if they are as strong politically as Paddy."

At that moment the door opened and Cyrus Hart Miller entered.

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"Well, Miller, what is it? You seem hot and flushed. Anything new?" quickly asked the Senator.

"Yes, and you must act at once. You remember a military company is about to be organized here. Those in charge have succeeded in getting enough names enrolled to obtain the necessary papers for organization. The company is an assured fact, the next thing needed is a name. Daley has offered to buy them a complete set of colors worth four hundred dollars, if the company is named for him. I just learned this from Kip Rogers, who expects to be captain, and I said to Kip, 'Senator Hamblin would do better.' How would Hamblin Guards sound? The organization is to be composed of the best blood in Cleverdale, and every man would be a strong friend of a generous patron. It is a good scheme, Senator, and a magnanimous offer from you would make the company a powerful auxiliary to your other strings. Of course there is the 'Hamblin Mutual Benefit Death Lottery Association,' named for you; then there is the 'Hamblin Steam-Engine Company,' the 'Hamblin Yacht Club,' all good, substantial aids to your ambition; but, Senator, the 'Hamblin Guards' would be of more real benefit to you than all the rest put together. What say you? I told Kip I would see him in an hour's time, for Daley wanted an answer this evening."

"Miller, you are a shrewd manager. Yes, you are right. You can say to Kip that I will present a stand of colors worth seven hundred and fifty dollars. The company can command me for one thousand dollars cash beside to fit up their parlors if the organization is named for me. Not a bad

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idea, and when the grand centennials occur the 'Hamblin Guards' shall go. Yes, Miller, they shall go with all the glory the men and their patron can command. Go at once and bring me their answer."

Miller was off in an instant, when the Senator seated himself and thus soliloquized:

"Hamblin Guards! eh? yes; it will read well in the newspapers. Ah, it is pleasing to see one's name in print—for other people to read. Such things as this, for instance, tell at the polls:

"Senator Hamblin is the generous patron of our local churches. He gives large sums for the support of the gospel. His charities are generously bestowed, while his name is recorded upon the hearts of all who love the church.'

"Yes, permitting Belle to bestow gifts upon charitable institutions has been of great advantage, for every dollar thus expended has brought me at least four votes. She gives from her heart, while I advance funds from my pocket at the dictation of my head. She is a noble girl, and I was cruel to her when I left Lake George. But pshaw! George Alden! only a clerk in the bank! He has no political significance, and I cannot allow my daughter to form an alliance with a mere private citizen. Her heart is young and tender, and the fire of to-day can be easily quenched. When she marries she must make a brilliant match. Belle is sick, her mother writes, and I must return to Lake George. This evening I must attend the church meeting; to-morrow the Cleverdale Woollen Mill Company are to hold an important business meeting, and I must be present. Senator, you have too many irons in the fire! Be careful, sir, for these hard times are shrinking values. No unwise ventures, sir, or your fortune will take wings and fly away."

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Thus he soliloquized, until interrupted by a note which read as follows:

Investigator OFFICE.

DEAR SENATOR: I will be at your house at 7 P.M. Will you be at home? Tell boy Yes or No.

Yours faithfully,
J. RAWLINGS.

"Tell him Yes," said the Senator, and as the boy passed out, he remarked: "What the devil does he want now?"

Senator Hamblin stood high in the community as a successful business man. Until recently he had suffered but few losses. At the height of his business career, he was the leader of numerous enterprises, and for the past ten years president of the Cleverdale National Bank, the stock of said institution being quoted at one dollar and ninety cents. He was director in the Cleverdale Woollen Mill Company, capital one million dollars. His business friends saw and regretted that his infatuation for politics caused him to do many questionable things. In business, social, and religious walks, a man must be the personification of all that is good, but in politics he is allowed the fullest license to tread paths that are crooked. Hence Senator Hamblin's friends tried to reconcile themselves to his action, but succeeded only in stultifying themselves.

Promptly at seven that evening, Editor Rawlings was admitted into the library at Senator Hamblin's residence.

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"Good-evening, Senator! Excuse me for calling. I will not occupy much of your valuable time. I have called to inquire concerning our business matters. I want to go to New York on Friday to buy that press and engine. What shall I do about payments?" said Rawlings.

"You can buy a press and engine for fifteen hundred dollars and have them billed to me," said the Senator. "After election I will make over same to you after you render me a bill for legitimate services and distribution of campaign papers. Do you understand?"

"Y-e-s, I understand, but Daley sent word he would give me out-and-out two thousand dollars to support him. Business is business, Senator, and I must make hay while the sun shines. Now I don't want to be mean or go back on a bargain, but hadn't you better see the two thousand dollars? You needn't say yes now, but let Miller come around and see me—he can fix it, for Miller is a man of business."

Senator Hamblin rose and walked toward the door. He was not in an agreeable mood, for he knew the man was a knave. Yet he was at his mercy. Had he followed the impulse of his mind he would have kicked him out-doors, but conquering his feelings, he said:

"Rawlings, you are not playing fair with me. If I accede to your demand now, will this be the last? I must know where I stand, as I cannot pay all I am worth for the help of a newspaper. Everybody thinks I have a gold mine and that they can tap me at their will."

"Oh, no, Senator, I don't think anything of that kind, but the railroads are shelling out money to overthrow you, and you know that business is business. I would rather be with you, by thunder, and am only asking what is fair."

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Senator Hamblin, aware that Rawlings would desert him if he did not submit to his extortionate demand, and anxious to terminate the interview, replied:

"Well, I suppose I must submit. Miller will call in the morning and arrange matters. I have an engagement at eight, and time is most up."

Rawlings, not at all put out by the Senator's manner, rose and said:

"All right, I will leave you. I am solid, Senator—a regular thoroughbred—and when I go for a man

I go my whole length," and passed out.

"Solid! Yes, you *are* solid—in your cheek. You are one of the representative men of the political arena. Bad—bad; and still you must be tolerated—yes, courted and paid. It is a blot upon our institutions that such rascals sometimes mould public opinion, all because they can wield a powerful pen. They prate of honesty and rob a man by their disgraceful blackmailing and—But how could politicians get along if it weren't for such rascals?"

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CHAPTER V.

TO THE RESCUE.

While the gale on the lake was putting Belle and her brothers in peril, four young men stood at one of the docks about two miles north of Cleverdale Camp, watching the surface of the water. One of them raised a field-glass to his eyes and looking across the tempest-tossed lake gazed intently toward Cleverdale Camp, and then said to his companion:

"Alden, what is that? It looks like a small boat; see, it seems to be hovering about the island rock. As I am alive, man, there is a woman on the rock with two objects at her side. It must be—"

His further remarks were cut short by Alden, who quickly seized the glass, looked intently for a moment, then said:

"Bob, there is also a woman in the small boat trying to rescue another from the rock. The two objects beside the woman on the rock look like children. They must be helped. Come along; who will go with me? Step up, boys; no time is to be lost; with a man at the oars and another at the helm we can weather this storm. Quick! who goes?"

George Alden, for it was he, was greatly excited as he observed the boat, for a terrible suspicion was filling his mind.

"George, are you a fool?" asked Bob Harkins. "No boat can stand such a gale; you are mad, man."

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"I'm neither one nor the other, Bob, but a man; when a fellow mortal is in danger I am going to the rescue. If some one will go with me the work will be easier, but, alone or not, I am going. Come on, for I am off!" and he started for the bay, where his boat was safely harbored.

All efforts to dissuade him were fruitless, and no one volunteered to accompany him. His boat, the "Nellie," shot out from under the bridge across the little bay with only himself for crew. Fortunately the wind was in the right direction, yet the group on shore anxiously watched him. His boat rode the seas like a cockle-shell; she was up on a white crest one instant, and then hid herself in the sea's trough for several seconds, as if she had been swallowed up, but skilfully the well-trained arms managed the oars.

Suddenly, during a lull in the wind, Alden cast his eyes toward the submerged rock, and perceived that the objects had left it, while a little way toward the south he beheld the rescuer and rescued dashing over the excited lake toward Cleverdale Camp.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed, "they are saved."

Heading his craft for Cleverdale Camp, within two minutes after Belle Hamblin had fallen George Alden was at her side.

"Oh, Mr. Alden, Belle is dead, she is dead! What shall we do?" exclaimed Geordie, while little Willie was moaning piteously.

Quickly leaning down and placing his ear to her lips, Alden felt a faint breath, and then was gratified to hear a deep sigh. She lay on the grass, her face white as snow, her eyes closed, the beautiful brown hair falling about her shoulders. Alden cast but a glance at her, and then asked the faithful Jane: "Will you help carry her to our camp?"

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The limp form was taken up and George Alden passed toward the camp with Belle's face close to his. She was very pale, and the thought that her stillness might, perhaps, be that of death staggered him for an instant. Holding her in his embrace and realizing that his arms clasped all his heart desired, he raised his eyes toward heaven, and said something more earnest than young men often do when looking in that direction.

The camp reached, Belle was laid upon a bed of boughs, a blanket having been previously thrown over it, and then Alden and Jane began the work of restoration by gently rubbing the girl's brow with brandy, a little of the same diluted being forced between her lips.

The young man, informed by Jane of the circumstances of the morning, of the storm and the wrecked boat containing herself and the two boys, of their rescue by the brave girl, felt assured that Belle was only paying the usual penalty of overtaxing nature. But, feeling certain that his own destiny was linked with the beautiful girl lying so pale and quiet on the improvised couch, the pulsation of his heart would have told tales if any one had been by to listen.

While chafing her hand with spirits Alden was gladdened to feel her fingers close about his own, and then he noted movements of the lips as if she were trying to speak. He quickly poured a portion of the spirits into his hand and placed it to her nostrils. Nature began to reassert itself.

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Belle sighed loud and long; her eyelids unclosed, the blue filling for an instant with wonder, and then the long fringed lids closed again. The veins filled with blood, and the plump cheeks showed the rose-tint of returning life. Gradually strength returning, she gently lifted her head, opened

her eyes, and said:

"Where am I? Where are Jane and the boys? Are they saved?"

"Yes, Miss Belle," he replied, "they are all here. You are at Cleverdale Camp, with friends. Can't you sleep for a while? Jane will stay with you while I amuse the boys. You are safe here away from the storm, and a half-hour sleep will restore your strength."

"You are very kind," murmured Belle. Then she exclaimed, "Oh, I can see the mad waves opening their great yawning mouths ready to swallow me. My dear little brothers; let them come to me. Oh, Willie and Geordie! Thank God! you are saved. Thank God!" and kissing their foreheads she fell back exhausted.

George Alden arose to withdraw, telling Jane he would be in the tent only a few feet distant, when Belle, opening her eyes, said:

"Oh, don't leave me yet. Stay—but no—I am not myself. I am still filled with the horror of those cruel waves. My poor mother, God pity her! she probably mourns us as lost. Oh, George, is there not some way to inform her of our safety? It will kill her if she thinks us drowned."

"Yes, I will see to it at once, only promise you will try to sleep again," he replied.

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"I will promise anything if you will only manage to relieve mamma's anxiety," and she again closed her eyes.

George, quickly obtaining a piece of white cloth, with paint he had at hand put on it in large, bold letters:

"ALL SAFE AT CLEVERDALE CAMP."

Placing the sign in a conspicuous place and firing a pistol, he saw his signal was heard, as several persons gathered on the dock and answered by another pistol-shot. Raising a field-glass he beheld Mrs. Hamblin standing on shore with a telescope to her eyes. Knowing the anxiety of the mother was relieved, he returned to camp and ascertained that Belle was sleeping.

The hurricane, as if sullen at being foiled in its attempt to destroy the little party now safe at Camp Cleverdale, began to halt in its mad career, the waves that had been roaring and dancing upon the shore showing signs of exhaustion. Although the winds blew, it was evident their force was nearly spent.

Later in the afternoon, while George Alden was seated upon a rock amusing Geordie and Willie, the boys much interested in the stories he was relating, Jane approached the trio and informed him that Belle, awakening from her sleep, wished to see him in the tent.

Leaving the boys with Jane he walked toward the Camp, and on entering the enclosure was gratified at finding Belle sitting up. "How are you feeling now?" he asked. "You look rested, and I hope are much refreshed."

"Yes, thanks to your kindness, I am feeling like myself again. Is the storm over? What a narrow escape for us all! But, how came you here?" she asked, anxiously.

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George then told his own adventures, relating all the circumstances of his trip, and then said:

"Ah, Belle, how happy I am that you are safe! I earnestly hope that you may experience no ill effects from your adventure."

"No, I am feeling quite well excepting a little lameness in my arms. It was a long, hard pull for my weak hands, but had I not undertaken it our poor little boys would have been drowned. It was a terrible ordeal, and when the cruel waves capsized their boat my senses nearly left me. When I saw my loved ones on the rock clasped in Jane's arms, my heart sent forth such a prayer of thanks! Are the boys injured?"

"Not in the least, the little fellows are perfectly safe. I trembled for you, though, when I saw your white face, your eyes closed, and your lips speechless."

He spoke feelingly, and as he did so gently took her hand, which she allowed him to hold with the confidence one feels when beside a trusted friend.

"And yourself, George," she said, "you look pale, as if the excitement had been too much for you, but I hope it is only your anxiety for us."

"It has been an anxious day for me. Had you been drowned, my heart would have been sorely stricken. Belle, I must speak—do forgive me—but you are dearer to me than all the world. I see you are offended, but when all I care for, all that I love, is before me I cannot help speaking from my heart."

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Belle arose from her seat and said: "Oh, think of what you are saying. I am not my own mistress. You are noble and brave, and having been the means of saving us from sorrow, I cannot be too grateful to you. You are more to me than—than I wish; but do not talk of this to-day. The scenes of the morning—the awful waves, that seem even now to laugh me to scorn—make this moment too much like the bright day following the darkness of night—too much like the sunshine after a storm. Please, George, no more of this—at least not now."

"As you say; but hark! hear the merry laugh of the boys. Come, let us join them. There! you look like your own dear self again."

As they stepped forth the sun suddenly hid its face behind a cloud, but the tempest had nearly subsided. Belle's brothers ran to meet her, and in an instant two little pairs of arms were

entwined about her neck. Then she arose and, turning to George, said:

"Can we go to our mother now? The lake is calm."

"Yes, in a short time, for I think I see the boys in the distance—if it is, we can make one trip. I have the children's boat, washed ashore during the gale, but Geordie's little arms cannot row to-night. See! The boat is headed for the island, and in a few moments we will take you to your friends."

In ten minutes the three companions of George Alden, stepping on the shore, were quickly informed of the state of affairs, and in a short time Jane and the children were in one boat, George and Belle in another, all gliding over the lake, which now was calm and beautiful, and soon Belle and the children were in their mother's arms.

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Remaining with the fond hope of again seeing Belle, Alden wandered through the hotel, and about half-past eight, discovering the girl at the door of her parlor, he went toward her. Gently and lovingly taking her hand he drew her toward him and somehow their lips met. That instant a hand roughly seized the young man by the coat-collar, hurled him across the hallway, and the Hon. Darius Hamblin stood between the two.

CHAPTER VI.

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A CAMP DINNER.

Senator Hamblin, leaving the stage-coach at Lake George, embarked on the little steamer Ganouski. He was accompanied by two gentlemen on their way to join a camping party of male friends, who had pitched their tents on an island about two miles south of Lakeside. The Senator was in good spirits, enjoying the society of his companions. The younger of the two, a fine-looking man about thirty years of age, resided in the same county with Hamblin, having represented his district two terms in the State legislature. His personal appearance was commanding, and for a young man he had taken a high standing in the political arena of the day. He possessed a keen black eye, sharp and piercing, around the corners of which could be detected an expression of recklessness and trickery, so necessary for a man of his calling.

Hon. Walter Mannis had been very successful in his political career, and older men pointed to him as a brilliant ornament—in fact, a rising star in the political theatre of the State; and so Senator Hamblin patronized and courted the young member.

Mannis had inherited a large fortune, which, added to his fine personal appearance and many accomplishments, made him a lion in both public and private circles. He was called the handsome member of the legislature, and many a mamma tried to win his smiles for a pretty daughter. Yet Mr. Mannis had never yielded to the charms of female loveliness and virtue. He remained a target, his heart seemingly impregnable to love's arrows.

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His companion, a member of the legislature also, representing an assembly district in the great metropolis, was about the age of Mannis, although not as fine-looking or intellectually as bright.

"Senator," said Mannis, as the three sat on the deck of the little steamer, "you must stop at the island and dine with me. Our friends expect us, and a royal camp dinner will be awaiting our arrival. We shall leave the steamer at the dock nearest camp, where a boat will be waiting to convey us to the island. After dinner we will row you to your family at Lakeside, about two miles distant. What say you?"

"I will stop on one condition, Mannis, and that your promise to spend to-morrow with me. I would like to have some conversation with you concerning political matters in our county. Have I your promise?"

"I shall be most happy to accept, Senator."

A half hour later the little steamer drew up at the dock, when the three disembarked. They were soon seated in a small boat, and after a pull of a few moments the party stepped on the rock answering as a dock for the little island. Introductions being over, Senator Hamblin was led to the table, where a tempting repast was spread.

Reader, have you ever participated in a camp dinner?

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No?

Then you have missed one of the rarest treats of life.

The dining-room is a tent opened at one end, through the centre extending a stationary table made of planed boards. On each side is a bench nailed to the table, capable of seating about six persons. To seat one's self, sit on the bench with back to the table; gracefully raising the lower limbs, right about face, your seat acting as a pivot for the body, swing over quickly, drop the feet beneath the table, and you are ready for preliminaries. Before you is new bread, white and tempting; butter of a rich golden hue; tomatoes, crimson and juicy with richness; cucumbers, pickles, sauces, and other relishes. The waiters are clothed in habiliments of blue surmounted by elegant crowns of native straw.

The cool breezes blowing from the lake, golden yellow-jackets in swarms hover about your head, occasionally swooping down into the sugar-bowl to see if the sweetness is first-class.

Presently bowls of delicious turtle soup are placed before you, and the aroma that rises is more than appetizing to a hungry man. As you convey luscious spoonfuls to your mouth, another aroma

greet your olfactories: it is the fumes of coffee.

S—p—p—p—p!

A pair of red squirrels go scampering up a tree near by, intent on getting over the dining-room to enjoy the rich odors wasting themselves on the desert air.

Soup is followed by fish—none of your canned salmon or salt cod—none of your stale shad, a week out of water—but fish almost wriggling their tails as you spear them with a fork. They are smoking hot, with a rich hue of brown—the edge of the dish being ornamented with small clippings of fried pork.

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Take the fish on your fork, insert a knife-blade in the back, when the white meat falls on your plate anxious to be eaten. Drop the knife and with your fingers catch hold of the skeleton at the head, pull gently, and it will divide itself from the other half. Your plate loaded with mealy potatoes, squash, boiled onions, and corn, you have before you a dinner fit for an epicure. How good everything tastes! All formality having been left at home, the camp dinner is the Eden of banquets.

Counting your skeletons, you will be surprised at the number of fish you have eaten. With your voracious appetite you will not fail to leave a place for a dessert of fruit which follows. Pies and puddings are not usually a part of camp dinners, fruit taking their place.

Senator Hamblin enjoyed the repast as thoroughly as his entertainer could have wished. Indeed, the entire party, though composed of politicians, did not easily get back to politics; for a half hour after dinner they sat on the rocks smoking cigars and discussing the surroundings. They could scarcely have helped it, for the scene was charming; the golden rays of the sun fringing the western hills gave the foliage a rare quality of splendor. The lake was like a sheet of silver, the surface reflecting the lovely azure of an unclouded sky. The air was pure and sweet, the breezes soft, and all the surroundings were specially successful bits of nature's handiwork.

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Senator Hamblin was enchanted as he gazed upon the beauties of nature spread before him; for the moment he even forgot the trials and vexations of politics. Worldly feelings that agitated him from day to day were gone, and he felt that he stood in an earthly paradise such as no other locality could present.

"Mannis, this is grand! In all my travels I never beheld anything so enchanting. I do not wonder this is such a resort. In all accounts of this beautiful lake justice has never been done it. But while I am lost in delight and bewilderment, I am forgetting my family await me at Lakeside. Come, let us proceed to my quarters; it is growing late, and before we leave this place it will be dark."

The party arose, preparing to depart, and by the time adieus were said the shades of evening had fallen. The moon burst forth over the hilltops as Senator Hamblin, Assemblyman Mannis, with two others, jumped into the boat. The little craft soon touched the beach, and Senator Hamblin stepped ashore.

"Remember, Mannis, you are to spend to-morrow with me. Good-night, gentlemen;" and in a moment the oars struck the water again and the little boat was far away on its return trip. Watching the craft a moment he turned toward the house and said:

"Mannis is one of nature's noblemen. What a magnificent couple he and my proud Belle would make! Egad! if I could bring it about Belle would have a husband every way worthy of her. We will see."

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After returning the warm welcome of those on the piazza he went directly to his room, fate decreeing his arrival at the moment George Alden so warmly greeted Belle. The young man, taken by surprise, was pushed violently across the hallway, while Belle confronted her stern father, who said:

"Belle, I am astonished!" and he led her gently into the room, quickly closing the door, and Alden was left alone.

The latter, regaining his composure, waited but a moment, then turned and left the house, in a short time arriving at his island camp. For an hour he remained alone on the rock with his own thoughts for company. He thought of the few days passed at the lake; the rescue of little Willie; the happy moments in the society of his heart's idol; the long days when her illness prevented him seeing her; and the many happy moments since she rejoined her friends. He thought of the day just ended; the storm; the brave girl in the boat; the loved ones on the rock, and the poor girl lying before him so helpless and white. His mind went back to the happy moment when he held her hand and told his love.

George Alden was a brave man, never quailing at danger, but when he thought of his humiliation he moaned in agony of spirit.

"I am only a bank clerk," he said, "but is that reason why this man's daughter should be injured by my society? I love her, and I'll have her, too, in spite of her father."

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CHAPTER VII.

THE CRUEL THUNDERBOLT.

"Belle, what does this mean? How dare that fellow pollute your lips with a kiss?" angrily asked Mr. Hamblin as the door closed behind him.

"Father," replied Belle quickly, "George Alden is a noble man, and inspired by honorable impulses. His touch is not pollution."

Senator Hamblin was filled with rage; his face became scarlet; his lips trembled, and raising his hand he exclaimed:

"Go to your room! If he dares to repeat the scene of this evening I will send the presumptuous puppy adrift. No employé of mine must presume upon stealing my treasure. My daughter must select her companions from a higher circle than that of book-keepers."

Suddenly Mrs. Hamblin entered, and beholding Belle with hands clasped over her eyes, and hearing her sobs, placed an arm lovingly about her neck, and asked:

"What is it, Belle, darling?"

"What is it?" exclaimed the father; "it is this: she would throw away the honor of the family on that beggar, Alden!"

"Oh, Darius! think of what you say. Are you ignorant of the events of the day, or is your heart turned to stone? Poor child, she has saved the lives of your boys and proved herself full of heroism. The scenes she passed through to-day would have prostrated a person of ordinary character. Husband, you little know what a brave and noble daughter you have."

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Senator Hamblin tried to calm himself. He walked to and fro several times, and then, halting before his wife, asked:

"What do you mean? If anything remarkable has occurred please inform me."

As Mrs. Hamblin related the incidents of the day, the cold, hard expression of her husband's countenance gradually softened. He forgot for a moment his personal ambition, forgot that the sweet girl before him had not only disobeyed but actually defied him, forgot the handsome Mannis and the audacity of the poor bank clerk Alden. As he listened to the thrilling recital of Belle's experience, the father predominated, and from his heart, in spite of its hard political crust, burst natural feelings. When his wife had finished he arose, went to Belle, lovingly placed his arms about her, and said:

"You are a noble girl, and I am proud of you. There, wipe away those tears. Your young heart is too good to carry a load of sorrow. The day's excitement has been too much for you. Give me a kiss and go to your room. A night's rest will refresh you."

Belle, raising her head, gazed into her father's face, and saw there the old look of love and affection that it wore before he became absorbed in public life; the cold, cruel lines disappearing, he was again the companion of her childhood. A flood of joy filled her heart, and she gave her father a look and embrace that would have reformed any parent not a politician.

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"Good-night, darling," said the Senator, when released by his daughter. "Go to your room now. To-morrow you shall have a day of pleasure. I expect a friend to spend the day and dine with us."

Belle left the room accompanied by her mother, and the proud man was alone.

"She is a noble character," the Senator exclaimed as he paced the floor. "And Alden—curse him!—is worthy of her admiration. Still, so is Mannis. When she meets him she cannot help admiring him. But she is proud and sensitive. She must be moulded by kind treatment; force and arbitrary measures won't do. She is full of the 'no surrender' spirit of her father, bless her. I must try strategy."

Belle entered her room, followed by her mother, and closing the door threw herself into a chair, and burst into tears.

"Oh, mother, what trials I am having! Ever since we arrived here something has been occurring to make me unhappy. What have I done to deserve it? Papa is not the same man he used to be; he thinks even his own flesh and blood must bow to his ambition. Poor George has fallen under his displeasure, merely for the sin of loving me. Why should we have any hearts at all?" Then she told all that had taken place between herself and George Alden, and when she referred to the scene at the parlor door she sobbed as if her heart would break.

Her mother, who had suffered worse and longer than her daughter by the remorseless ambition that was demanding the entire sacrifice, comforted the weeping girl as only a mother could, and an hour later sleep ended for the day the sorrows of both.

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The next morning opened bright and beautiful, the Hamblins as usual appearing at the breakfast-table. Belle's exploit of the previous day had been noised about the neighborhood, and she found herself the centre of attraction at the Lakeside, and the little boys Geordie and Willie came in for a share of honor. Belle bore her honors meekly. Unlike her father, hers was not a character to be excited by public applause. Besides, her mind was preoccupied, and her eyes often strayed toward Cleverdale Camp. While gazing in that direction she saw a little boat enter the bay and a gentleman step from it upon the beach, where her father warmly greeted him, and then escorted him to her and her mother.

"Mr. Mannis, I take pleasure in introducing you to Mrs. Hamblin and my daughter, Miss Belle."

The guest bowed to both, and said: "Ladies, I feel you are hardly strangers to me, for my friend here, your honored husband and father, is an old acquaintance in the forum of politics and at the State capital."

"We are always glad to meet Mr. Hamblin's friends," replied the elder lady, "and he has often spoken of you; you are very welcome, sir."

Mannis bowed his acknowledgments and then turned to Belle.

"Miss Hamblin, allow me to congratulate you on your narrow escape yesterday, and express my admiration of your noble exploit. It is fortunate that you had learned to use the oar, but few even of young ladies who row would have the courage to undertake so hazardous a trip. Do you know your praises are being sung far and near?"

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"Belle is a brave girl," said the Senator, "and I am proud of her. Don't blush, Belle, you are too modest."

"But, papa, what did I do? I could no more resist the impulse that sent me out than you could help reaching forth your hand and snatching one of the boys from an approaching locomotive."

"Say what you will, Miss Hamblin, the world gives every human being credit for the brave deeds they perform, and your modesty will not enable you to avoid being praised for your heroism."

The conversation continued for a long time. Belle, like a true woman, enjoyed the society of a gentleman, and as Mannis had perfect manners and was a fluent conversationalist, the moments passed most agreeably. The Senator was delighted by the grace with which his daughter entertained his guest, and with great satisfaction he noticed that the handsome Assemblyman was greatly interested in the girl. Not a word on political topics had been spoken; for a deeper game was being played by the proud father, who in believing that he held a winning hand forgot that his stake was his own flesh and blood.

After dinner the two gentlemen went to enjoy a quiet smoke on the veranda of the gentlemen's sitting-room. Mannis was profuse in compliments regarding the Senator's family, all of which were extremely gratifying to the honorable gentleman. Gradually the subject of the approaching campaign came up, and Mannis disclosed that Daley had urged him to espouse his cause against Hamblin.

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"I told him from the first I was with you, and now repeat it more strongly than before. I am more friendly to you now than ever."

"Thanks, Mannis, and if I can do anything to advance your interest you can always command me," replied the Senator.

Just then little Willie came running to his father, who took him upon his knee. The child's bright blue eyes and head of handsome brown curls always attracted attention, which his amusing lisp was quite sure to hold. Twining his little arms about his papa's neck, he began talking in a manner so amusing that the practical Mannis at once took a great liking to him, and Willie reciprocated it, so that Mannis was still further impressed by the Hamblins in general.

As the party chatted a storm-cloud arose, but no one seemed to notice it. The green was covered with children, little Willie among them, and as he danced with all the joyousness of healthy childhood he seemed the leader of the little party. The cloud grew larger, but no one was alarmed, for sudden and short visits from storm-clouds are not unusual at Lake George. Suddenly, however, there was a flash, a ball of fire appearing over the house and then dashing swiftly down. The shock for an instant prostrated all who were near by, but they slowly recovered—all but one; little Willie lay motionless upon the grass.

Senator Hamblin sprang from the piazza, seized the little form, pressing it to his bosom, and exclaimed:

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"Willie—my child—speak to me! Wake up, my son! look into your father's face!" But the little form was silent, for Willie was face to face with his Father in heaven.

The lifeless form was carried into the parlor, and the family that prosperity had almost estranged from its head seemed united again by its terrible grief.

NOTE.—A casualty like the one described in this chapter occurred at Lake George, in the summer of 1877, the victim being a little girl of nine years. The author has borrowed the incident, describing the electric phenomenon as related to him by several persons who were sitting or standing by the child when the terrible thunderbolt dropped from the clouds.

CHAPTER VIII.

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AFFAIRS AT CLEVERDALE.

Cleverdale is a flourishing village of about eight thousand inhabitants. Enjoying transportation facilities both by rail and canal, it contains several large factories, which in turn enable a bank to do a great deal of business and cause money to circulate freely. Churches and schools, not excepting a young ladies' finishing school, abound, and there is no lack of the rum-shops that in towns so large are always demanded by one class of inhabitants.

Like all other towns, Cleverdale had its local causes of dispute, and its differences between classes, yet so proud of Senator Hamblin was the town that when, two or three days after Willie's death, a little white hearse moved slowly from the Senator's door it was followed to the cemetery by representatives of every class and interest in the town, even the red head of Paddy Sullivan being prominent in the procession. Paddy was dressed in his Sunday suit of black. On his head he wore a high white hat with a narrow black band around it, and in his face was an expression of grief that undoubtedly was honest.

One of the Senator's bids for prominence had been the erection of the most imposing monument in the village cemetery, although he had not at the time buried any member of his family. This monument had given his eye much comfort, but when little Willie was laid in its shadow, the ambitious politician was too much absorbed in grief to notice the stately stone at all. For a few days his nobler sentiments had him so completely in possession that he fairly forgot even his public interests; although Miller called and reported that he had faithfully carried out all the wishes of his chief, no further orders were given him.

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"Wait a day or two, Miller," said the Senator. "I am too much overcome for business or politics now," were his words.

But time cures grief, and great burdens soon fall from shoulders accustomed to other burdens. A few days passed and the doors of the Hamblin mansion were again opened, and Senator Hamblin at his bank looking after his large business enterprises. His political interests also began to receive attention. In this direction he found that his temporary withdrawal from affairs had been utilized by his opponents, who made a vigorous push. Of course Miller had not been idle, having worked hard—even kept Rawlings in line; in fact, no attempt had been made of late to win the *Investigator's* editor to Daley's side.

But an ugly paper had been privately circulated, charging Senator Hamblin with having made admission before a former clerk of the Canal Committee, of which Hamblin was chairman, of a character not consistent with a man of honor. The paper accused him of boasting, during his two years of chairmanship, of making more than a hundred thousand dollars on bills that his committee had approved. Fortunately a copy of the paper fell into the hands of Miller, who went to work to prevent further circulation. He had even called on young Sargent, making threats to intimidate him, but without obtaining satisfaction. He knew Sargent was greatly incensed against Senator Hamblin for throwing him out of his berth and fat salary, and also knew Daley and his friends paid well for the information they were using.

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Senator Hamblin gave Miller full power to treat with Sargent and make him recant. Miller was a good worker, and not afraid to face any one. Had he been going to die, he would not have hesitated to call on Satan, if that were possible, and he would have done it in the full belief that some satisfactory arrangement for the future could be made.

He called promptly on Sargent, who received him with great cordiality.

"Well, Sargent, how are you?" said Miller, extending his hand to greet the ex-clerk.

"All right, Miller. Take a seat."

The visitor at once stated his business.

"Sargent, what in the world possessed you to make such a charge against the Senator? Of course the shot may temporarily injure the man it is fired at, but, my dear fellow, just think how it will injure you. Hamblin is powerful and rich and stands high among the business men of the State. He is a leading man in politics, and his influence can be used to crush a young man like you. He will be renominated, and that means re-elected: then all the men backing or helping Daley will be crushed. That is as sure as fate, for when the convention meets he will have at least three quarters of the delegates. His election is an assured fact, and can you, a young man, afford to go down with the wreck? I have always found, in politics, a man is safest when sticking to the machine."

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"That may be," said Sargent, "but Hamblin played a mean trick when he shoved me out of the berth I held. I worked for him faithfully, and just because Jim Warren was backed up by Paddy Sullivan and the factory bosses I had to slide. I say it was a dirty trick, and I mean to get even with him."

"See here, Sargent, didn't the Senator say he would see you provided for? Now look here, man; there is need of another clerk in the bank, as the cashier's health is poor and young Alden unable to do the work alone. That place was to be given you, but when you got your back up and 'went' for the Senator, *his* Ebenezer rose, and you lost a better place than a temporary position on a committee."

"Why, I didn't know that," said Sargent in a surprised tone.

"Well, it is a fact; maybe it is too late now, after all you have done to injure yourself; but see here, Sargent, can't you recall that statement, if by so doing you can benefit yourself? Of course, if you persist, we shall meet the paper and break its damaging points; you will be ruined with it, for you must know Senator Hamblin will not hesitate to kill so grave a charge against his integrity. Come, Sargent, think it over. I don't know what I can do for you, but assure me you will recall the words and I will try and place you in a position where you will be taken care of. As you are now, when the polls close on election night, your reputation will be blasted and Daley and his friends powerless to help you. I tell you, Sargent, every young man should remember the loaf of bread he is cutting to-day may be turned to stone to-morrow."

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Miller's words made a deep impression on Sargent, who rested his head on his hand a moment and then replied: "But how can I recall the words? That's what bothers me."

"I can fix that. Of course you will have to follow your first paper with a second, acknowledging your error in publishing the first—but pshaw! who cares for that? If you get a thousand-dollar position, that will fix you—eh, old fellow?" and Miller playfully hit Sargent in the ribs with his cane.

"Wait and let me think it over. I cannot decide now. I don't think anything very bad can result

from it, for in politics everything is honorable. Queer thing is politics. Eh, Miller?"

"Yes, Sargent, but you might better freeze to a live man's heritage than walk, with your eyes open, into a dead man's grave."

The door-bell rang and Sargent recognized the voice of Daley, inquiring for him. He heard him approaching the room, and quickly turning the key in the lock and pointing to a closet, whispered to Miller:

"Quick! hide in there!"

As Miller entered the closet and closed the door, Sargent turned the key and admitted Daley greatly excited.

"Are you alone, Sargent? Eh? yes? Well, all right. That infernal Miller is raising the deuce with my canvass. Now see here, Sargent, the caucuses have been called in most of the towns in the county for next Saturday. Miller has succeeded in buying back the Strong Mill gang. Last week the whole lot were red-hot for me, but this morning the foreman informed me that he and his men should vote at the caucus for Hamblin delegates. The caucus is to be held in the evening, something unprecedented in town politics, so the factory hands can gag the voice of people of intelligence. The new military company has also been bought up for Hamblin by Miller, with a seven hundred and fifty dollar set of colors, and the devil is to pay generally. Of course *you* will stick to me, and when our caucus is held we must spring a mine on the whole gang. By the Eternal! I am going to beat the scoundrels. Yes, sir, beat 'em!" and he walked the room like a lion at bay.

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"All right, Daley, but I am not well to-day, I have a wretched headache, and you must excuse me this morning. Call to-morrow and we will talk it over. Excuse me now. Excuse—"

His further remarks were cut short by a crash in the closet, when the door flew open, Miller falling headlong on the floor, prostrate at the feet of Daley.

Miller rose from the floor, which was covered with broken glass, boxes, and books precipitated upon his head by a chance movement of his own as he had crouched listening at the key-hole. As Miller regained his feet, the three men stared at one another for an instant; then Daley exclaimed:

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"Miller! you are the very evil one himself. Where in the world did you drop from?" Then turning to Sargent, he said:

"And you too have turned against me. Well, who *is* to be trusted?"

Seizing his hat, he hastily left the room, muttering words in such direct conflict with the third article on the table of stone delivered to Moses on Mount Sinai, that they must be omitted here.

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CHAPTER IX.

THE CAUCUS.

For three weeks after the death of little Willie, Belle could not bear to leave the mother and the little brother who remained.

She even suspended her work among the needy, and many inmates of charitable institutions missed delicacies she had been accustomed to distribute among them. Society in the village became dull and stupid by her withdrawal from its circles. During this time, however, George Alden frequently called, and the tenderness and affection of each heart for the other was plainly manifested. Mr. Hamblin in no manner interfered with his daughter and her lover, yet he chafed, fretted, and hoped that something would occur to break the spell.

Shortly after her return home, Belle received a letter from Mannis, full of sympathy, yet every line breathing sentiments that distressed her, for unlike most young ladies she felt hurt when demands were made upon her to which she could not respond. Admiring many qualities possessed by the handsome Assemblyman, she had no warmer feelings than friendship for any other man than George Alden. The latter was her ideal of true manliness, the former only evoked admiration for his intellectual qualifications and social gifts. Gladly would she have met Mannis on terms of common friendship, but his letter revealed that he expected more, for he announced a determination to lay siege to her heart.

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Her father often spoke of his friend, even hinting that he would be proud of a son-in-law so gifted and successful. She had hoped that Willie's sudden death had changed her father's heart, but now she realized that the temptations and ambitions of public life once more bound him in their chains.

A lively canvass was now waging, and the inevitable discussions, criminations, and recriminations grew more and more exciting. On the eve of the caucuses the war of the factions waxed hot. Leaders and bullies of both sides were on the alert, and Paddy Sullivan held matinées and evening gatherings at "The Shades," lager beer and poor whiskey flowing as free as water, and the "b'ys" kept full at the expense of one or the other candidate.

"Arrah! b'ys, whoop 'er in!" Paddy would exclaim as he tapped a fresh keg of lager.

The night before the caucus of the Senator's party Paddy Sullivan was in his glory. The leading spirit among the class frequenting his gin palace, his word he declared to be "lar." While the bar was flanked by a row of men, Miller entered accompanied by Editor Rawlings, the latter

overcome with liquor. After a general hand-shaking, Miller said:

"Come, boys, what'll it be?"

"Arrah, Mishter Miller!" said Paddy, "things is jist rid-hot; the b'ys is all sound fer our frind the Sinitor. The ould man will win as aisy as sippin' beer. I'll bet tin dollars wid any mon in the crowd that Daley won't git quarther of the votes to-morrow avenin'. He was jusht in here wid his party, and the b'ys took in his beer, and when the door closed agin him they up and give three cheers for the Sinitor. Now thin, gintlemen, here's a sintiment: When the caucus closes may Daley be a spilt pig wid his nose out of j'int."

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"Hip! hip! guzzle 'er down!" chorused the crowd.

"Them's the sentiments!" said Rawlings, who clung to the bar for support. "I'm solid for Sen'ter 'Amblin. Whoop 'er in, boys. I'm a thoroughbred every time! Come, Paddy, set 'em up again—what'll y' 'ave, boys? This is a thoroughbred drink. 'Zactly so."

The party falling in line, their guns were soon loaded with ammunition, warranted to kill at forty rods and indirectly damage everybody in the neighborhood. Rawlings continued:

"Gen'lemen—'ere's hopin' that to-morrer evenin' the old man'll scoop in all the (hic) votes and every son of a gun'll be a—a Millerite. Eh, Miller! ole man, how's that fer a thurrerbred?"

The sentiment was applauded, even the fat wife of the proprietor, at the back door of the bar-room, responding:

"Faith, the iditor is as livel-headed as that darlin' ould mon, my Paddy."

After ordering cigars for the party, Miller prepared to leave the place; pausing at the door and striking an attitude, he said: "Boys, I hope you will all attend the caucus to-morrow evening, using your prerogatives as free citizens to help sustain an honest man—the people's candidate—against the monopolies that are trying to overthrow the individual rights of every man here." Then taking the red fist of Paddy, he whispered: "Well done, old friend; you are a power, and the Senator knows it, and won't forget it either."

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Seizing the staggering editor by the arm, Miller left the saloon. This was the last visit the pair made that night, every drinking-place in town having been previously visited, and all hands treated to whiskey and cigars, Miller privately slipping a ten or twenty dollar bill into each proprietor's hand.

Leaving "The Shades," Rawlings was assisted home by lesser political lights, Miller going directly to Senator Hamblin's residence, where several persons were in consultation, concluding arrangements for the morrow's caucus.

The day opened lively, Miller and aids being on duty bright and early, while Daley and his friends, greatly discouraged, were nevertheless determined not to give up the fight. Their cause was almost hopeless, for on entering the canvass they expected to overthrow Senator Hamblin by the support of the moral portion of the public. Daley, possessing no more virtue than his opponent, had mounted the reform hobby to ride into power, but he found that a majority of voters could not be won to his side. The fight having become bitter—a sort of a "dog in the manger" contest—Daley saw no way to win, so he determined to be satisfied with preventing Senator Hamblin's re-election. Copies of Sargent's statement had been prepared for circulation in every town, but, receiving no explanation of Miller's sudden appearance during the interview at Sargent's, Daley thought something had been done to counteract its effects, and as Sargent had mysteriously disappeared, his anxiety increased.

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Cleverdale had seldom before been so excited. Politicians walked the streets, men were button-holed in stairways, offices, or "sample-rooms," and importuned to vote for one or another of the delegates. Daley, feeling the ground slip from under his feet, began working up his friends on the issue that he was a badly used man, and prepared a programme for a grand "bolt" at every caucus in the county where Hamblin delegates might be chosen.

Bolting is the salve to heal wounds caused by disappointed hopes of politicians. It is a prerogative that such men avail themselves of; yet being a "double-ender," the end placed against the shoulder often does the most damage.

Bitterness between opposite parties is nothing compared to the bad blood that exists between factions of the same party. It is a bad time for men to know the misdeeds of each other, for secrets are used after being enlarged and exaggerated to powerful dimensions. Such occasions furnish capital to the opposite party, and many campaigns are carried on by simply using against candidates ammunition that members of their own party have manufactured.

The Cleverdale drinking-saloons were in full blast, the bummers revelling in what to them seemed paradise. Bad whiskey and ice-cool lager were free to all, up to the hour the caucus was to be held. Long before seven P.M. the town hall was filled with men. Air impregnated with onions, garlic, old pipes, and poor whiskey, greeted the olfactory organs of those entering the room. To this was added the exudations from garments of factory hands and laborers, who had worked hard during the excessively hot day and not availed themselves of such cheap luxuries as soap and water. Miller, with aids and assistants well organized for the forthcoming fray, was present, while Daley, flanked by a coterie of followers, was active. Paddy Sullivan was on duty, moving about among the men whom he controlled. Suddenly the chairman of the Town Committee mounted the platform and pounded the table with his fist. The buzzing profanity and coarse jokes of the multitude ceased at once.

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Reader, take a careful look across the sea of upturned faces, for here are the men who, choosing delegates, make the officers of the town, the officers of the county, the officers of the State, yes, the chief ruler of the nation. Sprinkled through the crowd are a few intellectual countenances; but observe the majority—coarse, uncultured, ignorant specimens of humanity—many faces stamped with the look of ruffian, while the drunken gibberish of others disgusts one with the thought that the elective franchise has been extended to all.

The chairman, again striking the table before him, said:

"Gentlemen! as chairman of the Town Committee I call this caucus to order. The deliberations of this meeting cannot proceed until a chairman has been chosen. Gentlemen, who will be your presiding officer?"

One of the Daley party quickly said:

"I move that Robert Furman be chairman of this caucus!"

"Misther Cheerman! I moves an amindmint that Iditor Rawlins bees the gintleman to take the cheer," said Paddy Sullivan.

This was followed by shouts of "Furman!" on the Daley side, while the Hamblin crowd were as loud in shouting, "Rawlings!"

For a few seconds there was a perfect pandemonium. The noise was deafening. The chairman of the Town Committee, pounding vigorously on the table, finally succeeded in quieting the enthusiasm of the factions. He then said:

"Gentlemen! I cannot put the motion unless there is order. The motion now is on the amendment. All who favor Editor Rawlings as chairman of this caucus will manifest it by voting aye."

There was a tremendous shout from the Hamblin side of the house.

"All who are opposed will say No."

"No!" was given with equal force by the other side, followed by wild shouts from each faction. For fully a minute the noise continued, the desk resounding with blows from the chairman's fist. Men jumped upon chairs and benches, while the platform was crowded with leaders of both factions. But the temporary chairman knew his business. When the excitement subsided he said:

"Being unable to decide the vote, you will now prepare to divide the house. All who favor the amendment will go to the left side of the hall. All opposed will take the right side—and I appoint Cyrus Hart Miller and Harvey Barnes tellers to count the vote."

The excitement was renewed with greater fury than before, the Daley men shouting:

"Give us a teller!" "Both tellers are Hamblin men!" "We protest agin it!" "Shame on ye to bar us out!"

After the house was divided the tellers finished the count, announcing the amendment carried by a large majority. The decision exasperating the vanquished party, threats were made against the chairman of the Town Committee, while the victors were wild with enthusiasm. Paddy Sullivan, hardly able to contain himself, his red face glistened like a coal of fire, while his carrot hair, stiff as bristles, stood erect.

"Hip! hip! hurray!" he cried, "bedad, the Sinitor has yees."

The newly-elected chairman mounting the platform, and thanking the caucus for the honor done him, asked whom they desired for secretary. The Daley crowd claimed the right to fill the place, but a vote on two candidates resulted in a victory for the "machine," the Senator's faction.

The chair asked the further pleasure of the caucus, when a young lawyer named Hardy arose to address the meeting. He spoke of the unhappy faction fight; he was for harmony, but thought the machine entirely responsible for the existing state of affairs. Censuring Senator Hamblin, he eulogized Daley, whom he believed actuated by the highest and most honorable motives in seeking the nomination, and he warned the "machine" men of the dangers besetting them trying to force a bad nomination. He then moved that the caucus proceed to ballot for a delegate to the senatorial convention to be held at Cleverdale, one week from that day.

An amendment making Cyrus Hart Miller the delegate from Cleverdale, provoked another spasm of excitement, shouts of "Ballot" being heard from the Daley side, while cries of "Question" came with equal force from the Hamblin party.

Although scarcely any one had large interests at stake, the audience seemed crazed with rage; opposing leaders were like wild beasts; oaths, threats, and invectives of all kinds were heard; the noise filling the hall was like the roar of infuriated animals, and in some parts of the room blows were exchanged; only by the greatest effort did the police prevent a general fight. The chairman, on finally being able to put the motion, heard many voices vote "Aye!" and the opposition loudly crying "No!" but he declared that Cyrus Hart Miller seemed elected the town delegate. Groans and hisses greeted the announcement. Amid the excitement Daley mounted the platform, and said:

"My friends will do me a favor by withdrawing from the hall. If we cannot receive fair treatment here we can at least hold an honest caucus in another place. Follow me!"

Jumping to the floor, he was followed by a mad crowd. As they withdrew from the hall, groans, hisses, cat-calls, and all sorts of wordy invectives were hurled at them. Cyrus Hart Miller was then unanimously chosen delegate, and a series of resolutions was passed, instructing the

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delegate to vote for the Hon. Darius Hamblin. Then the caucus adjourned. As the bolting caucus also elected a delegate, Cleverdale was to be represented by both factions.

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Senator Hamblin won a victory in the county, securing ten of the fifteen towns, although bolting delegates had also been chosen. Several bottles of wine were drunk that evening by the men assembling in the private office of the Boss, but the latter was not happy, for, having stirred up a bitter faction fight, he trembled for the consequences.

CHAPTER X.

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THE CRUELTY OF AMBITION.

Senator Hamblin sat alone in his private office at the bank, evidently engaged in taking a moral inventory of his position. Although winning a victory at the caucuses, he fully realized having slipped down lower in the scale of morality. His canvass had already cost over five thousand dollars, to say nothing of the loss of honor and the awakening of bitter hostility against himself in his own political household.

He knew it would take a large amount of cash to elect him, and hypocritically condemning the corrupt use of money by Daley and his followers, agreed with himself that he must exceed Daley's corruption fund or else be defeated. He fully realized the multiplicity of evils that beset him, but did not desire to turn back.

"I will be elected," said he, "cost what it may, and then try to recover what I lose. There is no backing out now, for the convention will be held next week—then for the result. Daley will bolt the ticket, but I will overwhelm him through the power of money. You infernal little god Mammon, how powerful you are! You have overthrown empires and dynasties; how easily, then, you can overthrow the machinations of a bolting clique! We shall see."

Just then George Alden entered and handed him several letters. Glancing over the superscriptions, his eyes fell upon the well-known handwriting of his admired friend, Assemblyman Mannis. Quickly opening the envelope, he read as follows:

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MANNIS MANOR, HAVELOCK, September 20, 187-.

MY DEAR SENATOR: I write to congratulate you on your victory over your enemies. We made a gallant fight for you here, and as I am chosen delegate from our town, you can readily understand who has won here. It has been reported that this place elected a bolting delegate, but Havelock is the only town, my dear friend, failing to elect one. Havelock will, therefore, be solid for you at the convention.

For a long time I have contemplated addressing you upon a subject interesting me individually. The deep shadow of affliction that gathered over your loved home has delayed the request I am about to make.

To say that I admire your charming daughter scarce expresses my feelings, yet I would not make known my affection nor presume upon paying her attention without the consent of her honored father. I now ask your consent to address her, with the honest intention of winning her heart and hand. I am a bachelor, and, until I met Miss Belle, had no thought of breaking away from a life of singleness. Please convey my regards to Mrs. Hamblin and Miss Belle, and if my request is not considered presumptuous kindly write me in reply at an early day.

Sincerely, your friend,

WALTER MANNIS.

As the Senator concluded reading the epistle, a smile of satisfaction crossed his face.

"This is one of the happiest moments of my life! With such a brilliant man for my son-in-law I should indeed be a proud father—but there is Alden. Well, she must drop him, and at once. Did I dare send him away, he should go this very day. But no; he is a favorite with all the directors, and he is certainly a faithful man. Ah! there's Sargent, he can be induced to do any work I desire him to perform. After election, he will have a position in the bank, for our cashier will surely die, his place will be filled by young Alden, and Sargent will be chosen teller. Alden should not be allowed to longer visit my daughter, but how can it be prevented? I shall at once make my wishes and Mannis's request known to my wife and daughter. Poor Belle! She is deeply interested in Alden, but what of that? Isn't my word law in my own family? Is not a man justified in guiding the destiny of those belonging to him? In fact, does not the imperative duty devolve upon a parent of making provision in life for his loved ones? This intimacy between Belle and Alden must immediately be broken."

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Thus he reasoned, trying to justify himself in allowing ambition to mislead him, but in contemplating the programme his conscience was not easy nor his mind comfortable. Seizing the letter, he started for home, but on reaching the street met Miller, who wishing to see him on important business, he returned to the office. Before Miller left others arrived, and the hours passed quickly without the interview taking place that was to bring pain and trouble to a young girl, merely because her heart was to be considered of less consequence than her father's ambition.

The engagements of the afternoon and evening made it necessary for Senator Hamblin to

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postpone the proposed conversation with his wife and daughter. On the following evening Belle, returning from the house of a friend, met her lover, who saluted her affectionately, and, offering his arm, proposed a walk. As the two passed along the street, they were happy as mortals usually are when the little god of love is binding them together with chains that do not gall except when one tries to escape from them. Absorbed in each other's society, they spoke of the past, the happy moments at Lake George; and then Alden poured the thoughts of his heart into the willing ear of the maiden at his side. His tale of love elicited from the heart of the happy girl a modest response, that nevertheless answered its purpose completely.

Then they began to forecast the future, which was not as clear as they desired, for both were conscious of obstacles obstructing their paths. Belle knew her father's consent to her marriage with George Alden could never be obtained, while the young clerk felt the enmity of Senator Hamblin toward him was not of a nature easy to be overcome. Still, what lover has ever lacked hope in proportion to what was to be hoped against?

Belle, full of joy, entered her home and sought her mother, telling of the happy hour passed; and as she related her joy, the loving parent, embracing her child, said:

"Darling, my blessing rest upon you, and may God soften the heart of your father; may the ambition holding him in its clutches spare your young heart sorrow."

The following morning, Mr. Hamblin arose from the breakfast-table, and said:

"Belle, I should like a few moments' conversation with you," and gently leading her from the room to his private apartment, he said:

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"My daughter, I wish to speak of a matter that interests not only your future, but that of our family. You have arrived at an age when you will be called upon to make choice of all that brings happiness or sorrow. Life's journey may be made joyous or a highway paved with sharp stones, hedged in with thistles and pitfalls. You are beginning the road without knowledge of the trials and vexations that may obstruct your progress. Unskilled in the ways and manners of those who will seek to turn you from the path of duty, you must know a father's love and anxiety for his offspring makes him anxious about her future welfare. You have passed from girlhood to womanhood and must soon choose a companion. I should always reproach myself did I fail in my duty toward assisting you to begin the journey aright."

The trembling girl, scarce knowing what reply to make, fully realized that the long-dreaded interview had begun, and a deep sigh escaping her, she said:

"I hardly understand your meaning, father, but I cannot believe you so cruel as to leave the one most interested without a voice in deciding a matter of such vital importance as you hint at."

"I see you comprehend me. Assemblyman Mannis asks the privilege of addressing you. He is rich, respected and talented, having already won honors of which few young men can boast. Coming from a good family, he is a prize that any lady may well feel proud to win. Ah, I see you do not receive this proposal as I wish. I did not expect you to think well of it at first; but, Belle, you are possessed of good judgment, and must see that the union of the estates of Mannis and myself would give us great power."

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"But, papa, I cannot give him my heart, that is another's. While I am ready to obey you in everything else I cannot change the current of affection, even at your bidding. Oh, spare me any moments of sorrow, and do not urge me, for I cannot receive the attentions of your friend."

"Cannot! but you *must!* This is only sentimentality. Once the wife of Walter Mannis, your affections would be his. As your father, I must see that you start aright in life. I am older than you, and have seen the world from all sides. People bow to station and wealth, it is the 'open sesame' to every heart—the key unlocking the door of every house in the land. Be not hasty in your conclusions, my darling; you are a sensible girl, and I believe the infatuation that beset you at Lake George will soon wear away, and the scales now dimming your vision fall, revealing not only your duty but your path to happiness as well. Do not shed tears, but bear up and look upon this matter as your father thinks best for your future welfare."

Belle suddenly brushed away the tears; her eyes flashed, her flushed face showed plainly that passion raged in her heart. Always gentle, seldom allowing anger to rise, Belle had ever spoken kindly to her father. Now, unable to control herself longer, she broke forth:

"As my father, I suppose, you have the right to barter or sell me, soul and body, to the highest bidder. Yes, you can advertise and even receive sealed proposals for my hand. But, father or not, I say distinctly that so long as I live, with mind clear and under my own control, I shall *never* be the wife of Mr. Mannis! I also believe him too honorable to desire such a union were he aware of my feelings. No, sir! I say now, as your child, I will never marry a man who has not my love."

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As she spoke she looked the proud and noble woman that she was. Her hair hung loosely about her face, her lustrous eyes shone like diamonds, and the rich tinge of vermilion on cheeks and lips were in striking contrast to the paleness of her father.

Senator Hamblin was filled with conflicting emotions. Admiring his daughter for her positive character, he was enraged at her bold defiance of his orders. But his lips soon became firmly set and a look of anger dispelled that of admiration and surprise.

"Belle," he exclaimed, "my orders must be obeyed. You shall marry Walter Mannis. I have no more to say at present, except that young Alden shall go from the bank, for it is he that has made you defy your father. Yes, he shall go as soon as I can get rid of him. He has rewarded me for giving him employment by stealing my best and greatest treasure, and he shall pay for it."

He ceased speaking, and casting an angry look upon Belle, quickly left the apartment.

Belle gazed after him for an instant, and wildly throwing up her hands, exclaimed:

"What have I done, oh, what have I done to merit this?"

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Bursting into tears, she staggered as if about to fall, when Mrs. Hamblin entering, caught and bore her helpless daughter to a sofa. The stricken girl opened her eyes, and exclaimed:

"Oh, Mamma! Papa has spoken cruel words to me; he will discharge George; he wants me to marry Mr. Mannis. God help us all when a father is willing to sell his own flesh and blood to gratify his political ambition!"

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CHAPTER XI.

THE CONVENTION.

Belle's heart was sad and full of forebodings of disaster to her lover, for, knowing her father's determined nature, she feared he would at once discharge the young man who had dared to love his daughter. Fully realizing the situation, she kept her room during the day. Her loving mother was her comforter, yet hardly dare plead for her daughter, knowing so well her husband's selfish nature and overbearing disposition. She knew that if her husband was opposed he would become more decided in his purposes than if left to think over his own unjust and cruel orders.

Belle decided that she must see George Alden without delay, so she wrote a note requesting him to call at her home at once. Her father, she knew, would be absent and they could enjoy an uninterrupted interview. She was well aware that if her incensed parent knew George Alden was to visit her, he would certainly give orders to prevent his entering the house.

Promptly at the appointed hour George entered the house, and saw quickly that Belle was in trouble.

"Oh, George," said Belle, "our sunshine of last evening was followed by a storm. I sent for you to tell you of my father's cruel purpose. He has given orders that I must receive the attentions of another, and he even threatened to remove you from the bank. My heart is wretched, for should you lose your place for the reason that you love me, I should feel that I was your evil genius. I sent for you to ask if you would give me up, rather than lose your position at the bank. Think of it, George, for you are dependent upon what you earn for the support of yourself and sister. You are free to decide now, and whatever you choose I will acquiesce in."

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"Belle, do you think the ties that bind us together are lightly assumed; or has your father's command made you regret the step you have taken? If the latter, then you are free, for I would not cause you one moment of grief or pain. But you are everything to me—my very existence—and rather than surrender you to another, I would lose all this world can give. Oh, Belle, you cannot doubt me!"

"Doubt you? No, George, I do not. My heart is yours alone; and let my father do his worst, he cannot change the course of my affection nor make me sacrifice myself upon the altar of his ambition. He is determined to prevent you from even seeing me, and whatever is done we must be guarded. I shall be advised by Mamma in all my movements. Attend faithfully to your duties at the bank and I don't think you will lose your place, unless the directors are dissatisfied with you. We are both young and time will work changes, perhaps for our good. Let no action of yours place you at a disadvantage, and be sure not to quarrel with my father. If he treats you in an arbitrary manner do not complain. Perhaps he may change his intentions when this hateful political campaign is over."

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"Belle, I will do all you ask. Whatever insults he may heap upon me will be borne for your sake; but I do not believe he can discharge me from the bank; in fact, our cashier is very ill, there is really no hope of his recovery, and I have been told by members of the Board of Directors that I am to fill the vacant position. Now, Belle, I will leave you, but shall see you when I can, for I must look often upon your dear face. Rest assured I shall retain my place unless some charge can be preferred against me, and of that I am not afraid."

The two conversed a few moments longer, then parted, full of confidence in each other, yet filled with anxiety for their future.

Senator Hamblin was greatly excited after his interview with his daughter, and walking quickly to his office threw himself into a chair, and said:

"Confound that puppy Alden! What shall I do? I am determined that Belle shall marry Walter Mannis. I little expected so much opposition. She has defied me, her father. H'm! I admire her spirit, but she must be conquered, for my mind is set upon this marriage. Curse the day that took us to Lake George! It was disaster from the time we landed from the steamboat until we left. Dear little Willie was taken from us there, and now my beautiful daughter has rebelled against me. I must write a letter in reply to Mannis and delay giving him a direct answer. Let me see. I will write at once," and taking pen and paper, he wrote as follows:

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CLEVERDALE, N. Y., September 18, 187-.

MY DEAR MANNIS: YOUR very welcome letter was duly received and I was gratified at its contents. Allow me to thank you for your expressions in my behalf, as well as your effort to aid my canvass. Believe me, dear Mannis, I appreciate your friendship.

In relation to your request to address my daughter, it would give me inexpressible pleasure to know that she was to become the wife of so brilliant a man as yourself. My wife and daughter have deeply felt the affliction befalling us at Lake George, and I am urging them to withdraw from seclusion. The death of our little Willie has left a desolate household, and my loved ones refuse to be comforted. While I freely give my consent and express my great delight at your request, I ask you to delay, for a brief period, addressing my daughter. We will meet at the Convention and can then talk the matter over at length.

Again thanking you for past favors, and expressing my pleasure at your request, I remain,

Your friend,
DARIUS HAMBLIN.

Folding and addressing the letter, he said:

"That will do for the present; in the mean time I shall see if my commands are to be obeyed."

The days flew rapidly by and Senator Hamblin was busily engaged in managing his canvass, trying every way to break the force of Daley and his friends. Daley, learning of Sargent's treachery, as he called it, had not made use of the statement as expected. Having neglected to get Sargent's affidavit to the paper made against Senator Hamblin, he was chagrined and dumbfounded on learning that Miller had succeeded in obtaining one to the later document.

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The day of the Convention was only twenty-four hours distant, and of course there was some excitement in the senatorial district.

As the reader may not understand the *modus operandi* of political conventions, we will explain how nominations are made.

There are sixty counties in the Empire State, embracing a population of 5,082,871 persons. These sixty counties are divided into thirty-two senatorial and one hundred and twenty-eight assembly districts, apportioned pro rata according to population for the composition of the State Legislature. New York County is entitled to seven senators and twenty-four assemblymen; King's County, three senators and twelve assemblymen; Albany County, one senator and three assemblymen; Erie County, one senator and five assemblymen; Oneida County, one senator and three assemblymen; leaving nineteen senators and eighty-one assemblymen to be divided among the remaining fifty-five counties, requiring from two to five counties to constitute a senatorial district. Each of the fifty-five counties are allowed from one to three assemblymen, except Fulton and Hamilton, which have but one to represent them both.

The county to which Cleverdale belongs is composed of fifteen towns, and this, added to the adjoining county of sixteen towns, furnishes the required quota of population for a senatorial district.

There are different methods of manipulating caucuses and conventions, and as the exciting political scenes of this story are to take place at the Senatorial Convention, we will explain the latter. Some counties send a delegate direct to the Senatorial Convention from each and every town caucus; some select three delegates at each assembly district convention, while others at their regular county convention select three delegates to be sent from each assembly district. In many counties, both great political organizations adopt the same method, while neither one of the different systems is in any manner used exclusively by either party.

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The county and senatorial district in which Cleverdale is situated is governed by the method first described. At the caucuses held in country towns, delegates are chosen by those present without enrolling names. In the cities, and in fact in some large towns, these caucuses are called "primaries," and the names of all belonging to the party holding the primary must be enrolled before they are allowed to participate in the regular order of business of the primary.

The respectable portion of the voting population being remiss in their duty, the "boss" and his followers are in full control of the caucus or primary. The entire composition of a ticket submitted to the approval of honest voters is the work of these men. Those claiming to represent the moral sentiment of communities rarely attend the caucus or primary, yet seldom fail to complain of that which they could easily prevent. Honesty in politics can never be expected until the intelligent and honest masses awaken to the necessity of devoting a little time to the primaries. The better element of the community is responsible for the demoralization in political matters, for, being in overwhelming majority, a little attention to the caucus or primary would make unfit nominations impossible. But the American way, in politics as in all things else, is to let everything drift until the situation is desperate, and then to work for a cure, which generally they effect. Not until they realize the proverbial superiority of prevention to cure will Americans be as wise as they are smart.

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The day of the Convention having arrived, Cleverdale was full of politicians, and an irrepressible conflict raged. The thirty-one delegates present were divided, yet Miller's careful canvass assured him that his chief would certainly receive eighteen, if not twenty votes, in the first ballot. Several delegates were working for a compromise candidate; but this element, composed mostly of Daley men, was intent on defeating Senator Hamblin at all hazards. It was their only hope now; and while resolved to bolt his nomination if made, and run Daley as a stump candidate, the irregularity of such a course was to be avoided, if possible, by a compromise candidate.

In Miller's private parlor at Cleverdale's best hotel champagne, cigars, and other refreshments

were served. Miller could not prevail on all delegates to accept his hospitality, for several moral lights in their respective towns could not forget their standing, and enter a room where temptations might lead them astray. Miller became somewhat alarmed at the proposed compromise, for several of his own friends talked of making success sure rather than run any risk of defeat. Miller was given unlimited power by his chief to thwart Daley's purpose. So, finally, in company with George Horton, Miller held a protracted interview with the delegates in question, and a generous distribution of money ended further efforts for a compromise candidate.

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Promptly at one o'clock, the Convention was called to order by the chairman of the Senatorial Committee, who nominated Hon. Walter Mannis as chairman. A Daley delegate offered an amendment that James Kendrick, of Silvertown, be substituted for Mr. Mannis. This was a test of the strength of the respective candidates, and the loss of the amendment by a vote of seventeen against fourteen was greeted with applause by the friends of Senator Hamblin.

The deliberations proceeded with many interruptions, when a motion for a ballot called talkers to their feet. The Daley men, with great persistency, fought for a compromise, and the speakers in making their appeal embraced the opportunity to attack the character of Senator Hamblin. Sargent's statement was read, followed by the affidavit, read by Miller, wherein Sargent retracted his charges against Hamblin, admitting the injustice done to a man who never, to the affiant's knowledge, performed a dishonorable act. The delegates became greatly excited, the Daley men making another appeal for a compromise candidate, charging the responsibility of defeat—which they declared sure to follow—upon the Hamblin faction, if their request was ignored. Charges of so grave a nature were preferred by both sides, that, if true, both Senator Hamblin and ex-Assemblyman Daley would have been consigned to felons' cells. The Daley delegates failing to carry their point, one of their number moved to withdraw and hold another Convention. Twelve delegates left the room, after which the nomination of Hon. Darius Hamblin was made, and suitable resolutions passed, endorsing the action of the Convention and condemning the course of the bolters.

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A committee appointed to wait upon the candidate and inform him of his nomination, soon returned with Senator Hamblin, who was received with cheers. Order being restored, he thanked the delegates for the honor conferred on him, and followed with a powerful speech, his words being carefully and shrewdly chosen to win sympathy. While he regretted, he said, the action of his personal enemies, he felt it his duty to remain in the field, so long as the Daley faction attacked his character. He deftly told of the personal sacrifices made to serve his fellow-citizens, the speech concluding with a promise of certain election, the cause represented by him being in the hands of the people.

Several others spoke, among them Mannis, who paid a glowing tribute to his friend; then the Convention adjourned.

In the mean time the twelve bolting delegates assembled at another place, where they were joined by eleven others, chosen by bolting caucuses in the senatorial district. A Convention was organized, Daley was nominated, and resolutions were passed declaring him the regular candidate, adjournment following.

Two faction candidates were now before the people, the hostility between them bordering on frenzy.

CHAPTER XII.

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A WICKED SCHEME.

The campaign opened vigorously and malignantly, so far as the senatorial nomination was concerned. The leaders began the work of organization at once. Miller was manager of Senator Hamblin's canvass. Yet every action was made at the instigation and under full direction of the Boss himself. Money was freely used, and the men at the factories were, through their pockets, made interested combatants.

Senator Hamblin supposed he had the support of all the bosses at the mills, but Daley succeeded in securing several men of influence, whom Miller found himself unable to win over. Even the great manufacturing company of which Hamblin was a director had many Daley men in its employ. The opposition party placed its candidate in the field, the leaders in the full hope that the split in Senator Hamblin's party would give them victory. Consequently there was no lack of ammunition to keep up the fight.

It is a custom of American politics for journals of the opposite party to help on the faction fights of their opponents by publishing the charges made by each faction against the other, and these cause fully as much bad blood as the most fiendish politician can desire.

One of the first demonstrations on either side was the presentation of colors by Senator Hamblin to the newly organized Hamblin Guards. The affair was shrewdly managed to give it all the political significance that such affairs carry with them. The company was to be christened and the colors presented by the honorable gentleman whose name had been adopted. One of the best city bands was engaged, and a banquet was ordered, to which many prominent men from abroad were invited. An elaborate programme was prepared and the event pretty well advertised. It was not especially intended by members of the company to use the occasion for political purposes, but their patron shrewdly managed otherwise.

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Prominent members of the New York State National Guard were to grace the occasion with their

presence, and the gathering of shoulder-strapped notables was to be large.

Cleverdale was to have a great gala-day, and, of course, Senator Hamblin expected to reap the benefit. The stand of colors consisted of two elegant silk flags—one the National colors, the other the company flag bearing the name of HAMBLIN GUARDS and the State coat-of-arms in gold and colors.

Senator Hamblin, desiring to bring Walter Mannis and his daughter together upon the stage of the Opera House, shrewdly arranged that, immediately after his presentation speech, Mannis should receive the flags in behalf of the company from the hands of Belle. At first the girl refused to take part in the festivities, appealing to her father to excuse her, and pleading her grief at the loss of little Willie; but the father was inexorable, and Belle saw that she would not be spared the pain of taking the part assigned her in her father's political programme. The opportunity of bringing Belle and Mannis together, added to his inherent pride of display and political significance of the occasion, made the Senator extremely happy, so what matter if it made his daughter miserable?

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The town, on the occasion, presented the appearance of holiday grandeur. Bunting streamed from many public places and private residences, while the cool October air and clear blue sky combined to make a truly royal day for the affair. As the military company was composed of the best blood of Cleverdale, it was natural that the citizens generally should honor the day.

The Opera House was resplendent with beauty and brains. When, at the appointed hour, the Hamblin Guards, commanded by Captain Rogers, entered, delicious music filled the hall, and amid the waving of handkerchiefs and smiles and cheers the company marched through the aisle to the stage, and were arrayed in solid ranks at its back. The music ceasing, Senator Hamblin appeared in front, accompanied by his daughter and followed by Hon. Walter Mannis and Captain Rogers.

The programme opened with the presentation speech by Senator Hamblin. It was an eloquent effort, and the points were so many and so well put that deafening applause was frequent. Belle stood by, holding the staff on which the company colors were furled. Beautiful in her rich attire of satin and velvet, her sparkling eyes, rosy cheeks and lips made her a most attractive figure. Mannis, standing beside her, glanced with admiration at the beautiful girl. Senator Hamblin's eye flashed with pride as he beheld his daughter, but no one understood the meaning of the furtive glances he cast toward Mannis and Belle, except the latter, who saw and comprehended its full significance; it caused a twinge of pain and a sigh to escape her, and these attracted the attention of Mannis. Realizing that she was attracting attention, a blush overspread her face, and the handsome Assemblyman felt flattered by the belief that his presence caused her emotion, while in reality her mind was clouded by the remembrance of her father's cruel commands. Her agitation was momentary, for the cue being given Belle gracefully unfurled the beautiful ensign. It was the natural signal for applause, and the roof fairly shook with cheers, the band playing "The Star-Spangled Banner," when Mannis took the flag and passed it to the captain, who placed it in the hands of the company's ensign. The other banner then given Belle was not fully exposed until coming into the hands of Mannis. That gentleman then spoke in eloquent words, his handsome form and commanding presence giving excellent effect to his utterances. On finishing he was greeted with loud applause. The party, retiring from the stage, entered a private box at the left while the band played several selections. The Hamblin Guards gave a display of military drill which was greatly enjoyed by the audience.

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Assemblyman Mannis divided his attention between father and daughter, the latter treating him with politeness. This was gratifying to her father, who hoped she would overcome her reluctance to obey him. But he reckoned without remembering the inflexible will of his child, who was too well bred to act other than as a lady toward her father's guest, especially when he was treating her with great deference.

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While conversing with those about her, Belle saw George Alden occupying a conspicuous seat, and many loving glances passed between her and him. George could not avoid hearing the expressions of admiration that greeted the handsome group. Senator Hamblin was a noble-looking man; Mannis was handsome, and Belle never shone with greater brilliancy.

The ceremonies were nearly over when Captain Rogers, advancing to the front of the stage, in a few words thanked the people of Cleverdale for the honor done his command in assembling to witness the christening. He also thanked his superior officers, coming from a distance to honor the occasion; and for the magnificent gift of colors paid a handsome eulogy to the honorable gentleman whose name the company bore. Then he proposed three cheers for Senator Hamblin, which were given by the whole assembly, rising to their feet. He then declared the exercises closed, the band played "Home, Sweet Home," and the audience left the Opera House.

Senator Hamblin and party passing from the box, Belle was followed by Mannis. As they reached the auditorium, the handsome Assemblyman offered his arm, saying:

"Miss Hamblin, may I have the honor of accompanying you home?"

With a pleasant smile she replied:

"Thank you, kindly, but I have a previous engagement," and with a "Good-night, sir," turning, she took the arm of George Alden, who was at her side.

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Mannis was chagrined and Senator Hamblin's countenance quickly overspread with anger. Whispering to his companion, he said:

"My friend, I am astonished, but we will speak of this later."

He could say no more, for, coming upon a party of distinguished military gentlemen awaiting him—military men always know whom to waylay at such times—the party was led to the Cleverdale House and ushered into the banquet hall. Several tables were arranged for the company, Senator Hamblin, Assemblyman Mannis and the military guests being placed at a special table. At the right was another, at which were seated Miller, Paddy Sullivan, George Horton, and several other political celebrities. At the left were the officers—both commissioned and non-commissioned—while at other tables were seated the members of the company.

The tables were loaded with every delicacy that could be obtained, while bottles of wine flanked a regular line of graceful glasses. Course after course was partaken of, and amid the hilarity the host and his friend appeared to forget their disappointment.

The popping of corks seemed just the kind of artillery that the uniformed guests enjoyed best. Yet those who remember the troublous times of twenty years ago will not forget that the Union was saved by members of this same Home Guard, who play at soldiering with zest, but in time of need "mean business."

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Speeches, toasts, etc., followed, until the "wee sma' hours" the flow of soul, wit, and wine continued, and Senator Hamblin reaped the full benefit. When the last toast was drunk, the host arose, and bidding the company good-night, departed with his guests. After the military dignitaries were conducted to their rooms, Senator Hamblin joined Mannis, who was awaiting him.

"My dear Mannis, I am amazed at my daughter's conduct toward you this evening. It was unexpected to me."

"I am afraid, Senator, she has deeply set her affection on that young Alden. I can read character, and tremble lest my efforts to win her prove unsuccessful."

"Unsuccessful? they shall not be. Do you suppose I will allow my child to throw herself away upon a common bank clerk? No! if you love her as you say she shall be your wife. My mind is made up, and the sentimental nonsense of the girl shall be overcome."

"You may not be able to overcome it, Senator. Still, I never loved until I saw your daughter, and I will wed her if her consent can be obtained, trusting to winning her affections afterward. Be careful what you do, though; don't frighten her with harsh treatment. She is conscientious, and having a share of her father's self-will she must be handled carefully, or before you know it she will fly off like a frightened bird. I shall leave here early in the morning; before I go I beg of you, whatever you do, to be discreet."

The angry father could not be quieted so easily. His face was hard with passion; he swore to himself that Alden should be sent away in disgrace and Belle be locked in her room; but when Mannis told him his canvass would not permit anything so arbitrary, the cord controlling his every action being touched, he became quiet, and said:

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"Well, what course can I pursue? Answer me that."

Mannis suddenly rising to his feet, looked into the closet, under the bed, behind the door, and in every place that might conceal a listener, then approaching Senator Hamblin, whispered:

"This man Alden must be sacrificed."

Senator Hamblin started, while a shade of horror passed over his countenance.

"No, no! Mannis, no bloodshed for me!"

"Bloodshed? Nonsense! no one said bloodshed. He is in your bank, surrounded by temptation. Place a trap for him, do you understand? Your daughter is too honorable and high-minded to associate with a rascal."

"Yes, I see," thoughtfully answered the Senator. "I declare, Mannis, you are full of expedients. Yes, he shall be entrapped, for I am justified in saving my daughter."

"Treat her kindly and do not be harsh with Alden; but work up a trap for him. Haven't you a clerk in the bank you can enlist to help you?"

"Let me see. I have it! The cashier, Wilber, can live but a short time and Alden will be his successor. Sargent, who published that ugly paper about me, is promised Alden's present place. Yes; he is my man, and I will use him."

The two talked a few moments longer, and warmly shaking hands parted, Senator Hamblin leaving for his home. On entering the gate he heard his name spoken, and turning saw Miller approaching, all excitement and out of breath, for he had been running.

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"More trouble, Senator; that d—d Rawlings has sold us out."

"Sold us out! the devil he has! And two thousand dollars of my money gone! It can't be possible, Miller!"

"But it is so, for I had it from his own lips. To-morrow's edition will fire into you from all sides. It's a bad go, and I have been afraid of the scoundrel. I was half inclined when I heard it to let Paddy Sullivan set a few of the lads on the office and clean it out. But that will hardly do."

"What shall we do for a home paper, now?"

"There is only one course left us, and that is buy up the *Advertiser*, which is in the market; but we must get legal hold of the concern. That is the only way now, for we must have an organ."

"Call at my office early to-morrow morning, and we will arrange the matter. Curse the luck! but I will block that little game. Good-night!" and the Senator entered the house, not to sleep, but to lie upon his bed thinking over the two exciting problems of the day, namely, how to entrap Alden, and in what manner to counteract the effects of Rawlings' treachery.

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CHAPTER XIII.

DALEY'S STRENGTH WANES.

The appearance of the *Investigator* next morning was like a thunderbolt in the village of Cleverdale. It came out boldly against Senator Hamblin, and charged that his action at the convention meant the overthrow of his party. The editor stated that he had stood by the man as long as he had even a piece of argument to catch his toes on, but when the wisdom of the men controlling the convention could not bring Senator Hamblin to see his duty, when a compromise candidate was asked for and refused, it was time for all respectable men in the party to declare themselves on the side of honesty, justice, and common-sense. It cited the charges first brought by Sargent, copied Sargent's first statement in full, and then charged that the profligate use of money had done more than anything else to make the elective franchise a farce. Senator Hamblin was held responsible for the disgrace of corrupting voters in the village of Cleverdale. The article was a scathing arraignment of Hamblin before the bar of public opinion, and apparently its influence foreboded disaster to the regular candidate.

During the early morning hours Miller met his "boss" at the private office of the latter, having previously seen the editor of the *Advertiser*, who offered to sell his paper for twenty-five hundred dollars. The price was considered high, but that being the best that could be done, Miller was ordered to purchase the concern at once. One of Cleverdale's young lawyers was placed in charge of the *Advertiser's* editorial columns, and the first number devoted itself to Rawlings' treachery and Daley's private character. The latter, the new editor asserted, was, unlike that of Cæsar's wife, not above suspicion, while Senator Hamblin's private character was pure and spotless.

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The fight between the papers was so full of acrimony that Satan himself would have delighted in it, had there been any possibility of his receiving fire-proof copies. Both candidates were attacked, and the sins of their ancestors were carefully elaborated and fired off as campaign fireworks.

Previous to an election, American journalism of the party-organ stripe has a demoralizing influence in the land. The good qualities of candidates are briefly mentioned. But the bad qualities—ah! these are what the party organs delight in. Not the part that their own candidate occupies on the side of virtue; not the good that is in him; not the intellectual qualifications he boasts of; not the nobleness of character he possesses—none of these inspire the editor. No, all of this is nothing: the amount of "pure cussedness" that can be attributed to the opposing candidate is the indicator of journalistic inspiration. Many a man who has thought himself a moral light has in an unguarded moment accepted a nomination, and the astonishment of himself and friends to see how corrupt he suddenly becomes is not infrequently a harbinger of victory for the opposition. The English language can hardly furnish adjectives to qualify such a man. Damned he is inevitably, and his carcass when hung up is filled with arrows dipped in printer's poisoned ink. When a foreigner picks up one of our party organs, during an exciting political campaign, he cannot help thanking his Creator he was not born in a land where public men are such rascals and robbers. Cardinal Wolsey said, "Corruption wins not more than honesty," but the dethroned favorite lived before America had gone into politics on her own account, and then left the work to her parasites instead of attending to it herself.

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As an index to the feeling of the Cleverdale community, a very interesting incident that occurred after the *Investigator's* editor came out against Senator Hamblin is valuable. One evening Editor Rawlings, boldly entering the "Shades," walked up to Paddy Sullivan, and extending his hand said:

"Good-evening, Paddy."

The man addressed rose slowly to his feet, the hot blood rushed to his face, the florid countenance assuming an almost purple hue. Drawing back from the outstretched hand as if it had been a viper preparing to strike its fangs into his flesh, a look of scorn flashed from his bleared eyes, his lips trembled, and his chin quivered as he roared:

"Shake hands! wid sich a dirty traither as yees? Judas Iscariot was a white man beside the loike of yees, and Binedict Arnold a saint. Git out av this house, ye villin! Bad cess to a loafer who sells hisself to a tradin' thafe! Shake hands wid yees, is it? May me hand be cut from me arrum afore it aven teches that pizen thing av yours."

Several men gathered about Rawlings, and each had a word to say.

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"Well, gentlemen, what have I done?" asked Rawlings; "can't a thoroughbred citizen call in here without being insulted? Come, boys, let's take a drink. Set 'em up, Paddy."

"Set 'em up, Paddy? Not a domned set up here. D'ye hear?" and the proprietor began pulling off his coat. "Now look ye here, Mr. Binedict Arnold, there's the door! and if your dirty carcass isn't outside of it in fifteen siconds, be jabers, I'm the darlint to throw yees out! No, b'ys, yees kape back. Moind, I'm the jedge to settle wid him. Iditor, git out!"

Rawlings, realizing that the angry Paddy was in earnest, slowly walked toward the door, when an egg striking him full in the back caused him to utter a savage oath.

"Paddy Sullivan, you and your gang of ruffians will repent this!"

During the interview Paddy failed to observe three men whispering to his wife, back of the bar. The woman handing them a package, the ugly-looking fellows stole out the side-door, and hid behind a tree as Rawlings was leaving the saloon.

The exasperated editor unconsciously approached the trio, swearing furiously at the outrage to his person, bitterly denouncing Senator Hamblin, whom he held responsible for the insult. As he arrived at the ambushade, three men suddenly sprang out, and before recovering from his surprise Rawlings was enveloped in a cloud of flour, the substance filling his eyes and mouth and covering him from head to foot. For once the *Investigator* man could boast that he was a white man, but he did not think to do it. And before he had recovered sufficiently to recognize his assailants, they had fled.

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Hearing approaching footsteps, he stepped aside as Senator Hamblin and Cyrus Hart Miller passed. Hidden behind a tree, he gnashed his teeth with rage as the objects of his hatred disappeared. He then left his place of concealment and started homeward.

The campaign went on, and Senator Hamblin bled freely. His chances were desperate, the Daley crowd drawing so heavily from him that at times the election of the opposition party candidate seemed almost assured. Miller was at work day and night, and wherever money could be used to win back strong leaders the price was paid and the wanderers brought back to the fold.

At the Cleverdale Woollen Mill, of which Senator Hamblin was a large stockholder, three powerful bosses opposed him. One had seen the necessity of "getting straight" for his employer, the others refusing to see their duty, or rather their interest. Having been exhorted and coaxed, it was evident they meant to "stick," and, each controlling many men, it became necessary to resort to other means to prevent opposition to the Senator.

As a warning to others, one of the bosses was to be removed from his position at the factory. Of course it would not do to openly discharge men for having political opinions of their own, for that would be called proscription, and in this free land would never be tolerated. Besides, a candidate could ill afford being called a "bulldozer," so, pay-day arriving, one of the bosses was discharged, and informed that his work did not please. He denounced the company for depriving him of the right of enjoying his own opinions, the charge being indignantly denied, but the company put a stanch Hamblin man in the vacant place, while the other stubborn boss, thinking discretion the better part of valor, was not slow in deserting Daley. The factory hands were soon made solid for their employer, for in the factory were posted large placards bearing the words:

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<p>EMPLOYÉES ARE EXPECTED</p> <p>TO VOTE FOR</p> <p>DARIUS HAMBLIN</p> <p>FOR</p> <p>STATE SENATOR.</p>

Will any man vote the bread and butter from the mouths of his wife and children?

Senator Hamblin meanwhile treated his daughter with great kindness. He did not refer to the scene at the Opera House, or again forbid her meeting Alden. He gave her large sums of money to distribute among the charitable institutions and poor of Cleverdale. Belle was happy at being allowed to assist the needy, and her father found her a valuable aid to his ambition. It was not strange, with so much money wisely distributed, that his canvass should grow more promising as election drew nearer. Men were sent into every part of the senatorial district, and if argumentative power availed not, more solid inducements were used. The powerful railroad interests were helping Daley, but even with the contributions from the great monopolies he continually lost ground. When he was nominated the mad passions of his backers held full sway, but as time passed men became cooler, and the irregularity of Daley's nomination, as well as the interest of the party, were powerful arguments in favor of Senator Hamblin. Here and there strong leaders were recaptured, and returned with their followers to the support of the regular nominee.

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Miller managed the canvass with consummate skill. He was everywhere at the right moment, while County Clerk Horton, Assemblyman Mannis, Paddy Sullivan, and others were valuable auxiliaries. "The machine" showed its great strength in the emergency, and demonstrated that the most powerful engine of American politics, when the bosses instead of the people have their hand on it, *is* the machine. Daley's canvass dwindled to insignificant proportions, although danger was by no means impossible, for it was reported that Daley would withdraw and urge his friends to support the opposite party's candidate. As for Rawlings, he had really been a detriment to the bolters, for his malice and treachery were so apparent that respectable people became disgusted with him, and the *Investigator* became a boomerang. Rawlings was treated with contempt by his townsmen, and of course did not enjoy the respect of those who purchased him.

A week before election day the cashier of the Cleverdale National Bank died. The directors at

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once called a meeting and elected George Alden cashier, choosing Sargent as teller to fill the vacancy caused by Alden's promotion. Sargent's appointment was to be kept secret until after election, lest it might endanger the bank president's success.

It was a proud day for George Alden when he was formally made cashier, and Belle was agreeably surprised when her father spoke kindly of the young man, although he added:

"I hope he will do nothing to destroy the confidence the directors have placed in him, but, like all young men, he may fall into temptation. He has greater responsibility than ever before, and in these days of defalcations it is hard to tell who will fall. George Alden is only human."

Belle, biting her lip with concealed vexation, was about to reply when a glance from her mother stifled the words she would have spoken. Feeling the significance of her father's remark, she went to her room to reflect upon what she had heard.

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CHAPTER XIV.

THE ELECTION.

'Twas the eve of election, and everything had been done by all sides to insure a full vote. Thorough canvasses having been made by the three candidates, every party felt confident of winning the day. A mass meeting at the Opera House was to be addressed by Senator Hamblin, and the hour drawing nigh a vast crowd assembled. At eight o'clock the spacious balcony was filled with ladies, stalwart men occupying seats on the main floor. When Senator Hamblin entered cheer after cheer greeted him. Bowing acknowledgments, he turned to greet the semi-circle of solid men of Cleverdale occupying chairs on the stage. Although his face was radiant with pleasure, careworn lines about his eyes gave evidence of the strain he had undergone during the exciting canvass now drawing to a close. As he took his seat a gentleman rose and said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, for the purpose of organizing this meeting, I nominate as chairman, William J. Campbell. All favoring Mr. Campbell as chairman will signify it by saying Aye."

There was a loud vote "Aye!"

"All opposed will say No!"

There being no votes in the negative, the motion was declared carried, and Mr. Campbell escorted to the chair. Making a brief speech, he paid a high compliment to "Cleverdale's favorite," Senator Hamblin, predicting a sweeping victory on the morrow, looking for a more harmonious feeling in the party after the canvass was over. His remarks were frequently interrupted by applause, after which he asked the pleasure of the meeting.

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Cyrus Hart Miller arose and proposed a number of gentlemen as vice-presidents of the meeting. The list contained names of many old citizens, and it was evident an effort had been made to recognize every element of Cleverdale. Every nationality was represented, even the names of several colored persons—descendants of Ham—being sandwiched between Celtic or Teutonic slices, while the native American was present in small quantity—merely enough for seasoning.

Then followed a long list of secretaries, embracing the names of many young men. The motion being submitted and carried, these gentlemen were invited to take seats on the stage. After music by the band, Cleverdale's glee club sang a piece suitable for the occasion, when the chairman presented Senator Hamblin. This was the occasion for more applause. When this subsided, the honorable gentleman began his remarks. Speaking at length, the occasion offered fine opportunities for display of his oratorical powers. Giving his views upon leading public questions, and comprehensively elucidating all the details of his subject, he compelled his audience to be attentive listeners. His views upon finances were explained, and his opposition to railroads and other monopolies graphically dilated upon. In all his remarks, however, he held one highly-colored picture before his auditors: it was a life-size photograph of himself as a Reformer. No reference was made to Daley and his friends until near the close of the speech, when the Senator paid his respects to them in words not at all complimentary. He told his hearers of having been forced into the campaign against his will, compelled to be their candidate simply to vindicate their honor as well as his own. Not desiring the office, it being a detriment to his business, he had placed himself in the hands of his friends and neighbors, and the morrow's verdict would be received by him either as an indorsement or condemnation of his course as their servant. Having been told that vast sums of money would be expended by the bolting faction, he also had the assurance of gentlemen managing the campaign on his side that every effort would be made to thwart the corrupters of the ballot-box. Dwelling heavily upon this one point, he somehow refrained from telling the audience that his own check for twenty thousand dollars had been drawn that day, and the money distributed in every town in the senatorial district for the purpose of purchasing votes. Had the information been given, the knowledge might have increased his vote among that class of men whose patriotic motives at the polls are governed by money.

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The Senator spoke for two hours, and, the meeting closing, the people of Cleverdale were left in a halo of political enthusiasm.

Election day opened pleasantly. Cyrus Hart Miller had thoroughly organized his forces, his chief staff officer being the powerful Paddy Sullivan. Next to his own Bridget and the children, Senator Hamblin occupied the chief seat in Paddy's affections, for the "Boss" being a generous paymaster

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Paddy adored him.

The opening hours of election day were quiet. During the morning the honest voters cast their ballots, the marketable article appearing later in the day. As Miller entered one of the polling-places and met Farmer Johnson, he extended his hand and said:

"Mr. Johnson, how are you to-day?"

"Mighty well, Miller; how's things agoin' here?"

"Oh, Hamblin will be elected by a good big majority."

"Don't be sartin on it. I tell you what it is, them Daley fellers is a-workin' like blazes into the hands of t'other party."

"That's nothing new, for Daley has been working that way all the time, being paid to bolt and come up a stump candidate. He is a bad man, Mr. Johnson."

"Don't know so much about that air; but see here, Miller—let me speak to you privately—he offered to pay my team hire if I'd come down and vote for him."

"But a farmer worth his forty thousand dollars wouldn't sell his vote!"

"Sell my vote! See here, Miller, let's go into this room. There: I can speak to you by ourselves, now. Do you mean to insinuate I'd sell my vote—me, a farmer who can buy the best farm in this 'ere county? No, sir, you've got the wrong man."

"Why, Mr. Johnson, of course you wouldn't."

"No, I jest wouldn't. But you see this is a good workin' day, and me and my two boys dropped everything to come down to vote. Daley offered to pay for my team if we'd go for him. I don't like him half so well as I do Hamblin; but—er—it kinder seems as if you'd oughter stand the price of our three days' work and team-hire if we vote your ticket."

"What do you call it worth? Are the boys here?"

"Yes, they'll be here in a few minutes; and if you'll give me five dollars—that is, two for the team and a dollar apiece for our three days' work—we'll vote for Hamblin."

"It's a pretty good price, but I suppose I will have to do it."

"But 'tain't sellin' our votes. I'd scorn doing such a mean trick as that. It's only gettin' pay for lost time."

"Exactly so, Mr. Johnson; I wouldn't dare offer to buy your votes for fear of offending you. There are your boys—call them."

The good old farmer, whose fine sense of honor would not permit him to sell his vote, said:

"Jack, you and Jim must vote for Hamblin; give us your ballots, Miller."

The ballots deposited in the box, Farmer Johnson, one of the upholders of our free institutions, received a five-dollar greenback for performing his duty as a patriot. This was only one instance, many of the same character occurring during the day.

Paddy Sullivan was at the polling district, and as the "b'ys" came up, said:

"Now, thin! here's your clane ticket—sthand aside and let the voters come up. Here, Mither Inspector, take this ballot. Be jabers, thim's the regular clane ticket, an' it's meself as knows how to git 'em in! Whoop 'em in, b'ys!"

Crowding his fat form before those voting against his candidate, at every opportunity, and challenging them, he ruled despotically, and respectable men looked approval.

"Arrah! Paddy Sullivan is no slouch, and when yees wants the ballot kept clane, I'm the daisy to do it."

Men ran hither and thither; Miller's aids receiving orders flew off, returning with those to be "seen." Whispering consultations were held, ballots distributed and deposited, the corrupted voters thereafter receiving pasteboard checks representing the amount agreed upon. In a small room in another part of the building the holders, presenting the checks, received their cash.

During the afternoon the excitement increased, the purchasable voters flocking about Miller and Paddy Sullivan, the latter standing near the ballot-box and making himself obnoxious to all voting the other ticket. He assumed to instruct the inspectors of election about their duties, and these officials feared to dispute his authority, in many instances their decisions being forestalled by him. Those of the other party were at his mercy, and the power of a pothouse politician was absolute. He was especially abusive to those of his own political party who voted for Daley, and soon after noon the Daley crowd becoming demoralized were driven from the polls.

So thoroughly was Senator Hamblin's programme carried out that every voter on his side was brought to the polls, in many instances men being paid to vote in both polling-places. All this was done in the interest of Senator Hamblin, who claimed to represent the "honesty and reform" element of the community.

Honesty and Reform! what sins you have to answer for! So potent are these names that if Beelzebub ever expects to people his realms with the good, he need only announce from platform and press that he is for honesty and reform.

Toward night Senator Hamblin received words of encouragement from every town. Passing the day at the bank, directing the movements of his forces, he was in excellent spirits at the

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prospects of his success and the downfall of his enemies.

The polls closing, Cyrus Hart Miller and Paddy Sullivan joined the boss at Hamblin's private office.

"Sinitor, ye're elected by two thousand majority, and there hain't enough lift of Daley to graze a griddle wid. Didn't we vote the b'ys lively!"

"Paddy, you are a trump, and I shall never forget your services in my behalf. Here is a little present for you," and he handed him two one-hundred-dollar bills.

"God bless you, Sinitor, and whin Paddy Sullivan can help yees, he's yer man, every time. May ye live long and niver want for a frind."

Cigars were lighted, and the trio waited for returns. It was not long before the good news began to flow in, Cleverdale's majority for Senator Hamblin being nearly two hundred larger than that of two years previous. No sooner was the result announced than the streets were illuminated with bonfires and a crowd of men approached the bank. Telegrams kept coming in containing news of Senator Hamblin's increased majorities on every side, so that his election was assured beyond a doubt. His countenance beamed with delight, and Paddy Sullivan, whirling upon his heel, shouted:

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"Hip! hip! hooray! didn't we whoop 'em in!"

The shout reaching the crowd outside, they at once responded:

"Three cheers for Senator Hamblin!"

In answer to the summons, Senator Hamblin stepped out, followed by Miller and Paddy, and was greeted with cheers from the crowd, who demanded a speech. He responded in a few words of thanks, congratulating his fellow-citizens that honesty and right had triumphed over corruption. When he concluded, cries were made for Miller, who appeared and spoke briefly, thanking his fellow-citizens for their part in the day's victory. Of course he did not refer to the fact that at least three quarters of those before him had received checks, ranging from two to five dollars, for voting for Senator Hamblin.

A great victory had been won—that was enough. Senator Hamblin, figuring the cost, found he had paid over forty thousand dollars for the honor of holding an office for which he would receive fifteen hundred dollars per year for two years. Contemplating the cost, he said:

"It is a pretty expensive investment, but the profits have not yet begun to come in."

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It was far into the night when, entering his residence, he retired to his room, and said:

"Now if I can get rid of Alden and make Belle the wife of Mannis I shall be a happy man. Mannis is rich, and I have lately met with heavy losses. To-morrow Sargent goes into the bank, and then—for Alden!"

CHAPTER XV.

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GLOOMY FOREBODINGS.

The excitement of election had hardly subsided when Daley was declared bankrupt. With the loss of property his mind became shattered. Brooding over his troubles and looking upon himself as a victim of the grossest persecution, his brain became so diseased that he would talk of nothing but fancied wrongs. Friends, observing his singular actions, little thought that he contemplated revenge. Two weeks later, however, Daley entered the bank, pulled a revolver from his pocket and fired two shots at his late antagonist. Luckily the pistol failed to do its work, and Daley was secured before he could do more mischief. Raving and swearing that he would have Senator Hamblin's life, he was removed at once, his friends promising to send him to an asylum. Senator Hamblin agreed not to prosecute him, but the affair caused great excitement, much sympathy being expressed for Daley. His case was only one of many: men infatuated with politics are often overwhelmed in financial and social ruin, occasionally followed by dethronement of reason.

Sargent's position in the bank caused much comment, but he was a good accountant and at once became conversant with his work. Cashier Alden gladly saw how readily he fell into the routine of a teller's duties, for he himself had long been doing the work of two men. While glad to have so useful an assistant, he did not feel the confidence he wished in the new teller, for Sargent lacked that frank expression of countenance that all business men look for in one another. Besides, the attitude that Sargent had occupied toward the president of the bank prejudiced Alden's mind against him. The new cashier knew that Sargent, over his own signature, had made statements reflecting upon Senator Hamblin's character, and had subsequently under oath denied them, his reward being the position as bank-teller. If Alden had been a politician he would have seen nothing unusual in such inconsistency, but being only a business man he judged Sargent by business rules, just as if politics was not a rule unto itself.

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One evening Senator Hamblin was writing letters in his private office at the bank when Sargent entered, and said:

"Excuse me, but I desire to get a book I have here."

"All right, Sargent. How do you like your new place?" said the Senator.

"It suits me nicely. Just my fit, thanks to you, sir. Anything I can do to serve your interests I shall

be ready to perform."

"Anything, Sargent?"

"Yes, sir! You can command me to do anything you will. I am indebted to you, and only too anxious to serve you."

Senator Hamblin hesitated as if about to speak, and then in a low tone of voice said:

"I have some very important work I may call upon you to perform. It is very peculiar, and will require the greatest secrecy. You have done private work for me before, and whatever you do now will not be without reward. I am not quite ready. In the mean time attend strictly to your duties, and make yourself strong with the cashier. Win his confidence in every particular, and you will have no cause for regret. I have taken you into my confidence as well as my employ. You can go now, as I have letters to write, and wish to be alone."

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"Good-night, sir!" said Sargent. "When you need my services, command me and I shall obey," and he passed out of the building.

"Yes," said Senator Hamblin, "I believe he will do anything I desire, and with his assistance a trap can be laid for Alden, for I am determined he shall be put out of the way."

He had just written a letter to Mannis, containing the following lines: "When shall I see you? I desire to know what has occurred to your mind to help along that little scheme. You must have a programme. Shall we meet soon?" Folding and addressing the letter, he soon after started for home, and arriving there saw Belle and George Alden in the parlor. He did not enter the room, but passing the door muttered angrily:

"We will spoil that fun soon. Curse it! I wish I could strangle him!"

His hatred for the cashier increasing, he could not drive the thought from his mind that Alden was really doing something criminal. A certain villain named Iago once worked himself into a similar frame of mind. Hamblin's one absorbing thought was to ruin Alden, and thus estrange from him his daughter's affection.

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Belle felt sure that her father's tranquillity was not permanent. Expecting another outbreak, she never awoke in the morning without saying to herself, "I am afraid it will come to-day." Her father often spoke of money losses, accompanying his remarks with these words:

"I should not care, if my daughter were as well provided for as I desire." Although raising no objection to George Alden's visiting the house, he was always cross after seeing him there. At the bank he spoke to him only on business, and as the cashier attended strictly to his duties there was little reason for conversation between him and the Senator.

Of course all this could not escape the attention of the village people, for "folks will talk." Everybody had his own views about the matter. George Alden was often seen with the beautiful daughter of the bank president, and it was remarked that the young lady seemed a satisfied party to the arrangement, so the village gossips had a rich morsel to roll about in their mouths.

One of the directors of the bank, a regular sitter in one of the Cleverdale stores—where that detestable creature, the male gossip, may be found every evening warming his toes as well as warming the reputation of his neighbors—related his suspicions to fellow-sitters, who in turn related them to their wives, and finally the news was generally circulated that Senator Hamblin disliked Cashier Alden because the latter admired his daughter. This was enlarged upon to suit the crowd where the subject was under discussion, until the whole neighborhood knew more about the private matters of the Hamblin family than did the family itself. There is nothing wonderful about this, though, for the family who knows as much about its own business as the neighbors do has never yet been discovered.

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Belle observed with pain her father's angry countenance, and sighed as she thought of the change that had come over him in a few short months. Once she was his pet; he never entered the house without uttering words of endearment or presenting her some token of affection; now, sullen and morose, he took his meals in silence, and the old, happy, sunshiny days were only memories.

George Alden hearing her sigh looked into her face, and said:

"Why are you sad?"

"I was thinking—thinking of the happy past."

"And has the present or future no happy moments?"

"Yes, it has many; but oh, George, time works some dreadful changes. Once I was my father's pride, but that day has passed, and now he has no love, but ambition; no companions but such as Miller and Paddy Sullivan; no thought but for politics, and few aims outside of public life. Oh, how I should enjoy one single moment of the good old days—when I had a father."

George offered some lover's sympathy of a kind that, although made by lips, does not put itself into words. But he said:

"It makes me sad to realize that I am much to blame for this state of affairs. If I thought you would be happier I would make the greatest sacrifice man can, and give you up. I know by his every action toward me that I am the subject of his hatred. He considers me a thief who has stolen his most precious treasure, and if I did not fill my position at the bank acceptably I should not be retained an hour."

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"Is he unkind to you, George?"

"No, he never speaks to me except on business matters. If he has anything to say, any little pleasantry to relate, it is always to Sargent, whom he treats in a far more friendly manner than he does me."

"What kind of a clerk does Sargent make?"

"He is a good accountant, perfectly correct, and very apt and quick to learn; writes a fine hand, and has the most wonderful power of imitating handwriting I ever saw."

"Do you have confidence in him? Is he a man you can safely trust?"

"H'm—well, he is your father's choice, he trusts him; why shouldn't I?"

Belle, with true womanly instinct, was not satisfied, and said:

"Be frank with me, George. You must have reason for distrusting him, and I ask your confidence. No one more than I can desire you to have a trustworthy clerk."

"I can only say I am not impressed with his honesty. Perhaps I am prejudiced, for you know he has not placed himself on record as one whose word can be relied upon. Belle, when Sargent stepped into the bank I should have resigned at once had it not been for you."

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"For me! why?"

"Because your father wished him to have the position. No harm may come of it, but I have a presentiment of evil. Pshaw; it's a foolish whim, no doubt, and I should not be influenced by it, nor worry you with it. I think it is time for me to be off when I torment my sweetheart with presentiments. Good-night."

Belle went directly to her mother, who said:

"What is it, Belle? is anything wrong to-night?"

"Oh, I don't know. Why did papa engage that Sargent as bank clerk? He does not bear a good reputation. George does not have confidence in him, and I am afraid he is not a trustworthy man."

"You and George don't like him, eh? If you and George will please attend to your own affairs you will both appear to better advantage."

Belle started; it was her father who had spoken; he had entered the room unperceived, just in time to hear her remark.

"Papa, as you have heard me, I cannot recall my words. After his publishing such a statement about you, I cannot repress my indignation against the fellow. I do not like him, and with due respect to you have no confidence in him."

"If my daughter will not interfere in the public and private business matters of her father," said the Senator coldly, "but will be guided more by his advice and judgment, her future will be happier, and her companions not of that class who slander their betters."

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So speaking, he left the room. Belle's temper rose quickly; the hot blood mantled her cheek, and her eyes flashed fire.

"George Alden's character is as far above that detestable Sargent's as the sky is above the earth. Papa hates those who are good and noble, but he takes to his confidence such men as Cyrus Miller, Paddy Sullivan, and that Sargent. Oh, this detestable politics! It steals the honorable instincts from good men, and makes them willing to sacrifice any and every thing to gain power. It has taken away my dear father, and left you a widow and me fatherless. God pity us both!"

Sympathetic words calmed the daughter's grief somewhat, and a few moments later, bidding her mother good-night, Belle gained her room and fell upon her knees before the only Friend who entirely consoled her when she felt desolate. She arose comforted. She was scarcely asleep when she dreamed that, again a little girl, happy and free from sorrow, she saw her father and flew to meet him. As her arms were about to embrace him, a serpent's head darted before her, the face changing to that of Sargent, who said:

"Beware, maiden! I am the god of political ambition, and am about to crush you in my coils."

As it wound its dreadful length about her she reached forth her hands and piteously implored her father to save her. He only laughed, and said:

"Oh, no, my daughter; I am the slave of the serpent. He demands your sacrifice, and I must obey."

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Looking again, she saw the faces of her father's political friends, all laughing at her, and the serpent said:

"Only ten seconds to live!"

Closer and closer its coils tightened about her; she could scarcely breathe; her agony becoming unbearable, she gave a loud shriek, and cried:

"Oh, mother, save me!"

Springing to the floor, the frightened girl beheld her mother entering the room.

"What is it, child? How you frightened me."

"It was a hideous nightmare. I thought I was being crushed by a serpent."

After relating her dream, Belle tried again to sleep, but during the remainder of the night the phantom haunted her. Truly, her dream was only a presage of the grief and trouble in store for her.

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CHAPTER XVI.

THE PRINCE OF MANNIS MANOR.

Havelock, the home of Hon. Walter Mannis, is a beautiful village situated in a valley surrounded by lofty hills. The place is not a busy one, but the home of many old and wealthy families who reside there during the summer months. The streets are lined on either side with well-grown shade trees, and the handsome residences are surrounded by spacious grounds tastefully laid out.

Mannis Manor had passed down from father to son for four successive generations, each inheritor marking his ownership with additions or alterations until the fine old house displays architectural styles of different periods of the past century. Walter Mannis inherited this old manor and its two hundred acres, beside a fortune in cash of over a quarter of a million dollars. Having been in possession about ten years, with so much money at his command, is it strange that he had devoted much of his time to pleasure and dissipation?

Both parents dying during his childhood, in the conduct of household matters he was dependent upon a house-keeper, an inmate of the old manor many years before he became its owner.

Mrs. Culver felt her responsibility, and considered it her privilege as well as duty to keep a motherly eye upon the young master. One of those good souls found in every community, she enjoyed her work, and her word about the manor was law. Mannis humored her whims, for she was a most valuable member of his household. She was sixty years of age, prudent, systematic, orderly, thoroughly competent and trustworthy. While carefully managing household affairs, she devoted much time to the supervision of farm duties, acknowledging no authority except the master himself, who had great confidence in her ability. Looking after his domestic comforts, she kept his suite of rooms in perfect order; regulated his wardrobe, and saw every garment kept in repair. She occasionally scolded him for extravagance in dress, and he received her severe words good-humoredly, for he really loved the kind, motherly attention bestowed upon him. In sickness she was a valuable nurse, and her closet of "yarbs and nostrums" a curiosity. With cup and spoon in hand ready to dose a patient, she was supremely happy. She was proud of "her Walter," although the young man caused her many hours of anxiety.

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At college he had sought merry young men for associates, and as he was provided with plenty of money he had no trouble to find them. Witty, vivacious, and eloquent, these brilliant adjuncts made him a lion in society, young men seeking him, while the ladies felt honored at his attention. He was a great flirt, and his conquests of hearts were frequent, yet he never until now had surrendered his own. While his eye sparkled with intelligence, it did not impress a student of human nature as being the eye of an honest man; even children could sometimes see in it something that made them distrustful.

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He enjoyed the gay life money enabled him to follow, and much of his time was passed away from home. During the winter his abiding-place was the great metropolis. Allowing himself to be led to palatial gambling dens, he played, and lost heavily, yet his passion was not cooled by reverses. Wall Street tempted him, and his ventures at first returned him fair margins, but his later investments were unsuccessful. Becoming interested in politics, he was twice elected member of assembly, and his manner, fortune, and intellectual qualities made him a great favorite at Albany.

The legislator who can gain the personal friendship of his associates can accomplish more than the cold, dignified man, so often elected simply to give character to his constituency. Mannis was not only a good debater on the floor, but a "powerful persuader" between sessions, and could accomplish more with members from the "rural districts" than any man in either house. The farmer members looked upon him as a kind of deity. He flattered them, and when they were unable to frame a bill in presentable shape, assisted them, and thus won their regard, though for his own part he felt that many buckwheat producers had been spoiled by sending an equal number of farmers to the State Legislature.

Mannis was well adapted to politics, and really liked its excitements. Having served two terms, he was only prevented seeking a renomination because it had been the custom to alternate the office, every two years, between the northern and southern part of his assembly district. He seriously thought of overthrowing this old time-honored custom, but friends persuading him to wait or look for something higher, he turned his aspirations to Congress, and was trying to educate his forces to assist in the consummation of this wish.

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In business speculations he was seldom successful, for money invested in many enterprises always returned him less than he put in. His losses troubled him, and he was often haunted with the idea that he would eventually become a poor man. Investing in government bonds and drawing the interest at stated intervals was too slow a way of making money. Observing friends gaining fortunes by speculation, he felt that he too could make money in the same way.

At the time this story began he had lost half his fortune in speculation and gambling, and realized that his available funds were gradually passing from his hands. His farm yield, though not enough to help him out of his difficulty, was, thanks to the management of Mrs. Culver, sufficient to support his household without making drafts on his bank account. But his extravagant private

expenses worried and caused him hours of anxious thought.

"There's nothing else to do," he would say to himself; "I must make a wealthy marriage. With a fortune and a wife I can save myself and keep a life-lease on the old manor."

It was this thought that actuated him partially in his desire to wed Belle Hamblin. While he admired her brilliant personality, and confessed that he was never before so charmed with a lady, he acknowledged to himself that her father's fortune was necessary to save him from the financial disaster which he feared. [Pg 138]

He sat in his room one evening smoking a cigar and thinking. All about were evidences of his æsthetic taste. Bric-à-brac crowded the mantels, while many fine pictures adorned the walls. Easels, arranged with a view to throwing light upon the works they held, were on all sides. Oriental rugs lay on the floor, while the luxurious furniture about the apartment seemed to coax the visitor or inhabitant to lounge upon soft cushions. Curtains of costly material hung before the large plate-glass windows, and as the afternoon sun peered through them it saw a picture of which the owner of the apartment was not the least handsome part.

A servant entered with a number of letters, which Mannis hastily shuffled through his fingers as if they had been cards. His eye quickly detecting the one he was looking for, he dropped the rest, and said:

"Here it is: let me see what the Senator has to say. What a man he is! He seems to be as infatuated with me as I am with his beautiful daughter. Well, I am infatuated with her; she is certainly the most charming creature I ever met; and I am determined to win with her her father's fortune also, for I have no father of my own to return to, and have the 'fatted calf' business done for me. Let me see what Hamblin has written."

Opening the letter, he read it carefully through, then smiled and said:

"Yes, he will do anything to rid himself of Alden. When I proposed entrapping him he was startled, but now can hardly wait for my suggestions. He hates Alden; he is ambitious that his daughter shall make a brilliant match; he thinks me the personification of brilliancy, and, by Jove, he doesn't miss it much. Ah, Senator, if you knew how I was running through my fortune you would change your mind. This is a very good joke you are playing on yourself." [Pg 139]

Returning to his letters, he opened another, when his countenance suddenly changed, and he exclaimed:

"Great God! I am almost ruined!"

He arose, and for a moment walked the room without uttering a word, when he suddenly stopped and said:

"Fifty thousand dollars gone at once! I must raise the money somehow to pay what I have borrowed. What a fool a man is when he is not satisfied to reach forth his hand and pluck the ripe fruit hanging near him, instead of letting his appetite for the unattainable ruin him. What can I do? I cannot mortgage the estate, for that would expose me at once. But how can I raise the money—that is, who—will—lend—it—to—me? S-h-h! I have it. I can raise it in New York on the notes of my friends, and my friends need never know it. It is a desperate game, but my estate is good for it, and in an emergency men do many queer things."

He walked the room in a nervous manner, running his fingers through his hair, rubbing his hands together, and occasionally saying words that are not in the dictionary.

"It is the old story," he resumed. "I've killed the goose that laid the golden eggs. Well, there is one trick left in my hand, and that is Belle Hamblin. I will go to work at once and help the Senator get rid of Alden. I will go to Cleverdale on the evening train. The girl has a strong will, and is very correct in her ideas of right and wrong; if she hears that Alden is a defaulter she will shed a few tears and never wish to see him again. He must be sacrificed; so the quicker the better." [Pg 140]

Ring the bell, a servant appeared.

"Tell Mrs. Culver I desire to see her immediately."

In a few moments Mrs. Culver entered, and said:

"What do you wish, sir?"

"I am going away this evening, and will be absent a few days."

"But you don't look well; are you sick? I am afraid you are not taking care of yourself. I have been fixing some medicine for you, which you must take before going away. Young men are so careless, they don't know how to take care of their health."

"I am all right. Don't trouble your kind heart about me. I need fresh air and out-door exercise, and a two-day jaunt will tone me up. Tell Henry to hitch up the sorrels and take me to the seven-thirty train this evening. I shall take a nap first, as I have a headache, and after a light supper shall be ready to start. So, never mind your doctor's stuff. If I am not well on my return you shall have two days' enjoyment dosing me."

When the evening train left Havelock it bore away Hon. Walter Mannis, who had previously sent a dispatch to Senator Hamblin stating that he would be at the Cleverdale Hotel after the arrival of the evening train. [Pg 141]

On his arrival he was greeted by Hamblin. A few remarks were made concerning politics and

business, when Mannis said:

"I received your letter while preparing to leave for Cleverdale. From it I learned you have not changed your intention concerning Alden. You still mean to get rid of him?"

"Yes, he must be put out of the way, for since his promotion he is more obnoxious to me than ever. No time must be lost, for he is a more frequent visitor at my house than before. He must be dropped as soon as possible."

"Draw your chair closer to mine: we must speak low and be guarded. You ask what I have to suggest. My plan is this: Sargent, you say, will do anything you desire: well, is he a good penman, and can he imitate handwriting?"

"Yes, he is an expert at that business."

"Good! now for it. He must alter the bank books, and make it appear that Alden has embezzled five thousand dollars."

"Great God!" exclaimed Hamblin.

"Don't start, Senator; it is a desperate game, but it's often been played successfully. You say you shall get him out of the way at all hazards: well, this plan will effectually dispose of the ambitious young man."

"Suppose he shows fight?"

"He must be allowed to run away. You can work that up. The affair can be kept between yourself, Sargent, and Alden, and when the latter is exposed you can feign sympathy, telling him if he will leave at once the affair will remain a secret. Yes, you can even offer to loan him the money to pay the deficiency. Make the evidence so strong against him that he cannot possibly see a way of escape, and if I know anything of human nature he will run away rather than be exposed."

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"Suppose he should first see my daughter, and she should advise him to remain and face the danger."

"It must be done when she is absent from home. You must find some pretence to send your wife and daughter on a visit to friends, or else send them to New York."

"You are a shrewd fellow, Mannis, and no mistake."

"A shrewd rogue, you mean."

"No, I do not. In this affair I am but doing the duty that a father owes to his child. She is in danger of being sacrificed to an adventurer who only wants her father's money. But she shall be saved."

The plotters talked a while longer about the matter; then Senator Hamblin withdrew, and Mannis said to himself:

"Now my case does not seem as desperate as it did."

And as Senator Hamblin stepped into the street, he said:

"I don't like this affair at all, but I am losing heavily, and the ventures I have lately made have turned out bad. Mannis' fortune added to my own will save me from disaster. Poor Belle must be temporarily made unhappy, but when she finds herself the wife of Hon. Walter Mannis perhaps she will thank me for saving her."

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Perhaps the state prisons will one day hold the great rogues instead of small ones, but they did not do it in 187-, or the above recorded conversation could not have taken place.

CHAPTER XVII.

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SARGENT ENLISTED.

The time was approaching for Senator Hamblin to take his seat in the State Senate. After his interview with Mannis his conduct toward his daughter and George Alden underwent a change.

Gradually assuming a loving deportment toward the former, he paid much attention to her personal comforts; in fact, began to act more like his former self. His cold formality seemed to thaw, and Belle was happier, while her mother entered a new era of existence as the husband's old manner returned. The change not only took place in his own household, but his demeanor toward the cashier was greatly altered for the pleasanter.

Late one afternoon the president, calling the teller into his private office, said:

"Sargent, I shall be here this evening doing private work. I want to see you about half past seven o'clock. Come in here as if on your own business, and if I am not alone go out and return soon afterward. Say nothing about this, but come on time. You can go now."

The latter withdrew, but was shrewd enough to comprehend that he was wanted on something important. The bank closed at the usual hour, and all left for home except the Senator, who arose and nervously walked the floor for a few moments, drops of perspiration standing on his brow.

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"Great heavens! what am I about to do? This troubled conscience is horrible. But shall I go to pieces financially? No! I must not give way to this weakness. What would the world say were I to become bankrupt?"

He resumed his seat by the table, began looking over his papers, and for an hour spoke no word, only an occasional sigh escaping him. At length he said:

"What a villain I am! Yet, isn't it better to save myself and my reputation than allow this opportunity to pass? Mannis and his fortune can save me: it is no time to turn back."

Putting on overcoat and hat he left the bank, and on entering his home met Belle, who gave him a kiss. To his conscience this token of affection was like molten lead, and leaving her he went directly to his own room, saying:

"My God! how can I strike this blow at her heart?"

At the tea-table he appeared uneasy and ate little, and being questioned by his wife and daughter only said:

"I have a slight headache—that is all; it will soon pass off."

Shortly afterward Belle came near him, and said:

"Papa, won't you stay home this evening? I will bathe your head, and perhaps it will relieve the pain."

"No, my daughter, I have very important business at the office this evening."

"Let business go for once; be my patient, and I will be your gentle and loving nurse."

Little did the kind-hearted girl know that she was plunging daggers into her father's heart, and that every word of endearment pierced him to the very soul. [Pg 146]

Abruptly leaving the house, he went directly to his office, when he was joined by Sargent. The latter was dressed with scrupulous care, for he was a great dandy, and spent most of his salary for clothing. Senator Hamblin beckoned him to approach and be seated, and hesitating before commencing his business, fumbled over his papers a few moments, and then said:

"Sargent, a few weeks ago you offered to do me a service. Can I enlist you in a cause that interests me deeply, if it will also be of great advantage to you?"

"Yes, sir; you can ask me nothing that I would refuse to do."

"That is well spoken. But first, I wish you to swear you will not betray my confidence."

"I swear that, whatever you ask of me, no living person shall ever learn its nature."

"To begin with, you know I do not like Alden."

"Yes, sir; I found that out the first day I entered the bank."

"I have reason to know that Alden does not like you, Sargent."

"I am also aware of that."

"You are a shrewd fellow."

"Not very, sir, but any one can see Alden has no confidence in me. A day never passes without his showing it."

"How would you like his place, Sargent?"

"It would be the happiest day of my life when I could displace the fellow by stepping into his shoes." [Pg 147]

"Would you be willing to take any chances to accomplish that very thing?"

"Yes, sir, I would do anything—except resort to bloodshed—to become cashier."

"I have a reason for wishing to get rid of him."

"Yes, sir, I think I know why."

"Ah, you do? Why is it?"

"You do not want him for a son-in-law."

"That's it, exactly. Now how can we get rid of him? Have you any ideas on the subject?"

"I have not thought of it, but will carry out any plan you may suggest. Don't be afraid to trust me, for I hate the fellow even worse than you do. He has lorded it over me the past few weeks, and I would like to see him disgraced."

"Well, have you any idea you could arrange a trap for him to fall into?"

"Yes, yes; a job could be put up that would send him to prison and, blast him! I would be glad to boss it."

The words were spoken with force, direct from the heart of the teller, so the Senator at once saw his way clear.

"What can you do and when can you do it?" he asked.

"With your assistance and co-operation I can fix a job making him a defaulter," replied Sargent.

"Go to work at once. Keep me informed of your movements. Be discreet, and report your plans to me here to-morrow evening. Your reward for the faithful performance of the work shall be the cashiership." [Pg 148]

The two separated, and as Sargent passed out he smiled, and said to himself:

CHAPTER XVIII.

GEORGE AND FANNIE ALDEN.

George Alden resided in a neat little cottage on a side street. His house was presided over by his sister Fannie, his senior by ten years. The dwelling, in no way pretentious, was simple in all its appointments, and the very perfection of neatness. The little parlor was not elegant, but all about were to be seen evidences of the cultivated taste of its occupants.

The tables were covered with books of poems from both early and later authors, while many classical works could be seen upon the shelves of a pretty but quaint mahogany bookcase that rose from floor to ceiling on one side of the apartment. The handsomest piece of furniture in the house was a large square piano. On entering we behold a dark-haired lady sitting before the instrument, while her fingers glide over the ivory keys.

The performer is lost in her delightful pastime, her face glowing with enthusiasm, and, the last strain finished, she rises from the instrument, and we behold the sister of George Alden.

A lady of medium height, slightly built, with dark hair and eyes; goodness and intelligence are written on every lineament of her countenance. In early life her father was able to give her many advantages; with a natural taste for music, she became mistress of the pianoforte, and when her father's physical energies failed, was obliged to teach music for the support of the family. A noble girl—self-sacrificing to an extraordinary degree. When she announced through the village papers, ten years before our story opened, her desire for scholars in instrumental music, the good people of Cleverdale responded with alacrity.

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The family at that time consisted of the parents and the children, Fannie and George, the latter a boy of fourteen. Attending the Cleverdale Academy, at the age of sixteen he was graduated with all the honors the institution afforded. He was a model youth, and on leaving school possessed a little fund of two hundred and fifty dollars, earned after school hours by keeping books for a Cleverdale merchant.

His sister, his adviser in everything, possessed a decided character and excellent judgment. She had unbounded confidence in her brother. Assisting him in his studies, she inculcated right ideas of independence in his mind, and taught him the value of self-reliance and education. A great reader herself, she had, by example and conversation, succeeded in bringing him to such a delight in histories, travels, and general literature, that he was considered an unusually well-informed young man.

When George Alden finished his common-school education he desired to enter college, but his little savings would scarce allow him to enjoy the fruition of that hope.

His sister succeeded in obtaining a large music class, while her mother attended to the household duties with such aid as her daughter could give, and Fannie was not only able to earn sufficient to provide the family with necessary comforts, but from time to time placed small sums of money in the savings bank. Foreseeing that George, with his ambition to become a scholar, would desire to enter college, to assist him she denied herself many of the luxuries that all young ladies naturally enjoy.

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Thoroughly devoted to her parents, she always said she should never leave them so long as either required her services. Perhaps her resolution would not have been so well preserved if a bullet from a Southern rifle during the war of the Rebellion had not entered the heart of a young Captain of a Cleverdale Company.

At seventeen, George was ready to enter college. With his sister's savings of two hundred dollars added to his own fortune of two hundred and fifty, with an additional sum of one hundred and fifty earned during the past year, he bade farewell to home and friends to enter upon his collegiate course.

Time passed and the boy rose rapidly in his classes. The father's health continued to fail; his mind becoming wholly lost, he was indeed dead to his friends long before the dissolution of body and soul. Although he was a great care to his daughter, the patient girl never complained, but ministered to his wants with as much gentleness as if he were a child. One day the poor broken-down machinery refused to work, and before George could be summoned home the vital spark had fled, and death completed the work begun nearly two years before.

Fannie now resumed her music class, while George, through his own efforts of teaching and doing such work as he could get, was enabled to continue his course at college. Two years later he was graduated with high honors, and returning home found his mother much changed in health, while his sister showed evident signs of fatigue. It then came with full force to him that he must give up the idea of a profession, temporarily at least, and seek employment that would furnish him an immediate income. Unlike many college-educated young men, he did not expect to command a high position, but became salesman with the merchant whose book-keeper he had been previous to entering college.

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One year later, the teller in the Cleverdale bank resigning, George Alden was appointed to the position, where we find him at the beginning of this story.

It was not long before the mother followed the father. The two orphans mourned the death of their parents; and after a few months of rest Fannie recovered from her fatigue.

George would not at first give consent to her resuming the music class, which she had been obliged to relinquish on account of her mother's illness, but when she declared and insisted that she should be much happier if allowed to help support the little household, he relented, and she was again at her work teaching music.

The little house their parents left was encumbered with a mortgage, which was finally paid, and it became the property of the brother and sister. Belle Hamblin loved the noble-hearted Fannie, although the latter was much her senior. Fannie Alden was her ideal of a true woman. She knew all about the ties that bound Belle and George together, and also knew of Senator Hamblin's opposition to her brother's suit. Often thinking of what "might have been," if a bullet had not cut off a life so dear to her, she said to George:

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"Have patience and all will come right. You are both young and can wait." She thought the hard-hearted father would some time realize that his daughter's happiness was of more consequence than his own ambition.

When George Alden heard that Sargent was to enter the bank as teller he threatened to resign, but his sister said:

"Resign! no, George, that must not be done. You can preserve your own honor, and if the new teller is not honest his character will soon be known. Your duty is to remain and not throw away your opportunity, because your employers have chosen to hire a man in whom you have no confidence."

"Fannie, I cannot work with a rascal, and I believe Sargent to be one. Would an honest man make such a statement against another as he made against Senator Hamblin, and then follow it by another, swearing the first was false? I should constantly feel that such a man would do something dishonorable, and perhaps get me into trouble. I cannot drive the impression from my mind, that if Sargent ever comes into the bank as teller there will be some complication."

"Take care of your own work, and you can keep yourself free from trouble," she replied.

George Alden could not drive these thoughts from his mind, for he looked upon Sargent as his evil genius, and was unable to conceal the fact that he had no confidence in the man. Several times on returning from dinner he found the teller engaged in looking over his books, and once asked what he was doing, but Sargent only replied:

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"I am posting myself thoroughly on the whole system of banking."

Two weeks before Senator Hamblin was to take his seat in the Senate Chamber at Albany, a disaster occurred in Cleverdale, which we will relate in the next chapter.

CHAPTER XIX.

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THE BURNING FACTORY.

It was a cold day in December, with everything in business and manufacturing circles of Cleverdale full of activity; the large mill of the Cleverdale Woollen Company running on full time. Senator Hamblin was at the bank conversing with the cashier upon business matters, when the ominous clang of the fire-bell startled him. The conversation ceased, and both men, quickly stepping to the window, looked into the street. All was bustle and confusion, the noise of the steam-engines, as they passed, adding to the excitement. Opening the door, Senator Hamblin asked a fireman where the fire was.

"At the Cleverdale Woollen Mill," he replied, and hastily passed on.

"The Cleverdale Woollen Mill!" exclaimed the Senator, "and there is but a small insurance on it, for most of the policies expired yesterday, and have not been renewed. Ruin!"

Re-entering the bank, his blanched face and agitated manner attracted the attention of cashier and teller.

"It's our mill!" he gasped. "If the flames cannot be stayed we shall lose heavily." Then, putting on overcoat and hat, he said: "George, come with me, and you, Sargent, remain in charge of the bank."

A moment later the two men stood before the burning factory, where crowds of people had already gathered. Sheets of flame were pouring from the windows of the first and second floor, which had been cleared of operatives. The panic-stricken crowd, gazing at the windows upon the third floor, beheld a sight that filled them with terror, for at each window were faces pale with fright. The fire below cutting off the egress, one hundred and fifty men, women, and children were prisoners.

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The hot flames crackled and hissed; the heat became intense. Shrieks and cries of distress filled the air. Wives, mothers, fathers, husbands, sisters and brothers ran wildly about the burning building, praying God and imploring man to save their dear ones, cut off from the outer world; meanwhile, "For God's sake save us!" came from the windows above.

Senator Hamblin, realizing the fearful condition of affairs, seized a factory boss by the arm and asked:

"Jones, is there no way of saving the lives of those poor creatures?"

"Yes, there is one way, and only one. The large iron door, opening from the room where the people are imprisoned into the main hallway, is locked, and here is the key. If that door could be opened and the door connecting with the winding staircase on the outside of the building unbolted, every person could escape, sir."

"Cannot some one open those doors? Why, man, what are you thinking about?"

"But, sir, to get at the main door one must pass through the narrow hall on the first and second floors, and the first hall is on fire for a short distance."

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"My God! what can be done?" exclaimed Senator Hamblin. "It is fearful to see those people perish. Where is this hallway, Jones?"

"Step this way and I will show you."

The two men following, Jones approached the flames, the forked tongues darting angrily toward them. Hotter and hotter became the fire, louder and louder rose the cries of terror and agony from the imperilled people; some had already thrown themselves from the windows, only to be picked up dying or dead.

"Here," said Jones, "is the entrance. If some one could enter here, and reach and unlock the iron door, he could liberate the hands."

"See here, Jones, I will give you five hundred dollars if you will save them," said Senator Hamblin.

"I am too old and clumsy—it needs a younger man for such a job."

Alden heard the heart-rending cries of those above begging in most piteous tones to be saved; he saw their peril, yet he hesitated a moment before he said:

"Mr. Hamblin, I will try to save them. Heaven knows it is worth the trial." The Senator looked at Alden, looked at the fire, and for a moment was honest enough to wish his own soul in a hotter place.

"Jones," said George, "get several blankets from the store-room if you can; be quick."

"Aye, aye, sir! and Lord bless you," Jones replied, and was off, returning in a moment.

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"Dip these blankets in water; there, now wind them about me. Here, give me that lantern; break off the frame." Then turning to the president he said, "Sir, if I never return from this building, please tell my sister and—and—and—your daughter I died in trying to do what they would not have me leave undone. God bless you, sir; God bless them."

As George entered the passage-way indicated by Jones the Senator was so filled with admiration for the young man and contempt for himself that for an instant he was in danger of becoming an honorable man again. But experience in practical politics teaches wonderful self-control, for a minute after the Senator said to himself:

"Brave fellow! a man couldn't be in better condition, morally, to die; I hope he'll realize it himself. If he does he shall have a first-class monument, and I'll pay the cost of engrossing in first-class style the resolutions that his associates in the bank will 'resolve' to present to his family. I hope he will not return. It will be best—it will be best."

While George Alden was preparing to enter the burning factory, a long ladder was placed at one window, but the brave firemen mounting it were driven back by the scorching flames.

The puffing and pumping of the steam-engines, with their shrill signal whistle, accompanied by the moanings and lamentations of the imperilled, made the scene one of horror, stout hearts quailing at the prospect of so many persons being entombed in the burning factory.

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The flames had already ignited the floor dividing the second and third stories, and amid the cries from the burning building were mingled many voices imploring God to save them.

The information reaching the excited people, of George Alden undertaking the perilous trip to save the operatives, blessings were invoked upon his head by the anxious throng. But where was the brave fellow?

Entering the building, he walked rapidly along the main hall, approached the stairs leading to the second story, and turning to ascend, encountered a flash of flame which he soon passed. Gaining the second floor, he encountered a fiercer flame. As he felt its warm breath strike the glass on his visor he realized the danger, and with a quick bound cleared the monster. Clouds of smoke rose about him to stifle him, but the wailing of female voices reached his ears, and stimulated him; and being a pure man at heart, he was further strengthened by the feeling that One who once walked with some other young fellows in a fiery furnace was by his side. Suddenly finding a bank of burning coals in his pathway, a feeling that he was lost overpowered him. Behind were the flames and two blank, impenetrable walls; before him a mass of live coals—cruel and hissing hot—ready to devour him. Looking again he beheld a small door. He seized the latch, but to his horror the door was locked.

Praying for assistance, and casting his eyes toward the floor, he spied a large iron bar. Seizing it he began battering the door, which to his great joy flew open, permitting him to enter the adjoining hallway, where he stood an instant to regain his breath, for the stifling heat had almost stopped respiration.

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Having often been in the factory, he was familiar with all its passage-ways, and knew that the hallway Jones described had been reached. But could he gain the iron door, at least three

hundred feet onward, and up another flight of stairs? Going about two thirds the distance, he ran up the stairway unmolested, when the glare of flames indicated another approaching danger. His heart quailed, but he could not turn back, his only hope being in pushing forward. He nearly reached the huge iron door, the key of which he grasped tightly in his hand. He made a dash at the fire which encircled him. He gasped for breath; the hot, seething flames seized his hand and arm, causing him to cry with pain. In an instant his feet cleared the flames, but just as he thought himself safe a huge burning timber fell, struck his back, felled him and held him fast.

He was only a few feet from the door leading into the hallway, where the flames had not yet entered. Groaning with pain, by a spasmodic effort he rolled the burning beam from his back, but on trying to rise he found to his horror that he could not stand, for his back was injured.

Retaining full use of his hands, he quickly tore off his blankets, and with an herculean effort dragged himself to the door. He seemed to have superhuman strength, for with his hands he moved himself about with a rapidity that surprised him. Out of reach of the flames, he dragged himself to the outer door, removed two bars, and slipping the bolt, the solid wrought-iron screen of the narrow exit was open.

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Dragging himself along, he returned and reached the great iron door, the effort causing intense pain. Unable to raise himself high enough to reach the lock, after great effort he mounted a box behind the door, slipped the key into the hole, and the bolt shot back. He then removed the iron bar, and the door, pressed hard by the people inside, flew back upon its hinges, striking Alden and throwing him bleeding to the floor.

Like wild animals, the freed men, women and children made a rush for liberty. The hallway was filled with human beings, and as the crowd emerged from the narrow doorway into the open air at the back, shouts of joy greeted them from the masses outside.

The friends of the lately imprisoned operatives made a rush for the foot of the narrow stairway, and as those given up for lost stepped into the open air, loving arms caught them, and those lately shedding tears of sorrow now laughed hysterically or made other demonstrations of joy.

The release of the one hundred and fifty had been accomplished none too soon, for the flames spread with fearful rapidity. Great angry forks leaped from window to window and then shot upward, enveloping the wooden cornice in sheets of flame. The roof was sending forth clouds of smoke, while little jets of flame ignited the dry wood of the huge tower surmounting the structure.

Suddenly, a stout, brawny, bareheaded man rushed to the entrance from which the liberated people had just emerged. It was Jones, the boss, who had described the passage-way to George Alden. He was greatly excited, and as the air filled with cheers for George Alden's brave act, he cried out:

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"Alden is in the burning building!"

Immediately the cheering ceased, and word was passed from lip to lip that Cashier Alden, who had saved the people, was himself perishing. Every face blanched with horror.

"Follow me, two of you!" cried Jones. Two stout operatives sprang forward, and in an instant the three men were in the hallway leading to the iron door, where they encountered clouds of smoke. To the cry, "Come on, men!" the heavy tramping of three pairs of feet were heard on the floor. Through the smoke rushed the brave fellows until Jones said:

"Here's the door;" then he cried out, "Mister Alden! Mister Alden! Are you alive?"

No voice responding, he called again and again with the same result; then Jones, with one tremendous push, sent the great iron door shut with a loud clang, and turning to retreat, his foot struck something on the floor. Stooping, he touched the form of George Alden, lying insensible before him.

"Thank God, boys, it is the cashier. Quick! men, seize him."

The three then, grasping the lifeless man, turned and hastily ran toward the door. As they emerged from the burning building, shouts of joy rent the air, but when the deathlike face of George Alden was visible everybody became mute.

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"Is the brave fellow dead?" were the words uttered, but they were not answered.

Carefully George Alden was laid upon a pile of blankets, when one of the village doctors sprang forward, placed his head upon the breast of the wounded man, and said:

"He lives."

Two women broke through the crowd, and Belle Hamblin and Fannie Alden were beside the almost lifeless form.

"Is he dead?" they both cried in tones of anguish.

"He lives," replied the doctor, "but must be taken away from here at once."

A litter was procured, the wounded man placed upon it, when eight stout pairs of hands gently raised and bore it to Alden's little cottage, only two blocks distant. As the silent form was laid on the bed, the two ladies entered the apartment, and the men immediately withdrew. The physician examined the wounds on the head and announced they were not necessarily fatal, and gave the opinion that he had fainted from exhaustion. His hands and arms were badly burned, and there was every indication of a hard struggle. His clothing was burned and torn, and as he lay upon the bed gasping for breath, the two trembling women mingled tears of sympathy with prayers for

CHAPTER XX.

THE SECRET MARRIAGE.

The day following the fire was gloomy; the smouldering pile of brick, stone and charred timbers marked the work of the destroying element. The immense factory was a ruin, and among the débris were seen the iron frames of intricate machinery, whose busy hum had so long gladdened the hearts of seven hundred operatives and their kindred. Many sad faces gathered about the ruins, and with trembling voices asked: "What will become of our wives and little ones?"

George Alden's act of heroism was the theme of general conversation, and prayers for his recovery sprang spontaneously from the hearts of men who had seldom prayed before. The newspapers were full of glowing eulogiums of the brave fellow who lay in so critical a condition. His spirit seemed undecided whether to remain in the bruised tenement or wing its flight to another world, but two devoted women watched at his bedside, and a skilful surgeon noted every movement of the patient, who occasionally opened his eyes and stared unmeaningly about. No intelligible words escaped his lips, for his mind wandered. But near the hour of noon, he opened his eyes, exclaiming:

"Where is the key? Oh, how it burns! Tell Belle and Fannie I died doing my duty," and, closing his eyes, was silent. Suddenly opening them again, he looked about, as if in doubt of his whereabouts. When his gaze became fixed on Belle and Fannie, for the first time since the disaster he spoke coherently and said:

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"God bless you both! where am I?"

"In your own bed, George. Do you feel better?" gently replied his sister.

"My poor back is broken. Did I—did I save them?"

"Yes, all escaped. Do you remember it?" said Fannie.

"Yes—yes, but never mind."

Raising his burned hand to Belle's, he said:

"You are *so* kind to remain with me," then closed his eyes as if exhausted. A spasmodic moan escaping him, he cried out:

"My back is broken! I shall be a cripple and a burden to my friends. Oh, why did I escape?"

His two companions tried to calm him. As Dr. Briar entered the apartment, George looked into his face and asked:

"Doctor, is my back broken?"

The kind-hearted physician did not reply, but soothed him with encouraging words.

The ladies withdrawing, an examination by the physician and his assistant revealed the fact that the poor sufferer's back was seriously injured. Everything was done by the good doctor to make him comfortable, and as the examination caused great suffering a sleeping potion was given him, for a raging fever indicated danger. The two women entering the room, to Belle's interrogations concerning her lover's injuries the doctor replied that he hoped for the best.

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Meanwhile other scenes were taking place in the community. Senator Hamblin sat in his private room at his residence, looking haggard, and seemingly in great trouble. He arose from his chair and began pacing the apartment.

"Everything is against me," he said. "All my late investments have been losses—and now comes this fire to wipe out over one hundred thousand dollars of my property. Oh, what fools we were to hesitate about renewing those policies! I can see nothing but financial ruin unless I can extricate myself from the strait I am in. With my credit good, I can raise plenty of money, but how can I repay it? Within the next month I must borrow at least fifty thousand dollars. These losses almost unman me. Had I kept out of politics, giving my exclusive attention to business affairs, I should not have been in this predicament. What an infernal fool I am to allow ambition to lead me to ruin!"

He placed his hands over his head as if to get rest, but apparently he found none, for he continued:

"It seems like a dream, that George Alden entered the burning factory. He is a brave fellow, and the physician says he cannot live—thank God! but he is happier than I, for I am standing between *two* fires—two powers are pulling my conscience in opposite directions—one for Mannis and his fortune, the other for George Alden and his honor. Pshaw! what is honor? Will it buy bread? Will it obtain station and fame? Not a bit of it. If Alden dies, Belle will be the wife of Walter Mannis, and I, her father, will be saved. If he lives there is only one way to dispose of him. By the way!—as Sargent is doctoring the books, why shouldn't he make the deficit fifty thousand, which I need, instead of five thousand? I might look over the securities and cash, steal—abstract that amount, and give Sargent such good cause that he will have no excuse for going back on me as he did once before. I'll go down to the bank at once."

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On his way to the bank, the Senator met many persons who inquired about the condition of Cashier Alden. To all inquiries he returned the same answer:

"Poor fellow, I am afraid he cannot live."

Entering the bank, Sargent said to him:

"By present indications our cashier will step out without our aid, eh?"

"It does look so, but he is a brave fellow after all. What is the latest, Sargent?"

"He awoke to consciousness at noon, complaining of his back, which Dr. Briar, upon examination, found seriously injured, and says his case is almost hopeless. He fears internal injuries, as Alden has a high fever—everything pointing to danger."

"It is sad, but may be for the best," was the reply, as Senator Hamblin entered his private office.

Greatly dejected and full of trouble, to him the future looked dark and portentous. Gladly would he have allowed his daughter to act from the dictation of her heart did he not think the fortune of Mannis would extricate him from the dilemma. [Pg 168]

Poor, foolish man, he little knew Mannis was as "deep in the mire as he in the mud" of financial ruin.

When at first raising objections to Belle's forming an alliance with Alden, he fairly hated the innocent cause of his ire, but gradually his feelings underwent a change; his old affection for his child returning, and the brave feat of the cashier touching his heart, he longed for a way out of his trouble. Unable to entertain thoughts of bankruptcy, his pride and fear of disgrace made him plot against the cashier.

The full significance of his political victory lost sight of, he could not drive the one absorbing thought from his mind, namely, the marriage of his daughter with Mannis; beside saving him, it could be easily brought about were Alden disposed of.

For two days George Alden's life hung in the balance. Fannie and Belle remained constantly at his bedside. On the morning of the third day, Doctor Briar, after examining his patient, beckoned the two ladies to follow him to an adjoining room.

"Ladies," he said, "it is my duty to inform you, you have a very sick patient. Calm yourselves and do not give way to grief—but I fear he cannot recover. He should be told his danger, and I think I can trust you both to talk with him on this subject."

Belle drew a deep sigh, which found response in the heart of Fannie.

"Oh, save him, sir! if you can, for he is so dear to us. I cannot have him die. He is too noble and good," impulsively spoke Belle. [Pg 169]

"Whatever can be done to save his life we shall do. All the good people of Cleverdale are praying for his recovery; let us hope their prayers may be answered, but as his physician I cannot speak encouragingly. He is a noble fellow, and I hope and pray it may be God's will to spare his life."

Bravely the two women repressed their grief, for both saw the necessity of great fortitude. The physician withdrew, and Belle and Fannie re-entered the sick-room, when Alden opened his eyes and in a low tone said:

"Belle, you look tired and anxious—are my injuries serious?"

"Yes, George, you are badly injured."

"Is there any possibility of my recovery?"

"We hope for the best, for oh! we could not spare you."

"By the anxiety on your faces, I feel my condition is very serious," he said feebly. "Oh, Belle, I wish you were my wife."

A shadow of deep pain crossed his features.

"Would you be happier were I your wife?" Belle asked.

"Happier! If I am to die I should be resigned to go and wait with outstretched arms for you to join me."

Belle, conversing with him a few moments longer, joined Fannie at the window, the two whispered together, when Belle, returning to the bedside, said:

"George, would you be entirely happy were I your wife?" [Pg 170]

"Yes, I could even die happy, for I fear I am to live but a short time. Your faces tell me I am fatally injured. But it would be too much happiness to expect, to gaze upon you as my own wife."

Looking for a moment intently into his face, she gently raised his burned hand with her own, and said:

"George, I will be your wife, though myself is all I have to give."

Bending over the pillow, she touched the parched lips with her own, sealing her promise with a kiss.

"God bless you!" were all the words Alden uttered, as, closing his eyes, he fell back exhausted.

Belle joined Fannie in an adjoining room; the latter said:

"Dear Belle, you are a precious girl—but what will your parents say?"

"Mamma will not object, and for the present Papa must not know of it. It is all I can do for

George."

She threw her arms about Fannie's neck, and a flood of tears followed. Mrs. Hamblin came later, and to her daughter's appeal for consent to the proposed marriage she yielded. She knew her husband would not approve the arrangement, but acting upon her own convictions she could not refuse.

None were present at the ceremony but Mrs. Hamblin, Fannie Alden, and the clergyman, besides the strangely joined pair.

The sufferer had been awake a long time, his eyes beaming with pleasure at the prospect of marriage with the girl he loved. The clergyman, approaching the bedside, commenced the ceremony. The mother trembled, and, turning to conceal her emotion, burst into tears at the moment the clergyman finished the ceremony. [Pg 171]

The husband looking into the face of his wife, his eyes filled with joy, and he gasped:

"I—I—am so—so—happy!" and then lost consciousness.

Loving hands quickly applied restoratives, and in a few moments the sufferer opened his eyes, and said:

"I thought I was married—but it was only a dream."

"It is not a dream, for I am your wife," said Belle.

"Mine, all mine at last," he said, and the invisible angels hovering about his pillow recorded the nuptials in that book the entries in which can never be altered for earthly and dishonest purposes.

CHAPTER XXI.

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SPOILS! SPOILS!

Christmas came, the day passing quiet and gloomy at the Alden home. The injured man grew worse and was delirious—living over the awful scenes of the fire many times during the day, and starting from his slumbers, crying out:

"Yes, they are saved, they are saved!" then he would moan, "Oh, how the fire burns my flesh! Take that big timber off my back! Must I perish? See, the iron door opens, the people are free—and I have saved them!"

For six days he was delirious, but just one week after the disaster he opened his eyes, looked about him, and in a weak voice said:

"Give me water."

His sister, standing near, raised a glass to his lips while he drank with a relish that he had not displayed since the disaster, his eye flashing with a little of its natural fire; and his sister felt there was really a change for the better. Full of hope, she could scarcely realize that the good symptoms were real.

"Where—where is Belle?" he asked.

"Watching over you constantly. She has gone home for a little rest, but will return in about two hours. Be quiet and go to sleep now; you are better, but must not exhaust yourself." [Pg 173]

"Then she will certainly return?"

"Yes, but you must not talk more."

The patient closing his eyes, his sister seated herself at his bedside. Two hours later the young wife returned, and perceiving the happy look upon Fannie's face, said:

"What is it? Tell me quick: is he better?"

"Yes, he opened his eyes, asked for a glass of water, and then inquired for you; when told you would return in two hours, a look of joy crossed his face and he again closed his eyes. He has slept quietly ever since, and his fever has perceptibly gone down."

"Oh, that he may only live!" said Belle, while her eyes filled with tears of joy.

Both ladies entering the sick-room, a glance toward the bed assured them the patient was awake and awaiting their return. Belle, stooping over, kissed him, which greeting he returned with—

"You are so good, I am trying to get well for your sake," he whispered.

When Doctor Briar made his afternoon call he was greatly encouraged.

"He is better," he said, "and if kept quiet there is now strong hope of his recovery. Good nursing will do more for him than anything else."

From that day Alden gained slowly, and all Cleverdale was made happy by the good news that their hero was likely to recover. All? No; there was one exception.

Senator Hamblin, at his office, engaged in writing letters, looked troubled and dejected. He had just returned from the State Capitol, where he had attended the opening session of the Legislature. Before him lay many letters, some with seals unbroken. One in the well-known handwriting of Walter Mannis greatly interested him. [Pg 174]

"He is anxious as ever to marry my daughter," he exclaimed. "He believes we will have a peaceful solution of the problem, but in that we have both reckoned wrong. When I left home a few days since, there was not the least possible hope of Alden's ever getting up again. It is a blind game, trying to discount fate. It seemed as if he would relieve us by going off in a regular and legitimate way, but he disappoints us and will remain. Why have I allowed Belle to attend him during his illness? She has not only compromised herself, but by this act I have sanctioned her course."

He lighted a cigar, and soon great clouds of smoke rose and circled over his head, while his pen lay idle beside him.

"Well," he whispered, "if he recovers it will be a bad go. If he could only look into the future, he would have no wish to live—but perhaps he may have a relapse."

Seeming to catch a gleam of hope, he resumed his cigar again, and continued to fill the room with clouds of smoke for at least ten minutes. Then suddenly rising, he said:

"There is no help for it: I must see that our programme is carried out. Sargent is ready to do his work, and I cannot let sentimentality make me lose sight of my own danger. Alden will no doubt recover, and there never will occur so good an opportunity as the present to make the necessary preparations to get rid of him. The hero-worship business is short, and by the time the good people of Cleverdale get through admiring the noble act of Cashier Alden, we will be ready with the trap."

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Observing Sargent was alone, he said:

"I wish to speak with you for a few moments."

The teller entering the president's private office, the latter said:

"Have you thought over the matter we discussed the night before the fire?"

"Yes, sir, it has been on my mind a great deal."

"It is evident we must carry out our original intention, for I think Alden will recover."

"It looks that way now."

"Have you any plans to suggest?"

"Yes, I can alter his books—put worthless bonds among the securities, making it appear Alden has abstracted the currency they represent, and carry the transaction along on his books until discovered."

"How will you manage to clear yourself of any complicity?"

"That is easily accomplished. The figures can be altered to correspond with dates in September or August, when Alden was alone in the bank, and make it appear that the worthless bonds were placed among the collaterals at the time, and only discovered by the forced absence of the cashier."

"That is very good, Sargent. Public opinion and sympathy are so strong for Alden it will not do for him to remain here. When confronted with the accusation he must be induced to run away rather than face exposure. When he is accused of defalcation I can express sympathy for him—offer to make good the missing funds—even give him money with which to abscond."

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"But, suppose he writes back to his friends—what then?"

"In that case we must plan to intercept his letters."

"That will be easily done, my brother being clerk in the post-office."

"Sargent, you are quick-witted. That will be the very thing; it is a most important point, and has bothered me considerably. We will do nothing until after I return home next week. By that time we shall know more about his chance of recovery."

A customer entering the bank, the conversation ceased.

The following Monday was cold and wintry, and before Senator Hamblin left Cleverdale for Albany he called at the bank and said to Sargent: "He is much better this morning, and we will plant our seed on Saturday."

During the week he was engrossed in his legislative duties. Being a recognized leader in his party, his late victory over both the opposition and stump candidate raised him higher than ever in the estimation of his fellow senators, and in the scramble for spoils of office his power was great. While there were scores of applicants for every office in the gift of the Senate or Legislature, those inducing Senator Hamblin, to espouse their cause were usually successful. The Senator was besieged by many callers, while every mail brought him letters asking help to obtain some position. Every senator and member possessed scores of friends seeking appointments. Mothers, sisters, wives and even children appealed personally to Senator Hamblin for aid, until he was nearly driven to distraction. It was impossible for him to move without encountering some one with a petition, for even when seated in the Senate Chamber, cards and letters were thrust into his hands by the pages, requesting interviews in the cloak-room. Every man who had peddled a vote on election day, asked another to support his candidate, or hurraed at a political meeting, expected to share in the spoils. Every member unable to obtain positions for all his friends was declared ungrateful, and curses loud and deep were heaped upon his head.

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Reader, did you ever visit your State Capitol at the organization of the Legislature, and see the scramble for spoils? A great army of hungry office-seekers, like sharks after a ship, appear even

before the opening. Candidates for leading positions, such as speaker and clerks of the House, clerk of the Senate, postmasters, door-keepers and sergeant-at-arms, commence operations before the houses organize. Senators and Assemblymen are besieged and promises obtained from them to support some favorite candidate. Those seeking these places make pledges to support their helpers for subordinate positions, promising to help members voting for them to chairmanships of leading committees. It is a persistent scramble, and honor must take a back seat until the spoils are disposed of. After the leading offices are filled, the fight for subordinate places follows. Railroad trains from the North, South, East and West are laden with applicants accompanied by their backers. Chairmen of county committees, members of the State Committee, Assembly district, and town bosses, are all on hand to offer their assistance in arranging the "slates."

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Senator Hamblin was in a dilemma. There were two applicants from Cleverdale for the same position; one backed by Paddy Sullivan, the other by Cyrus Hart Miller. Miller was his first and best man, but Senator Hamblin could not afford to ignore Paddy Sullivan. He expostulated and plead with them, but each was persistent and obstinate. Both were on the ground, and as the war for spoils raged, each felt sure of winning. A rupture with one or other of the favorites seemed imminent, when the affair was amicably arranged, at a cost to the Senator of several hundred dollars, paid to appease his powerful lieutenant, Paddy Sullivan.

The scramble for spoils continued several days, and when the Speaker of the House and the President of the Senate announced their appointments, the usual Swearing Bee began. Disappointed men vowed they would never again support the party, and that night, as the "Swearing Train" left the Capitol city, a long streak of sulphur must have arisen above the car roofs, and all supplied by the profanity of those who, if they had spent as much time in trying to obtain legitimate business employment as they had done in crawling at the heels of appointing powers, would have been richer, better, more useful and independent citizens.

CHAPTER XXII.

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SAD FAREWELLS.

George Alden improved slowly, his back having received serious injuries, from which Dr. Briar feared he would never fully recover. His faithful nurses were in constant attendance at his bedside, bestowing every attention that skill could suggest or loving hands perform. For many weeks he could not be moved. He became much emaciated, paroxysms of pain being of frequent occurrence and making opiates necessary.

Weeks passed, and spring was near at hand. Allowed to sit up for a short time each day, Alden looked from the window upon the street, enjoying every movement with delight known only to those confined for months upon beds of sickness and pain. Belle sat beside him reading aloud from a book, the patient watching her constantly, seemingly in a trance of worshipful devotion. His eyes sent forth sympathetic and tender glances, his heart catching every word that fell from the beautiful lips. Forgetting himself, he was held in transports of love, soon, alas! to be broken, leaving him a poor worshipper, removed far from his idol. Enjoying these precious hours, and watching the expression of love and happiness gathering upon the face of his young wife, he little thought she was to be the victim of the ambition and lost fortunes of two other men.

"Ah, Belle!" he said one day, "during all my sickness and suffering, I have passed many happy hours; will it always last?"

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"I hope so, my dear husband; and when you recover we will publish our marriage, and then renew these happy moments without the attendant suffering."

"But must I be a cripple? Oh, the thought is agony to me. What should I do, a helpless person entirely dependent upon those I love? Even with all the precious hours I could enjoy with you and my dear sister, I should pray God to take me away."

"Do not talk of that. Dr. Briar says you will again be able to walk. Do for the present let your mind rest and be contented; your recovery depends entirely upon this."

"Yes, I know it, and were it not for my two good and loving nurses my mind long ere this would have given way. I am truly happy, yet I am so often reminded of the danger surrounding me that I cannot dispel the thought that I may be permanently helpless."

Belle, rising from her chair, approached him lovingly, placed her arm about his neck, and laughingly said:

"No more of such gloomy forebodings. If you wish to get well you must be happy and contented; if not your nurses will retire and send two snuff-taking, herb-giving hospital women to take care of you. How would you like that, my impatient prisoner?"

"That being too great a punishment, I will promise to obey my nurses, providing they will remain with me."

Week after week passing, the later spring began to send forth its balmy breezes. The snows of winter long since gone, and the birds returned from southern homes, the trees began taking on their garb of emerald, while the apple blossoms were bursting forth, soon to expand their germs into luscious fruit.

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The factory had not been rebuilt, and much suffering had been experienced among families

whose members were thrown out of employment by the disastrous fire of the previous fall.

The heavy loss to the Cleverdale Woollen Company forced several of its stockholders into bankruptcy, and the business interests of the village were more or less affected by the disaster. Naturally, everybody thought Senator Hamblin too solid financially to be disturbed by the loss of one hundred thousand dollars—the amount of his stock in the company—but had they seen him in the solitude of his office or home meditating over the critical condition of his business affairs, they would have formed a far different opinion. During the winter he had been obliged to raise large sums of money to prevent his own bank paper from going to protest, but with an unlimited credit he could command almost any desired amount. Men with funds lying idle were glad to place their money in the hands of as safe a man as they supposed him to be. Widows and factory operatives felt secure, could they induce the president of the Cleverdale Bank to take their savings and pay them interest. In this way Senator Hamblin succeeded in averting the calamity that would otherwise have overwhelmed him.

He borrowed heavily from the bank on the notes of his friends.

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The limited amount a bank may loan to any one individual—as regulated by the National Banking law—is one tenth of its capital stock, but on notes of his friends President Hamblin had already borrowed three quarters of the bank's capital. Thus keeping himself apparently solvent, the people of Cleverdale looked upon him as the wealthiest man in the county, and being a shrewd actor in life's drama, by his conversation and general demeanor he succeeded in making good the impression of his wealth, bestowing gifts upon charitable objects with more liberality than ever before. The Hamblin Guards were his especial pride; he contributed largely to the company's support when occasion afforded opportunity for the organization to do credit to its patron. At the State Capitol he was the leader in numerous projects, and his power was felt on many occasions, when important bills had to be carried through both houses. He returned to his home nearly every Saturday, remaining until Monday. While appearing happy and at ease before the public, in private he was discontented and miserable. Inevitable ruin staring him in the face, he planned to avert the calamity by the assistance of Walter Mannis.

He delayed making final arrangements for disgracing the cashier, hoping the latter would die, but as months passed and the obstinate fellow refused to play the part assigned him, Senator Hamblin became petulant and cross because he was so long in getting well.

He constantly chided Belle for confining herself so closely to the sick-room.

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"You must go away from home for a time. Your mother and yourself had better make preparations immediately for the long-talked-of visit to your aunt in Philadelphia," said he. "You need rest and recreation, my daughter."

"I cannot leave home at present; perhaps I may be able to go next month. George is improving rapidly and begins to walk about the room, and even talks of soon resuming his work at the bank."

"Tell him to hurry up, for I want to see the roses back again in your cheeks. You must have rest and at once."

As he turned and left the room, he failed to hear his daughter remark:

"What would Papa say did he know I was the wife of George Alden?"

Two weeks later George Alden, riding for the first time since his illness through the streets of the village, received many demonstrations of the esteem in which he was held. Not only were kind expressions uttered by men, but the "God bless you" of many an old woman reaching him touched his heart-strings. Each day's drive gave him new force, he grew stronger, and the danger of being crippled for life finally passed away.

One day, after he had returned from his drive, Belle sat at his side, where she had passed so many anxious hours.

"Belle, my darling," he said, "you look tired and careworn, your bright color has entirely vanished, and you need a change of air and scene. I am improving so rapidly now, you ought to go away for a while."

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"Do you think so, George? Papa said the same thing to me a short time ago. He wants Mamma and me to visit his sister at Philadelphia, but I cannot endure the thought of leaving you."

"I am much better, and by another week hope to be able to resume my duties at the bank. Although I should greatly miss you, nevertheless you must promise to go, for you need it."

Fannie entering the room at that moment, her brother appealed to her. "Fannie, I am trying to persuade Belle to leave home for a short time. Her father also desires her to visit his sister; and she needs rest. Come, Fannie, be as decided with her as you have been with me, and she will not dare disobey."

Fannie laughingly replied, "Yes, my dear Belle, you must go, for it will greatly benefit your health. Get ready to go at once, for George will soon be able to go into the bank."

Belle consented, and returning home, told her mother of her determination. Mrs. Hamblin readily fell in with the arrangement; so dressmakers were called, and everything was done to make the ladies ready for the journey.

One week later George Alden declared himself able to resume his duties, but postponed returning to the bank until after the departure of his wife. Naturally enough he and Belle were

constantly together, and were as one in dreading the separation.

"I am sorry, George, I promised to go," said Belle one day. "I cannot tell why I feel so badly about leaving you. I am not superstitious, but I fear something will occur to keep us apart."

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"It is all for the best," said George. "Go, my precious wife, for a change is what you need. I shall resume my work at once, and while you are absent will write you each day. Returning you will be better able to meet your father, and tell him of our marriage."

The two were together several hours the day before the departure, but there was an indescribable feeling in the minds of both that something would occur affecting their happiness.

Telling their fears to Fannie, she laughed and said:

"Nonsense; lovers always feel that way when they part. Nothing is likely to occur affecting your happiness, unless it will make you both miserable to see the roses again in bloom upon Belle's cheeks."

But the final parting was full of sad forebodings, and as the train bore away Mrs. Hamblin and daughter, the tears shed in silence by the latter would not have ceased so soon had she known that her cup of happiness was to be replaced by one so full of trouble that its very bitterness would almost drive her into eternity.

CHAPTER XXIII.

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EXILED FROM HOME AND FRIENDS.

The Legislative season drawing to a close, Senator Hamblin made preparations to return home. Determining upon an active and early canvass for the nomination as Gubernatorial candidate, his money had been lavishly expended to win converts, while his large dinner parties—the finest of the season—were attended by leading men and high dignitaries. So successful had been his efforts to make friends for himself, that even when the session closed, and before his canvass began, he was spoken of as the probable choice of his party for the Governor's chair. He therefore concentrated all his energies to accomplish two objects: his own nomination and the marriage of his daughter to Walter Mannis.

When awake these two objects were constantly on his mind; when asleep his dreams were filled with them; when the impending financial hurricane forced itself upon his mind he always reasoned:

"Walter Mannis will make my daughter a magnificent husband, while his fortune will prevent my failure. Once Governor of the State, and I can wield influence enough to extricate myself from the present dilemma."

The session had not been a profitable one to him, for no large jobs that he was interested in came before the Senate; besides, while looking out for his pocket, he had to avoid injuring his chances for the nomination. The session had cost him several thousand dollars more than his salary, which added to his embarrassments, yet his lavish use of money made all believe his wealth increasing.

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After the departure of Belle, George Alden became much depressed in spirits. He was anxious to enter the bank at once, but by the advice of Doctor Briar he went, accompanied by his sister, to visit a cousin about two hundred miles distant. The change of air and scene, together with the letters received from his wife, gave him renewed vigor, and his despondency wore away. After a visit of one week he made preparations to return home—his sister, as much in need of a change as himself, was induced to remain a few days longer.

On his return, Alden was welcomed by many friends, who warmly grasped his hand and expressed their gratification; but when, on the following day, he entered the bank, he felt hurt at the cold greeting of the teller. Removing his hat and stepping to his desk, he opened a book, when Sargent said:

"Beg pardon, Mr. Alden, but the president desires to see you in his private office before you resume your duties."

"See me?" said the astonished cashier. "For what?"

"That you will hear, sir, from his own lips."

His voice was full of irony, and the manner in which he spoke caused the cashier to tremble, his pale face indicating agitation.

"Well, I will see him at once," Alden replied, and stepping to the door of the private office, he gently rapped. Receiving a summons, he opened the door and entered the apartment. The president was sitting at his desk. Alden said:

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"The teller informed me you desired my presence here."

The president, giving him a cold, meaning look, rose from his seat, turned the key in the lock, then said:

"Yes, he was right. Be seated. I have much to say, and of a painful nature."

George Alden's lips trembled. For a moment neither spoke, the silence being finally broken by the president.

"George, never in my whole life did I have such a painful duty to perform as now falls to my lot. You have served the bank for several years, and during that time have succeeded in winning the confidence of every officer of the institution. You have been trusted implicitly at all times, yet an examination reveals to us that this confidence placed in you has not been deserved."

He paused, when George Alden sprang to his feet, and gasped:

"I—I do not—that is—I cannot comprehend your meaning."

"Be seated, Alden. It almost unmans me; in fact, ever since this affair came to my knowledge my confidence in mankind has been shaken as never before. I see you are overcome; why not confess your crime, and let us see that you are not as depraved as your act would indicate."

"My God! what do you mean? Confess what? At least, inform me of what I am charged."

"Why inform you of what you already know? The abstraction of the funds has been discovered and the worthless bonds are here." [Pg 189]

Turning to his desk and opening a drawer, he laid before the astonished cashier five thousand dollars in worthless paper.

"I swear before my Maker," exclaimed George, "that I never saw those bonds before. What conspiracy is this?"

The president affected surprise and answered:

"You act your part well. You little thought, I suppose, that we would discover your crime. The books, however, show that some time in August last year you took five thousand dollars in money from the bank, placing these worthless bonds in the vault as collateral."

George Alden rose to his feet, and lifting his clenched hand above his head, and bringing it down upon the table before him, said:

"It is a lie! If anything is wrong the villain is in the other room."

"Beware, young man, how you talk; the evidence is too strong for you to escape by any means whatever. Here is the entry made in your own handwriting. You cannot deny this. Look here—is that written by any other hand than your own?"

"It—it—it—does look—oh, my God! I never wrote it. Am I dreaming? No, I am the victim of that man who has been at my desk."

Catching hold of a chair to prevent himself from falling, and turning toward the president, in piteous tones he said:

"Mr. Hamblin, certainly you do not think me capable of robbing the bank?" [Pg 190]

His answer being only a cold wave of the hand, the distracted man stared at his tormentor; as he did so, anger succeeded amazement, and he exclaimed:

"It is a foul conspiracy, and *you* are at the bottom of it! You would ruin me to satisfy your own ambition, you scoundrel!"

The president turned white with rage, and said:

"Have a care what you say, young man, or I will hand you over to the courts, where your crime will receive its just punishment. Your assumed innocence cannot stand against proofs so damaging as these books reveal."

"But I never committed the deed. I am innocent of anything so despicable. I a defaulter! God knows I never wronged any man. Oh, why was I brought out of the burning factory!"

His weak condition showed that he had miscalculated his strength, and Senator Hamblin looking into his face, saw its deathly pallor, while the poor man's eyeballs seemed almost ready to burst from their sockets. Much alarmed, he rose hastily, and seizing the hand of George Alden, said:

"I pity you—God knows I do. You are only human, and I will try and help you out of this trouble, for I recognize you have claims upon me."

"Thank you; perhaps I spoke hastily just now, but answer me—do you think I am guilty?"

"The evidence is very strong against you."

"But have you never thought another might have desired to get me out of the way?" [Pg 191]

"To whom do you refer?"

The cashier turned, and pointing toward the door opening into the banking department, replied:

"The man who once went back on *you*."

"No, I cannot believe that—for he pities you, and to him you owe the fact that no one knows of your crime but him and myself."

"My crime? Stop! do not call it that."

"Calm yourself, George, and let us talk of the future. Of course, it is impossible for you to remain in the bank. No one but Sargent and myself knows of the affair. You are without means to make good the missing sum. I have suffered great anguish of mind since I learned of this matter, and am not indifferent to the existing relations between you and my family, which makes my course toward you far different than it would be were our relations otherwise. Beside this, your brave act of last fall entitles you to consideration, therefore I will befriend and help you, if I can."

"Thank you, sir! thank you. I—I am so bewildered, I scarcely know what to do. I cannot realize that I am awake. I know I am innocent of any crime; but I have no adviser."

"Listen a moment," replied the president. "I can and will help you. I will replace the money, and thus make good the defalcation—advance you five hundred dollars beside, and you can quietly leave Cleverdale."

"I leave Cleverdale like a criminal! Confessing by flight that I am a thief! No, sir, I cannot do that."

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"You do not realize your situation. At present no one knows of this affair. If you remain in town an excuse must be given for discharging you from the bank, for it will be impossible for you to retain your position here. Reflect a moment. If you desire to remain and face the evidence, I am powerless to prevent you. I am your friend so far as I can be, but should you remain here it will be necessary for me to report this matter to the board of directors. I wish I might do otherwise, but I cannot be placed in the attitude of sacrificing my own honor. I know that warm affection exists between you and my daughter; as the father of her whom you love and respect, I will help you if you will help yourself, but I cannot go beyond those limits and make myself the shielder of an openly apparent criminal. Ah! I know what you would say, but facts exist that we must look at squarely. I offer to help you, but you must leave Cleverdale at once."

The distracted cashier fell into a chair and groaned with agony. Through his mind rapidly passing many thoughts, he fully realized his situation, and knew he was the victim of a base trick, if not a conspiracy, yet he was powerless to prove his innocence. Thoughts of his young wife and sister passing rapidly through his mind, his first and only consideration was to shield them from disgrace. Once he thought of disclosing the secret of his marriage, but remembering the solemn promise made his wife, and knowing that Senator Hamblin was a cold-hearted man, he feared the disclosure might increase their difficulties.

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These thoughts running rapidly through his mind, he wished for his wife and sister that he might consult them, but as they were far away, in whatever he did he must act alone, and in his weakened condition he was unfit to decide so serious a matter.

He believed his innocence would be established if he prevented the conspiracy from being made public; although he was a good enough judge of human nature to suspect Hamblin, he was loath to believe that the president desired his ruin. He believed that Hamblin's mind had been poisoned by Sargent, who had really robbed the bank and made a scapegoat of the cashier. At the same time he recognized the fact that Senator Hamblin was in the power of the teller, but desired to get rid of the cashier. The more he thought over the subject the more he saw the utter impossibility of proving his innocence, but concluded to make one more appeal to the president.

"Give me time to think, sir," he replied to Senator Hamblin, when the latter asked for his decision. "Before you drive me from home and friends, make a more thorough examination, for I am confident you will be convinced of my innocence."

"No, that cannot be. This was discovered immediately after your heroic adventure. I was astonished and could not believe you guilty. I have investigated thoroughly, and after due deliberation am convinced in my own mind concerning this matter."

"But Sargent—what does he say?"

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"He pleaded for you, as never before man did for another. When it looked as if you must die, I decided to make good the amount and let your grave cover the crime. I am entrusted with the funds of this institution. If you remain in the village I must give a reason for your discharge—if you go away your absence must be attributed to mystery; I shall never follow you. If you can ever repay me the amount I advance, all right; if you cannot, I shall feel that I have protected you as well as the honor of a member of my own household."

Eloquence can make deceit appear as the purest of truths. This gift accounted in part for Senator Hamblin's great power, for he was a natural actor. His persuasive manner and strong language had a perceptible effect upon George Alden, who gave evident signs of weakness of mind and body. Long months of confinement left him powerless to cope with a strong mind, and gradually his will succumbed to that of his persecutor.

He could write to Belle and Fannie, he reasoned, and be advised by them. Yes, he would save himself and friends the disgrace that must inevitably follow the charge he knew to be false, yet was unable to disprove. It would be a terrible ordeal, but he thought it would be only temporary and his vindication must surely follow. As for Belle, who never could doubt his honesty, he could keep her informed of his whereabouts, awaiting her summons to return.

"What is your decision, George? I must know at once," asked the president.

"Give me one day to decide."

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"No, you must make your choice at once—the directors will meet this evening, and if you remain here I must tell them of the defalcation, and then I shall be powerless to aid you. I wish it were otherwise, but it is not."

"Well, sir, to shield those I love I accept your offer. I hope I have not made a wrong decision, but my vindication is sure to follow."

Senator Hamblin opened a private drawer, and taking from it five hundred dollars, said:

"Here, George, is money—no, do not push it back—you will require it—you need not take it as a gift, it is only lent you."

At first Alden refused the loan, but the president, pretending to be affected almost to tears, at last succeeded in forcing the money upon him.

The interview ended, Alden left the building and wended his footsteps homeward. Alone in the privacy of his chamber he gave way to his feelings, after which he began making preparations for leaving Cleverdale. Taking up a picture of his wife that lay upon the table before him, he covered it with kisses, and said:

"I am her evil genius, and thus far have only caused her unhappiness. But she shall know all; yes, every word that passed between her father and me shall be written her."

For two hours he sat beside the table, writing. He wrote of the terrible charges against him, and placed on paper every word that passed between the bank president and himself. He asserted his innocence; told of his love, and begged his wife to do everything in her power to clear up the mystery. He read and reread his letter, and added more, telling her of his assumed name and destination. He then wrote another letter, containing substantially the same matter, which he directed to his sister.

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Not one word concerning his marriage, or his legal relationship to Belle, appeared in either letter. He was too much absorbed in his situation to think of anything but his flight and the causes that led to it.

At nine o'clock George Alden, bidding farewell to his home, went directly to the post office, mailed his letters, and then turned toward the depot. Meeting many friends, to their inquiries whither he was bound he replied, he was "going for his sister." It was a falsehood, and his conscience troubled him for it.

As the train steamed out of the depot his heart was too full of sadness to speak to any one. Although an innocent man, his sorrows must affect the two noble women whom he believed he was serving by leaving home.

God pity the three! Business reverses may drive a man from home and friends, death may inflict anguish hard to be endured, calumny may cast dark shadows over noble lives, but ambition alone can inflict unmerited misery on honorable natures; and worse than the ambition that causes war—worse because meaner—is the feeling that political necessities engender and stimulate in a man until he can coolly perform deeds more fiendish than Holy Writ anywhere ascribes to Satan. In proof whereof it is only necessary to quote a word or two of Senator Hamblin's soliloquy after Alden left the bank.

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"I am the scoundrel.—Well, a man must be one to succeed in politics."

CHAPTER XXIV.

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THE DISTRACTED WIFE.

The next morning, as Senator Hamblin entered the bank, Sargent handed him two letters. Receiving them in silence, he went directly to his private office, closed and locked the door, and seating himself at the desk, seemed much troubled.

"I am playing a dangerous game, and wish I were well out of it. During the long, tedious night, sleep refused to relieve me of that dreadful look of agony and despair that yesterday overshadowed Alden's countenance. But can I do otherwise than try to prevent the crash that would ruin me and disgrace those dependent upon me? It is a desperate game, but I cannot retrace my steps. Let me look at these letters. Yes, here is one addressed to my daughter and another to the Alden girl. I cannot bear to open them, but must do so, for how else can I know his destination?"

For a moment he was silent, then quickly opening the letter addressed to Belle, and counting the sheets, he found there were six of them—just twenty-four pages in all. Reading, he was soon interested in the contents. Troubled thoughts running through his mind, he frequently passed his hand across his brow as if hiding the words from view. Before the letter was finished he was greatly agitated, and when all was read, his head bowed upon the desk, sigh after sigh escaped him.

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"What have I done? The writer of this letter would have made my daughter a kind and true husband. I will recall him—I must, for I cannot go farther in this deception. Poor Belle! God pity her! I—her father—have basely conspired to destroy her happiness. God! what a villain I am!"

He arose and paced the floor in terrible agony of conscience.

"I have added crime to cruelty, and my hand is plotting against two true and noble hearts. I will at once recall Alden, for Belle's letter received last evening informs me of her return home to-morrow. What sorrow awaits her! I must—I will make amends for all."

Resuming his seat, he was about to open the letter addressed to Fannie Alden, when a rap at the door caused him to pause, and hastily slipping the two letters into a private drawer, he arose, and opening the door, to his surprise he found himself face to face with Walter Mannis.

"Ah, Senator, how do you do? Glad to see you. You look surprised. Didn't expect to see me to-day, eh?"

"No, I did not expect you, Mannis, but I am glad to see you. Walk in, and be seated."

Closing and locking the door, and resuming his chair, he said:

"Mannis, this is bad business. Yesterday I sent poor Alden away as if he were a common thief. Today I am a changed man and must give up this business, for it is a damnable scheme."

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"Pshaw! Senator, you are only doing your duty; beside it is too late to turn back now. Tut, tut, man, another day will calm your mind and all will be well."

"I suppose I am weak, but the scene I passed through yesterday has quite unmanned me; I will soon throw off this spell, realizing now that only the successful development of our scheme will save us. But I was a fool to ever begin it."

Mannis, with his keen eye, saw that the veteran politician was really moved. He was astonished; what politician would not have been? But he did not lose his wits; he said:

"The only thing necessary now is to prevent Alden's return. Of course you have intercepted his letters, for Sargent told me as I entered the bank that he handed you two this morning."

"Yes, I have them safe; but the counterfeiting and forging business must follow. When will bloodshed be added?"

The words were spoken in a desperate voice, so Mannis quickly replied:

"Come, Senator, put on your hat and let us walk over to my room at the hotel. You need fresh air and a glass of wine—then we will return here and look further into this matter."

The Senator at first refused the invitation, but persuasion finally made him yield, and the two men left the bank.

Returning an hour later, Senator Hamblin was in better spirits, the fresh air, together with several glasses of wine, having changed his whole demeanor. Despondency had given way to exuberance of spirits, and both men were soon seated side by side, smoking cigars. Then George Alden's letters were brought from their hiding-place and examined, Mannis remarking:

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"Well, he is a gushing youth if nothing else."

It being decided an answer must be sent Alden, Mannis, taking paper and pen, wrote as follows:

"CLEVERDALE, 187-.

"SIR: On receipt of your letter I immediately returned to Cleverdale. When I thought you an honest man, I respected and loved you, but your crime has aroused me from this dream. Never dare address me again, for I abhor a villain.

BELLE HAMBLIN.

"TO GEORGE ALDEN."

"There, Senator, have Sargent copy this—imitating your daughter's handwriting—and mail it to the gusher. It will make him overflow with rhapsody—or profanity. Gracious! how I would like to see him when he runs his eyes over this *billet-doux*," and he ended his words with a long, low whistle.

The interview was but a short one, and the two men shook hands. Mannis, while leaving the private office and passing into the bank, whispered to Sargent:

"Come to my room at the hotel at noon, I wish to see you privately."

Promptly at noon Sargent entered the Cleverdale Hotel, and hastily going to Mannis's room rapped at the door. A voice within calling out, "Come in," the teller entered the apartment, and Mannis rose to meet him.

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"Sargent, the old man is faint-hearted, and if something is not done to prevent, he will have Alden back here."

"Yes, I noticed he looked like a sick man when he came to the bank this morning. If he should repent, what would you and I do?"

"We must not give him a chance. Will you stand by me in this matter, Sargent? Remember, you are to be cashier."

"Stand by you? Yes, sir; I am with you and can take a hand in anything you suggest."

"Well, let's shake hands over that. Now let me whisper a few words in your ear."

For five minutes the two men whispered together; then Sargent said:

"By thunder! I never thought of that—but I am your man—that will check things certain."

"Not a lisp of this," said Mannis; "but Saturday evening, at eight o'clock, meet me near the hollow road, and be sure to bring along that suit."

In another moment Mannis was alone, and an hour later, behind a span of fleet horses, he was speeding over the road toward Havelock.

"The girl shall be mine," he said, "and the Senator's money will chip in nicely to keep me afloat. But if he only knew I wanted his cash, even more than his pretty daughter, he would shut down on me. Chicken-hearted as a child, I am afraid he will repent, and try to undo the little game. I always took him for a man of pluck; but we will arrange this business, though. My eyes! how he will shake in his boots when Sargent and I get through with our part of this affair—and won't all Cleverdale be excited? Whew! There'll be a first-class rumpus!"

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The following day Mrs. Hamblin and Belle arrived at the Hamblin mansion; the husband and

father was not there to receive them. Relieving themselves of wraps, etc., they took their supper.

Belle with great impatience momentarily expected the arrival of George Alden. Eight, half-past eight, nine o'clock came, still the young husband failed to appear.

"It is strange, mamma," said she. "I wrote him I would be here this evening. Can he be sick? I will send Jane to his house—possibly he is there."

Seating herself, she hastily wrote:

"DEAR GEORGE:

"I am home. Come at once.

BELLE."

Summoning Jane, instructions concerning the note were given; in twenty minutes the faithful nurse returned and exclaimed:

"The house is dark, and no person there."

"No one there!" said Belle, in a trembling voice. "It is singular enough. He came home three days since. Where is Papa?—he can tell us whether George has been at the bank. There must be something wrong."

"Be calm, my child," said her mother; "he will come soon—there is some good reason for his absence. Perhaps he is at the bank with your father." [Pg 204]

"True; I never thought of that. It is getting late, and we had better send James to the bank and ascertain. I must know his whereabouts before I can sleep."

She immediately rang the bell, and Jane appeared.

"Tell James to go to the bank, and see if Papa is there. Also tell him to inquire if Mr. Alden is there. If Papa is alone, ask him if he will please come home at once."

Half an hour later, James returned with the information that Mr. Hamblin was alone at his office, and would be up soon. Belle was much agitated; her mother tried to quiet her, but without success. Shortly after, Senator Hamblin entered the house; Belle ran to meet him, but by his manner she was conscious that something terrible had happened. After embracing his wife and daughter, the latter asked:

"Papa, where—is—is—George?"

Slow to answer, his hesitation only added to her agitation, for she continued:

"Oh, speak! What has happened?"

"My daughter, he is unworthy of you, he has proven himself a villain."

"Proven himself a villain! why, what do you mean? Answer me!" Her face became deathly pale, and she tottered as if about to fall.

"He has—I cannot speak it, for I am affected as never before—but you must know the worst—George Alden has stolen five thousand dollars from the bank."

There was a wild shriek, and Belle fell sobbing into her mother's arms. [Pg 205]

"It is—it is false! he never committed a crime." Rising quickly, with excited voice she asked: "And—and where is he?"

"Alas, my child, he has absconded. I befriended him, making good the amount, and the crime is known only to the teller and myself."

"Father," exclaimed Belle, "this awful crime is yours, not his; you have conspired to defame as pure a man as ever lived,—and *you have killed his wife.*"

"His wife! My God, Belle, what do you mean?"

"I mean that I am the wedded wife of George Alden, whom an unnatural father conspired to ruin, branding him as a criminal and sending him away a fugitive. Oh, I see it all! Weak from his late illness, not able to cope with villains, and left by me at the mercy of his persecutors, he is ruined, and I am murdered by—oh, God!—my father!"

The sorrow-stricken wife sobbed with intense agony; her proud sire stood trembling like a whipped cur. Approaching his wife, he said:

"Why was I not made aware of this marriage? I would have saved him from flight, but now I am afraid it is too late. He—he—did not tell me of this."

"No, pledged not to reveal the marriage until my return, his fine sense of honor, together with his weak condition, made him keep the secret. But what is manliness, honor, or love to you? You drove him away!" replied Belle.

"I did not drive him away, the evidence of guilt caused his flight. I not only made good the defalcation, but gave him money for necessary expenses. He made a fatal mistake in not informing me of this marriage; but I promise to recall him. I will do it at once. You must bear up until his return." [Pg 206]

"Then you will restore him to me, and when he returns you will proclaim his innocence?"

"Hope for the best, my child. You did wrong in keeping your marriage from me."

The family retired, but not to sleep. All the long night Belle lay upon her sleepless pillow, unable to drive the thought from her mind that her husband was suffering. In the bedchamber of her father there was no repose, for even a politician cannot always stifle conscience at will. The Senator ordered remorse to quit his presence, but as remorse was not in his pay, it refused to obey his mandate. The wretched man would willingly have welcomed financial destruction, if thereby he could have restored George Alden to his daughter. Solemnly pledging himself to make restitution for the wrong he had done, he resolved on the morrow to write to George Alden, bidding him return. But he reckoned without his host, for Mannis and Sargent had not yet been interviewed by their consciences.

When, next morning, Senator Hamblin entered the breakfast-room, his face showed plainly the struggle through which he had passed. Inquiring for his daughter, he was told by Mrs. Hamblin that she was sleeping soundly.

"Poor child, let her sleep. Would that she could enjoy an unbroken slumber until the return of her husband."

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At nine o'clock he went to the bank and found Sargent alone.

"Have you mailed the forged letter to Alden?" he asked.

"Yes, sir; it left this morning."

"I am sorry, for I am convinced I have done a great wrong. I have been a fool—yes, worse than that, a villain—but I will recall him at once."

Sargent, conscious that his companion's mind had undergone a radical change, did not at first reply, but no other remark being made by the president, he finally said:

"Will it not be dangerous for him to return here? he might make it warm for us."

"I care not; although there would be no danger. There are reasons why I desire his immediate return. To-day is Friday—I will write to him at once, and he can be here by the middle of next week."

As he entered his private office and closed the door behind him, Sargent laughingly said to himself:

"Just as I expected—but we will nip this little game; for he has men, not a girl, to deal with now. We hold the trump cards and he will find himself euchred."

One hour later Senator Hamblin passed into the banking room, and handed Sargent a letter addressed, GEORGE HOWARD, CHICAGO, ILL., saying:

"Mail this at once. And do not be disappointed in this matter; if we can get Alden back again, I will make you a handsome present—I will remain here while you are absent."

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Sargent, leaving the bank, slipped the letter into his pocket.

"Lucky he sent me! I will take care of this for the present."

CHAPTER XXV.

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THE CRUEL LETTER.

George Alden, with satchel in hand, stepped from a train just arrived from the East, at Chicago; his pale face, blood-shot eyes, and whole manner betokening a nervous condition. A stranger in a strange city, scarcely knowing which way to go, he felt almost like a guilty wretch fleeing from justice. The events of the past three days passing before his mind like a row of spectres, his haggard face told plainly of his anguish.

The sun was sinking beneath the western plains as the fugitive walked the streets of the strange city, not knowing whither to turn. He was faint from lack of nourishment, for he had not taken sufficient food to preserve his strength; while severe pains in his back recalled to his mind the fearful experience in the burning factory, when he lay in the hallway held down by the firebrand. He entered a restaurant, and seating himself at a small table in a recess, ordered food. Then, taking a photograph from his pocket, he imprinted many kisses upon the pictured face of his wife.

"Poor child!" he murmured. "She has already received my letter—God help her! I am sure, though, she will bid me return, as soon as she reads the letter."

The waiter soon returned, and Alden said:

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"Can you direct me to an inexpensive, respectable private boarding-house, where I can find comfort? I am not well."

"Yes, sir," replied the waiter, "I can direct you to just such a place as you desire."

His supper finished, he paid his bill, and with directions from the waiter he started in search of the boarding-house, which he soon found. Making known his wants, the good lady, after asking a few questions and looking into his honest face, decided to take him as a boarder. It was fortunate for him that she did, for Mrs. Nash afterward proved a valuable friend at a time when Alden stood in need of care and attention.

In the solitude of his room he threw himself into a chair and gave way to a paroxysm of mental anguish, reproaching himself for deserting his home and friends, for the act was an

acknowledgment of guilt. Retiring at an early hour, exhaustion made him sleep soundly. In dreamland he forgot his troubles, again living over those happy days passed with his loving wife and sister.

Sancho Panza uttered the sentiments of every living creature, when he invoked God's blessing upon the man who invented sleep.

As the morning sun crept into Alden's apartment its rays fell upon the sleeper's face and caused him to move his head upon the pillow. In a moment he opened his eyes, gazing about the room as if in doubt of his whereabouts; gradually the painful realities of life drove the happy dreams from his mind, filling his heart with sad thoughts, his only companions the past few days. Quitting his bed, he dressed himself, and involuntarily glancing into the mirror he started back in affright, and said:

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"My God! is that haggard-looking face mine? Here I am, far away from home and kindred, hiding in Chicago. For what? Because I was a coward. Yes; having braved the dangers of fire, I did not have courage to face my false accuser. Oh, why did I run away like a thief?"

Overcoming his agitation, he bathed, dressed, and was soon ready to descend to the breakfast-room. At the table he met others, to whom he was introduced, but his heavy heart usurping the whole space within him, he talked little and ate less.

His meal finished, he returned to his room to wait for expected letters. Two long days passed, and the suspense was straining his nerves to their utmost tension; unable to divert his mind by reading, he watched the passage of time, which never moved so slowly. Saturday evening he sent Mrs. Nash's son to the post-office, instructing him to inquire for letters for George Howard, the latter his mother's maiden name, assumed by him on leaving Cleverdale; but the lad returned without tidings from either wife or sister.

On Sunday, leaving his room for a walk, he cared nothing for the sights that another time and under different circumstances would have pleased and interested him. Attending morning service at church, his thoughts were far away, an eloquent discourse failing to arouse him from his abstraction. The service over, he sought his boarding-house, and was going directly to his room, when Mrs. Nash accosted him, and said:

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"Mr. Howard, you seem ill; can I do anything for you?"

Halting to see whom she was addressing, he recalled his assumed name, and replied:

"No, I am weary, that is all. Thank you for your interest in me."

"But, sir, you do not look strong. Pardon me, but have you been ill?"

"Yes, I have been very ill for many months, but am getting stronger now, and will soon be well again."

The sigh that escaped him convinced the good woman his sufferings were mental. Observing the paleness overspreading his face, her heart was touched, but not wishing to appear impertinent, she said:

"I have a son about your age, far away in a foreign clime, and you must forgive me, if I, a mother, take an interest in you. If I could only know the whereabouts of my own boy, I could close my eyes in peace instead of lying upon my pillow each night imagining him surrounded by all kinds of danger and temptations," and she raised her handkerchief to her eyes.

"I pity any person in trouble," Alden said, "for I have had my share of sorrow and suffering." He would have said more, but at that moment the door-bell rang, and Mrs. Nash said:

"If you are in trouble confide in me, and I will try and give you the consolation I hope some good person will give my own poor boy."

George Howard—we must for the present call him by that name—passed on to his room, while the good woman went to answer the door-bell. At the supper table she spoke kindly to the new boarder, who ate but little, and soon re-entered his room.

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The following day, sending again to the post-office, the boy returned bearing in his hand a letter addressed to George Howard, Chicago, Ill.

Seizing it with trembling hands, Alden hastily tore open the envelope, looked at the few lines it contained, and holding the sheet before his eyes, with a trembling voice read aloud:

"CLEVERDALE, 187-.

"SIR: On receipt of your letter, I immediately returned to Cleverdale. When I thought you an honest man, I respected and loved you, but your crime has aroused me from this dream. Never dare address me again, for I abhor a villain.

BELLE HAMBLIN."

He crushed the letter and tore it into shreds. As the pieces fell from his hand his pale face became suffused with scarlet, and large cords rose on his temples and brow as he said:

"My God!—And she too believes it? I did not think that—Oh, my head is bursting—*I am dying—God, have mercy—I—I—*"

He staggered and fell heavily to the floor. Mrs. Nash hastily entering the room beheld him lying senseless upon the carpet. The good woman, seeing the scattered pieces of paper, at once

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comprehended the situation, for she knew her young son had brought a letter which must have contained bad news.

"Poor fellow! I am afraid he is gone." Stooping, she placed her hand over his heart. "No, he is not dead," she continued.

She stepped into the hall and summoned help; and two women lifted the insensible form to the bed. A physician was called at once, and attempted to resuscitate him. Remaining in a partial stupor all day, toward night Alden began to show signs of returning consciousness. The following day, as he lay upon his bed looking at the kind-hearted woman watching over him, his mind seemed utterly broken down, for his appearance was that of listless disinterestedness. His face was pale, with the exception of a bright-red spot on either cheek.

For three long weary months he kept his room, yet never murmured at fate's decrees. His hostess constantly watched her patient, and never troubled him with questions; her only desire being for his recovery. The physician gave orders that he must be kept perfectly quiet, and all letters withheld from him, unless containing cheering news. No letters came, however, and the good woman wondered; but had she known of the scenes taking place elsewhere, she would have been filled with greater wonder.

CHAPTER XXVI.

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A DIRTY JOB.

Time dragged slowly, Senator Hamblin being ill at ease.

Beholding his daughter's sorrow, and knowing she could not become the wife of Walter Mannis, he began looking about for some other method to avert the financial disaster threatening him.

Scarcely a moment passed that he did not reproach himself for the great wrong he had done. Overwhelmed with horror, and fully realizing that ambition and selfishness had made him a criminal, he little realized that he was dealing with men deeper and more desperate than himself.

One night a man left the village of Cleverdale and passed into the country. He wore a slouched hat pulled well down over his forehead, while his coat-collar was turned up about his neck. The night was dark and cloudy, so the pedestrian was scarcely observed by any one; but when he met an acquaintance, he pulled his hat further over his brow, and passed unrecognized. Under his left arm he carried a large bundle, his right hand holding fast a heavy cane, which he used to pick out his pathway.

It was not long before, passing beyond the corporate limits of the village, his feet were treading the highway leading toward Havelock. As he kept on his way he heard the noise of an approaching carriage. The dense clouds overhead made the night so dark that teams were compelled to move slowly, and as the mysterious pedestrian neared the carriage he coughed three times; a low whistle assured him his signal was heard. The single individual in the vehicle cried out, "Whoa!" the man on foot approached and jumped in. The team turned and headed toward Havelock, and the horses were driven faster than was compatible with safety.

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One hour later the vehicle entered a piece of dense woods. The driver, dismounting, seized the horses by the head and led them on, through a narrow roadway or lane, for a distance of at least a quarter of a mile. When he stopped the man in the carriage jumped to the ground, and the two stood side by side. The driver then reached beneath the seat of the carriage, and drew forth a dark lantern, a pickaxe, two shovels, a hoe, a coil of rope, and two long queer-looking hooks with wooden handles. As he passed his hand under the seat, a noise was heard similar to the wail of a cat.

Both men were disguised, and as they continued their work conversed in low tones. Gathering up their tools and moving along at a rapid pace for about five hundred feet, they stopped at the edge of the forest and scaled a high picket fence. White slabs of marble, tall columns of the same material, and large granite monuments rose before them like spectres, grim and lonely.

A ghost-like stillness pervaded the scene, for the two men were in a city of the dead, surrounded on all sides by its silent habitations.

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"Follow me—it is only a short distance away. Come," said the taller of the two, who led on, his companion following.

The two men paused at the side of a newly made mound, and laying down their tools, pulled off their overcoats and prepared for work. As they threw aside their disguises the reader would at once have recognized the two men as Hon. Walter Mannis and Sargent, the teller.

"Here is the grave," said Mannis. "And we must commence our work at once. This man was buried last Sunday, and in size and personal appearance looks much like Alden. Let us hurry up and snake him out—come, take that pick and loosen the earth. Eh? what's that? S—h—h—h! Pshaw! it's only a twig which broke beneath your feet."

"This is rather serious business, Mannis. Give me a pull from that bottle. There—that tastes good, and it will nerve a fellow up."

"Yes, we need a little backbone—be careful and do not make much noise, for we are within a quarter mile of the road, and there is danger of being discovered. Here—hand me that spade. The earth is not very solid, for I can easily run this spade down a foot or two."

"This pick goes in as easy," said Sargent, "as if it were cutting cheese. Wonder where Alden is now? Ha! ha! wouldn't he make Rome howl if he knew what we were doing? But, d—n him! he always looked upon me as if I was a scoundrel; now I'll be even with him. There, how is that? Hand me that other spade."

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Mannis, doing as requested, said:

"Be careful, Sargent, and throw the dirt where the grave-digger pitched it. So the old man weakened, eh?—if he knew that you pocketed his letter he would be apt to send you adrift. His pretty daughter is his pride, his very life—Ah, Sargent, she is a darling, and I feel rather sorry for her, for she will cry her pretty eyes out upon learning George Alden will never return. Careful, Sargent; the earth is falling back into the grave. Here, take another drink; egad! a little good spirits is required to keep the evil spirits away. I don't just like this job; but virtue will have its reward, and such patterns as you and I will not be forgotten, eh?"—and both men laughed, as the devil also must have done if he was present, as probably he was.

For a full half-hour they toiled on, until they stood at least three feet deep in the grave. Slowly the mound of earth rose about them and the scene became animated. In the distance was heard the rumbling of thunder, the dark clouds overhead becoming blacker and more dense, while the men, unaccustomed to manual labor, paused at intervals to rest. Nearer and nearer they came to the box and its occupant, until at last Sargent's spade struck the wood, sending back a dull, hollow thud, startling both men.

"Gracious, Sargent! that frightened me, it came so sudden; but it will not be long before we shall have this ugly business finished."

"It startled me too. This is a pretty tough job, Mannis."

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"That's so; but remember it will make you cashier of the bank."

"Yes, that will pay—but see here, Mannis, it's mighty slippery business after all."

"We have no time to discuss the matter now—come, let's to work; ten minutes of lively shovelling will have the box clean as a whistle."

Both men resumed their labor, shovelful after shovelful of dirt was thrown up on top of the mound already formed, until they stood upon the cover of the box.

"Lay the shovels outside, Sargent, and take another drink. There, that will set you up. Here's at you!" and he turned the bottle and drank deep from its throat.

Taking a screw-driver from his pocket, and turning the rays of his dark lantern into the grave, Mannis began removing the screws from the cover. It was but the work of a few moments, when, the cover carefully laid outside the grave, the screw-driver began its work on the lid of the coffin. As the corpse was exposed to view, Mannis touched its cold, clammy face. A thrill of horror went through his frame, causing him to start and step heavily upon Sargent's toes, their owner standing behind him on the lower part of the coffin-lid.

Both men expressed their abhorrence of the scene, and an outsider looking upon the body-snatchers would have beheld three death-like countenances instead of one.

"Here, Sargent, stick that hook into the clothing. Now wait a moment until I get the other hook into this side; there—steady now! Can you take hold of both hooks? There, don't drop him, and I will fasten this rope about his breast. Now if you can hold on a moment, I will get out and hang to him with the rope."

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Nimble as a cat, Mannis sprang from the grave.

"Now pull out the hooks, and come and help me."

Sargent did not wait for a second summons, for his hair already stood on end at the thought of being alone in the grave with the dead man, and he was at the side of Mannis in an instant. The two men worked hard, and soon had their horrid prey out on the grass. The coffin-lid was laid back and the outside cover placed in position, the body-snatchers not waiting to replace the screws. Quickly they plied their spades, only stopping to tread down the loose dirt. In twenty minutes the grave was refilled, the mound rebuilt and the ground cleared up, as it was found.

"Sargent, we have a burden to tug. First, let us take the tools to the wagon and then return for the cold corpus."

Gathering up their tools and soon placing them beneath the carriage-seat, the men returned, and taking up the corpse, prepared to leave the cemetery. When approaching the fence, a sudden flash of lightning caused them to drop their burden, and the body rolled over into a hole near by.

"Egad! Mannis, I am sick of this. U-u-g-h! when that flash struck the face of the corpse it sent a thrill of horror all through me. I wish the body was in its coffin again."

"You think it rather unpleasant work, eh, Sargent? Well, that's because you've never been in politics. But we have got over the worst of it. Let us kick off a picket and push the fellow through the fence."

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Suiting the action to the words, he gave a vigorous blow with his foot, and two pickets flew off. The body was then lifted up and crowded through the aperture, and ten minutes later the men and their disagreeable burden reached the carriage.

"It is one o'clock, Sargent," said Mannis, turning the light of his dark lantern on his watch. "We must hurry up. Get that suit of clothes, there; spread them out. Now help me strip this fellow. It

was mighty lucky Alden left these clothes in the bank; very kind of him, and I am much obliged for his thoughtfulness. No one will examine them critically to see if they are old clothes or not."

"Old clothes! They are not old clothes, it is a suit he wore last year when he slept in the bank, and he never took them away. This fellow looks pretty fine in borrowed clothes, eh, Mannis?"

The body was soon dressed; the hardest work experienced was that of encasing the feet in boots, although the task, after much effort, was successfully accomplished.

The two men had labored faithfully and their work was soon finished. The clothes taken from the dead man were buried, the form lifted into the carriage, the men following, when Mannis turned the horses' heads toward Cleverdale.

The clouds began discharging flashes of lightning, loud peals of thunder adding their unpleasantness to the scene, and amid almost impenetrable darkness the team could not be driven faster than a walk. Presently great drops of rain spattered into the carriage, striking the occupants full in the face. After a long, gloomy ride, which neither Mannis nor Sargent enjoyed, the street lamps of Cleverdale were faintly seen in the distance.

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"Where are we, Sargent? Oh, I see now—that flash showed up the country. There is the road—let us turn in and plant this chap."

The horses' heads were again turned, and approaching a clump of forest trees the two men jumped out. The body was taken from the vehicle and dropped over the fence. Both men then followed, and carrying the body back some distance, placed it beneath a tree.

"Where is the pistol, Sargent? All right—now I'll put a ball into his brain."

A sharp report followed, and Mannis had fired through the sightless eyes, the pistol being held so near as to tear and disfigure the face past recognition.

"There!" said he. "I guess this will be a good enough Alden until I marry the girl."

The pistol laid beside the body, the two men hastily left the place.

One hour later, Sargent was in his bed, and as daylight began to dawn, as naturally as if nothing unusual had happened, Mannis was on his way toward Havelock.

CHAPTER XXVII.

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CLEVERDALE'S SORROW.

Gradually the disappearance of George Alden became known about Cleverdale. His sister, on returning, was greatly shocked to learn of his absence. It was thought best by both Senator Hamblin and Belle that the cause of his flight should be kept from her, and she was encouraged by both assuring her of his probable restoration to them in the course of two or three days.

Patiently the two women waited. The Sabbath was gloomy and dismal, for a drizzling rain kept everybody within doors. Monday dawned, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday following without the return of the loved wanderer. The hours passed slowly and sadly, and the lines about the eyes of both women showed plainly that sorrow and grief were almost bursting two hearts.

Since the news of the cashier's departure became known, many inquiries had been made, and much sympathy expressed for the friends of the young man. It was feared his brain had become disturbed during his long illness, and that he was wandering about in a weakened condition of body as well as mind. One remembered that he appeared abstracted and acted strangely; another recollected passing him without his scarcely returning recognition, and many others now brought to their remembrance strange actions on his part.

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As day after day passed the excitement increased, and his disappearance became the theme of general conversation. It was singular that no one recollected his departure on the evening train, the night he left his native village.

Senator Hamblin, nervous and filled with great anxiety, wondered why his summons had not brought back the fugitive. Many times he took from his private drawer the intercepted letters written to his daughter and Fannie Alden, and closely examined the assumed name and address, to convince himself that he had made no mistake in directing his letter. Much of his time was spent at home with his wife and daughter, who saw his anxiety, but little suspected the double load that weighed him down. Looking upon himself as a criminal, the impending financial ruin, added to the injury done his own daughter, nearly drove him to desperation. He scarcely slept during the long, tedious hours of the night, while the day gave him no peace of mind.

Receiving a visit from Mannis, the two men held a consultation for an hour, Senator Hamblin telling of his resolve and determination to make all reparation in his power for the wrong he had done. The wily Mannis pretended to coincide with him, even expressing a mock penitence for the part he had performed in the affair. So well did he act his rôle that Senator Hamblin never suspected the deception that was to make him a victim. He knew nothing of the body lying in the woods, soon to play an important part in the development of the scheme. Since the change in himself he began to look upon Mannis as a villain, even congratulating himself that fate, more careful of his child's happiness than her own father, had made her the wife of George Alden. But when Mannis expressed penitence for what he had done, Senator Hamblin fell into the error of believing him an honest man. He did not hear the words Mannis whispered into Sargent's ear as he passed through the bank:

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"The old man trembles, Sargent, and is greatly affected—how he will rip and tear when the fellow in the woods is found! Oh, my!" Both men laughed, and Mannis left the bank.

Friday was a pleasant day, the excitement being on the increase, for George Alden's disappearance had become still more cause of wonder. About noon, two little boys, greatly frightened and excited, came running into the village, exclaiming:

"A man—a dead man—in the woods over there!"

"Where?" inquired a citizen. "Stop and tell me."

The other lad, calming himself, said:

"We were playing in the woods out yonder, and saw a man—looking as if he was dead—lying under a tree, and we just ran away, sir."

By this time several other persons gathered about the boys, insisting upon the little fellows leading them to the place where the cause of their fright could be found. The lads agreed to go as far as the fence and point out the spot. The men moved along, their numbers increasing, and by the time they arrived at the grove there were at least twenty persons in the crowd. The boys pointed to a large maple tree, and a moment later the crowd surrounded the dead body. An offensive odor filled the air, and the horrible sight caused many to turn hastily away. [Pg 226]

"Who is it?" asked every one, but no one seemed able to answer.

The crowd was being augmented by numbers, for the news of the discovery had spread rapidly. Finally a man broke through the crowd, and hastily glancing at the body, said:

"It is George Alden. I know those clothes; but see, the face is pretty much gone. Horrible!"

The news flew quickly to the village, and many people flocked to the scene. Gazing upon the mutilated remains, many, recognizing the clothing, corroborated the opinion first expressed. Soon it was decided in the minds of all that the remains were those of the missing cashier, a pistol in close proximity to the body telling a tale of suicide.

The coroner came later, a jury was empanelled, and it was discovered that all valuables on the person had been stolen. Although the body was so badly decomposed that a thorough examination was impossible, the bullet-hole was plainly visible, the whole face having the appearance of being scorched and lacerated. In this condition the remains were placed in a handsome casket, and closed never to be opened.

The first theory was one of suicide, although the fact that the watch and everything else of value had been taken from the pockets suggested to many murder as the cause of death. [Pg 227]

While the community was greatly shocked, the scenes taking place at the Hamblin mansion were heart-rending. Fannie Alden, on returning to Cleverdale, had been prevailed upon to remain with Belle until her brother's return.

During the anxious days the sisters tried to comfort each other, constantly remaining together. As the hours wore on, no tidings of the loved one being received, hope gradually gave way to despondency, and when the awful news reached them that the dead body of the husband and brother had been found, it prostrated both with grief.

"Oh," cried Belle, "I must go to him, and look upon his dear face once more."

When told it would not be possible for her to see him, her sobs and moans were so piteous that they would have even softened the hearts of the two villainous authors of the deep and cruel game, so full of woe to her, had not these hearts been reserved for more appropriate treatment.

For several days Senator Hamblin visited his daughter only once, for he knew that he was a poor comforter. Suffering the torments of hell, he cursed his mad ambition and declared himself a murderer.

"Oh, my God!" he would exclaim, "what have I done to gratify my ambition? Step by step, approaching this awful deed, what crimes I have committed, and what sorrow I have brought upon my beloved daughter. Dead? yes, and I his murderer! How can I free myself from myself? My dreams are haunted by this awful spectre. I see him before me in his agony, as he trembled at the false accusation that he was a thief. That look haunts me, and almost drives me mad." [Pg 228]

Falling into a chair and burying his head in both hands, he groaned in agony of spirit.

"Oh, had I the courage to end this! But no, I dare not run the risk of a worse torment than I am experiencing. If this is earth, what must hell be? I must live and look upon her sad face—see her misery and acknowledge that I, her unnatural father, murdered her husband! Ambition, what a fiend you are!" and so passed hour after hour.

The remains had been removed by the coroner and placed temporarily in the receiving vault. The funeral, appointed for the following day, was a sad and solemn occasion for the people of Cleverdale, the eulogies pronounced over the supposed dead hero touching the hearts of all. The brave act of rescuing the one hundred and fifty operatives from the burning factory was referred to in glowing words, and stout hearts were overcome as they thought of the sad death of the estimable man whom every one loved and respected.

The prostrated young wife was unable to attend the ceremony, for, utterly overcome with grief, she could not leave her room.

A grave was opened in the Hamblin lot, for the Senator ordered that the body should rest there. The crowd that followed was very great, for most of the one hundred and fifty rescued persons

followed as mourners, and as they stood beside the yawning chasm, sobs filled the air. Never was there such an affecting funeral in Cleverdale. The church bells tolled sad requiems, and it was a day long to be remembered. As the earth closed over the remains of the man stolen from his grave in Havelock, many grief-stricken hearts were weighed down by the cruel clods; while two jolly fellows met in a room at the Cleverdale Hotel, opened a bottle of wine, and drank to the success of their businesslike scheme.

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Instead of abating, Belle's grief increased, causing her to pass many sad hours mourning, and reproaching herself for leaving her husband before his body and mind had regained their natural strength. She desired to make public her marriage and assume her lawful name, but at the urgent solicitation of her father decided to keep her secret; though not until Fannie Alden had acquiesced in her decision. Afterward regretting this deception, she passed many unhappy hours in the dual character assumed.

Senator Hamblin lost all interest in politics; he was burdened with his crime and haunted by visions. In his chamber, at the bank, or with his family he appeared like a broken-down man; even his old political friends failed to arouse him from his moods of despondency. Miller called to converse with him on subjects that heretofore occupied his whole attention.

"I care not, Miller," he said. "I am sick and tired of politics."

Even Paddy Sullivan failed to awaken the old-time enthusiasm, and the canvass for the gubernatorial nomination was abandoned temporarily at least.

Day after day, week after week, month after month, he moved about in a mechanical way. As he kept his notes renewed, no one suspected his financial condition, but the interest on his borrowed money was increasing his indebtedness. He was always kind to Belle, however, and as she lost all love and interest for everything he often expostulated with her.

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"No, papa, my heart is frozen. I can only wait for the time when I shall meet George in the other world. But you, papa, look haggard and broken down."

"Ah! my child, I am a murderer—the brand of Cain is upon me. It will be only for a short time, for this terrible responsibility is killing me."

The dutiful girl, throwing her arms about his neck, kissed him.

"How can you kiss me," he would say, "when I have been so cruel to you? Oh, Belle, the world is ignorant of your relation to him and it does not know I drove him away. If the people of Cleverdale, who loved him so, knew that I was his murderer, think you they would spare me?"

"You knew not what you did then. For my sake throw off this grim demon that is holding you. You must be prepared for your public duties, for it will be but a short time before you must go to the Senate again."

"If I could recall the dead, I would willingly give all I possess; yes, I would esteem it a privilege to lie down in the grave myself could I give you back your dead husband."

Belle, filled with grief for the dead, beheld the suffering of the living, and resolved to bear up and save her father if possible.

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Poor Fannie Alden was spared the grief that would have been hers had she been told of the charge preferred against her brother. She believed that, becoming deranged, he had taken his own life. A long investigation was made, but of course nothing was found supporting the theory of murder excepting the fact of the pockets containing no valuables. It was ascertained, however, that the watch of George Alden was at a jewelry store, left there by the owner to be repaired; but the absence of all other articles from the pockets was enveloped in deep mystery. Not one word written by the deceased had been found. The excitement soon died away, the suicide theory being gradually accepted.

Senator Hamblin and daughter thought they knew why he had taken his own life. Mannis and Sargent knew George Alden was not dead. But the people of Cleverdale, visiting the cemetery, often paused beside the grave and said:

"Such a good and noble man! What a sad thing that he became insane and killed himself!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

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AMONG THE HILLS OF COLORADO.

Four long weary months passed, and George Alden, alias George Howard, sat in his room at the boarding-house in Chicago. His face was pale, and lines of sorrow were plainly visible about his eyes. Gazing intently at a photograph, his only companion in many a sad hour, he murmured:

"Lost! lost to me, all that I loved and adored! Four months ago I fled like a thief from my native village; oh, fatal mistake, fatal mistake! By that act acknowledging myself guilty of a crime I never committed, I must now prepare to go forth into the world and battle for a new existence."

Raising the picture to his lips, he kissed it again and again.

"Oh, that cruel letter! But 'grief never kills;' the fact that I am spared proves the truthfulness of the old saying. My wife believes me a villain, and all I might say or do would never convince her to the contrary. And my poor sister has deserted me; she too must believe me guilty of crime."

He was much agitated, and rising from his chair paced the room for a few moments, when forcing

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a change of manner he said:

"No more of this—I must smother these remembrances of mine; henceforth I must conquer the feeling that overwhelms me. Farewell all past loves! Farewell all past joys and sorrows! Tomorrow I go forth into the world, and as Mrs. Nash's door closes behind me the curtain disclosing the past will drop forever. It must be so, or I cannot expect to keep up with the army I am soon to join."

The next morning, rising early, he packed his satchel, and descended to the breakfast-room, where he ate more than usual. Upon leaving the table he entered the sitting-room, where he glanced over the newspaper until Mrs. Nash joined him.

"Mrs. Nash, I am going away to-day."

"Going away? You must not go yet, for you are hardly strong enough."

"Do not think me ungrateful to such a kind mother as you have been to me, but I must seek a place where I can earn money. I have been dreading departure from this home—the only one I possess in the world; but I have fully realized the need of active employment for my mind. I must forget myself—forget I ever lived until I came to you. Do not ask me why. Some time I promise to tell you all; yes, open wide the book, that you may read every line upon the pages that to me are so sad and gloomy."

The good woman noted his sorrow, and saw the necessity of cheering words.

"Never mind all that," she said; "this world is full of sunshine, and if clouds hide the light for a while, remember that the sun shines just the same. I shall miss you, but wherever you go I shall always think of you, and hope to hear of your prosperity." [Pg 234]

"Dear, kind mother—you are all I have now—the only link binding my heart to the past is your love and kindness. God bless you! God bless you!"

His voice trembled with emotion, and Mrs. Nash, wiping away a tear, forced a smile, and replied:

"If I am your mother, you are my son, and as you are to leave me, I insist upon a promise."

"Name it, my good mother, and if it is among the possibilities I will readily comply."

"It is this: you must try to forget all sorrow of the past and live for the future. You must write me at least once a month, telling about yourself. You must, above all things, be cheerful and not give way to despondency."

Promising to obey, and regretfully bidding the good woman farewell, Alden turned his face westward from Chicago, to seek a fortune and begin a new life for himself in the wilds of Colorado. A week later, he stood alone in the streets of a small settlement in the silver hills, and, after walking about for a while, entered a hotel, and bargained for a week's board. On entering the small room assigned him he was forced to smile at the primitive style of the apartment and its furniture. The bed was simply a "tick" filled with dried grass, over which was spread two coarse woollen blankets. The bedstead was without posts, while an old rickety chair and a barrel used as a table completed the furniture of the apartment. [Pg 235]

The following day he met two young men who, like himself, were strangers in the locality and seeking a fortune. Sympathy drawing the three together, they mutually formed plans for the future.

The next morning the three, leaving the inn on a prospecting tour, first visited the mines in the vicinity. Every detail was carefully noted, and they asked so many questions of those in charge, that, as they left the place, a foreman remarked:

"There are three keen-eyed chaps, and I'll bet a silver brick they'll strike a paying lead before they are much older."

Four days later they staked a claim, pulled off their coats and began active operations; a few old heads smiling at the three "tender-feet" turning miners.

Alden rapidly gained strength, and the bracing air and steady exercise gradually restored him to health. The paleness so long overspreading his countenance gave place to a healthy glow, and the clouds that darkened his mind were only visible at periods when he allowed old thoughts to disturb him.

His natural strong will-power reasserted itself as his physical vigor returned. His principal thought now was to repay the sum which Senator Hamblin advanced him when he fled, like a thief, from home and friends. The amount he was accused of stealing he knew was not incumbent on him to pay, for he now fully believed Senator Hamblin had really manufactured the charge to get him out of the way, that he might marry his daughter to Walter Mannis. [Pg 236]

Belle, he knew, was his lawful wedded wife, and could not, if she wished, marry Mannis; yet he longed at some future day to return to Cleverdale and confront his false accusers, even though his wife had turned against him. This thought often entered his mind, but he dismissed it with the remark:

"No, I shall never go back to be spurned by the only woman I ever loved."

His companions often inquired concerning his past life, and as he evaded direct answers, they concluded his presence in Colorado was the result of a love affair. Soon learning to look upon him as the very soul of honor, in all their movements he became an adviser with rare judgment and foresight.

Operations were partially suspended by the three miners during the winter, for the weather prevented much work. Being prudent during the winter months, they made but little inroad upon their reserve fund, and when spring opened were ready to renew operations. All about them were evidences of rich mineral wealth, and before summer came they had gone to a considerable depth into the earth. Day by day they toiled on, and old miners, straying through the gulch and watching them, changed doubt of the "tender-feet" to admiration at their plucky spirit. All through the region in that mountain-pass spread the fame of the new company, and when indications of paying ore began to develop itself everybody said:

"I told you so! those chaps will certainly succeed."

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George Howard showed plainly that he was worthy of success. Nearly a year had passed since his departure from Cleverdale, and during that time, with the exception of the forged letter, he had received no tidings from his native place. Could he have seen that silent mound in the Cleverdale Cemetery surmounted by a plain marble slab bearing the name of George Alden, it is possible that he might have abated his energies, but his only ambition now being to succeed in his new life, right royally did he concentrate all his efforts to accomplish his desire.

He regularly wrote to his good friend Mrs. Nash, and the letters received in return overflowed with sympathy and words of encouragement. Greatly prizing her letters, he read and re-read them until every word was indelibly engraved upon his mind. This was very unromantic, but it was also very much to his credit.

One day, "Three Boys Gulch," as it was called, was the scene of excitement, for the efforts of the partners were crowned with success by the discovery of a rich vein of silver. The news travelled on swift wings, and spectators looking into the shaft shook their heads at the thought of what they had missed.

The young men became lions at once, for were they not owners of a bonanza? and George Howard wrote a short letter to his friend Mrs. Nash as follows:

"THREE BOYS GULCH.

"MY DEAR FRIEND AND MOTHER:

"I am a rich man, for we have struck a bonanza. Business may call me to Chicago soon, when I shall see you, and then, my good mother, I will tell you the secret of my life. Until then, farewell.

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"Ever your friend,

"GEORGE HOWARD."

Sealing the letter, he said:

"And now for a vindication of myself; even if I were guilty, everybody will listen to me when I own a third of a rich silver mine."

CHAPTER XXIX.

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POOR MARY HARRIS.

Go where you will, seek whom you may, converse with all whom you meet, and you will fail to find a person of either sex, arrived at years of discretion, whose heart does not conceal a secret. Some have secrets of love, some secrets of business, while other heart-closets may conceal the skeleton of a secret crime. Several of our characters have faithfully retained secrets which, if known, would have long ere this abruptly terminated our story.

Senator Hamblin suffered intensely by his terrible secret. Fully conscious that George Alden had committed no crime, to the oft-repeated inquiries of his daughter concerning the defalcation he evaded direct answers by saying he believed him innocent, although the sum of five thousand dollars had mysteriously disappeared. His agency in the supposed death of George Alden weighed heavily upon him, while the impending crash in his business affairs was a secret that gave him no peace of mind.

His daughter possessed two secrets; one of them, her marriage with George Alden, was faithfully kept from all except those of her own immediate family. While it was publicly known that she mourned his death, refusing comfort, none but those mentioned were aware of the relation she sustained toward the late cashier. Another secret which she guarded safely was her knowledge of the accusation which she supposed caused her husband's death.

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Fannie Alden was unconscious of the charges made against her brother's integrity. Had she known the cause of George's disappearance, her sensitive nature would have received a wound from which she never could have recovered. Therefore, Belle felt justified in keeping this secret locked in her breast, although she believed the charges false in every particular.

Two other persons possessed a secret, over which they cracked many jokes. Mannis and Sargent often met and talked over the success of their scheme. The latter, now cashier of the bank, fully felt his importance. Sargent's thoughts sometimes reverted to the night when, playing the rôle of body-snatcher, he assisted to disguise a dead body to account for the absence of the living; and he never felt proud of that night's work; but when a twinge of conscience disturbed him, he quieted his mind with the oft-repeated remark:

"Well, a man must look out for his own interests."

Walter Mannis felt little remorse at the part he performed in the game, for his was a callous conscience, and such little episodes never disturbed the serenity of his mind. The Congressional nomination was sought and won by him, thanks to money, and his election was easily accomplished. Considerable hostility to his nomination was evinced at first, but when the convention closed its deliberations, there was a general acquiescence in the result. The candidacy of Daley was too fresh in the minds of recalcitrant politicians to encourage a repetition of the "bolting" game. Poor Daley, still an inmate of the asylum, and with small hope of recovery, left a warning behind.

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Senator Hamblin, of late much with Mannis, fell under the influence of his companion, whose wily tongue and smooth manner again completely won the Senator's confidence and esteem. The father still entertained hope that his daughter, recovering from grief occasioned by the death of George Alden, would ultimately become the wife of his friend.

Mannis soliloquized one day in his room at the Manor, surrounded by books, letters, and scraps of paper covered with figures:

"My case is desperate," he said, "and something must be done at once, or I shall be caught napping. The note on which I took the liberty of endorsing Hamblin's name falls due next Wednesday. By Jove! it must be got out of the way, dead sure, or there will be trouble. It is for ten thousand dollars, and if not taken care of at maturity, those city bankers will make me trouble."

Lighting a cigar and stretching himself in an easy-chair, he watched the smoke for a moment or two as it curled above his head, and then continued: "Mannis, you are a cool fellow, and Hamblin falls an easy prey into your clutches. I feel sorry for him; I wouldn't have his tender conscience for a fortune. He thinks he murdered Alden—ha! ha! ha!—a confounded good joke. But supposing the ex-cashier should walk in some day, with papers and documents, to say nothing of his face, to prove he is not dead? Wh-e-e-w-w! wouldn't there be a nice old time in Cleverdale? I only hope he will wait until I secure the girl, whom I have sworn to marry. Once married to Belle Hamblin, and I am saved; the old man's fortune can help me out of my trouble, and it must. I have lately hinted to him again my desire to marry his daughter, and he takes kindly to the notion. They do say she is inconsolable at Alden's supposed death; but she will get over that; 'grief cannot kill'—" and singing the refrain from a popular air, he seemed very happy, for he resumed:

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"See here, old fellow, you are a Congressman, but it will be some time before you go to Washington, and if you can get a hold there, perhaps you too can make a strike. All those fellows get rich, and Walter Mannis will look out for number one. Oh, if I can only capture Belle Hamblin, and take her to Washington as my wife, what a brilliant couple we will make, for I flatter myself I am not bad-looking. Ah, Mannis, you are an egotistical fellow. Egad! But how can you help it? I vow I will go to Cleverdale to-morrow, see Hamblin, and again urge my suit. What would the old man think if he knew of that note his name is on! But, pshaw, he will never know of it. I shall get it out of the way somehow, and at once."

He was interrupted by a servant entering and handing him a note, which he hastily tore open. As he read it a shade of anger crossed his countenance.

"Confound that girl!" he said. "She thinks I will marry her, does she? She doesn't know me. I must get rid of her some way; but how? That's the question. Let me think."

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Dropping into a chair and passing his hand across his brow, he was engaged in deep thought for almost ten minutes. Breaking the silence, he said:

"Well, I must get her away from here, to begin with. This affair troubles me more than any woman scrape I was ever engaged in. If her father knew about it there would have to be a new election for a Congressman to fill my place. It is a bad go, for I certainly have deceived the girl, and old Harris is a savage fellow, who wouldn't hesitate to pop the man who betrayed his daughter."

Mannis, for once, was really troubled. He cared little for the misery he might bring upon others, but he fully realized that his life would be endangered, did his treatment of Mary Harris reach the ears of her father. The poor girl had been deceived by a promise of marriage, and the note Mannis received was an appeal begging him to fulfil his word. The innocent creature was ignorant of the duplicity of the man she had trusted, for although many times before he had crushed young lives as if they were the merest baubles, he had managed to prevent any charges appearing against him.

For many minutes his nervous agitation was very great. He tried to drive fear from his mind by reading, but could arouse no interest in his favorite books, for the fear of Mary Harris haunted him, and he trembled for his own personal safety.

"This will never do," he suddenly said, "I will go to Cleverdale and visit the Senator, and then make a pilgrimage to the great Babylon, New York, where something must turn up to help me out of my troubles."

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The same evening found him at Cleverdale, and at a late hour Sargent was with him at the hotel. The precious couple engaged in a game of cards, surrounding themselves with clouds of cigar smoke, and drank champagne as they talked of Alden, and congratulated themselves their plans had worked so well. And yet each in his heart wondered what had become of the victim.

"How do you like your place, Sargent?" asked Mannis.

"It is a very good situation, but a man can hardly get rich on the salary. I'll tell you what it is, Mannis, I have had a notion for some time that the silver hills of Colorado are the place for me. Those chaps out there are fast getting rich, while we salaried men, working infernally hard, can lay up nothing. To-day I read an account of three young fellows who staked a claim last fall and now they are millionaires. The excitement is intense, and the lucky chaps have been offered millions for the claim."

"Who are they, Sargent? Where are they from?" asked Mannis.

"Hanged if I know; but I wish I was one of them. You fellows with fortunes don't know the hardships we paupers have to undergo; and the more I think of the matter, the more I believe in the advice, 'Go West, young man.'"

The two men drank so heavily that before midnight several empty bottles stood on the side-table, and both were in a very convivial condition, when Sargent, bidding Mannis good-night, wended his footsteps homeward in rather uncertain fashion. [Pg 245]

The next forenoon Mannis arose with a headache, but did not fail to call upon Senator Hamblin, whom he found busy, as usual, but glad to meet the Congressman-elect. After a few moments' conversation, Mannis said:

"I am going to New York, Senator, for a few days' recreation. I have had the blues lately, and have prescribed for myself a week's sojourn in the gay city. The metropolis is the celestial city of the world, and when the pilgrim groans under a burden of blue devils a plunge into the pool washes away the load, and man comes forth brighter, better, and happier. The forced seclusion of the country clogs the brain, deadens the intellect, and makes man's heart heavy as lead."

"You have the blues, Mannis! Why, I supposed you never felt a care except when a candidate for the people's suffrages."

"But there is greater cause, my friend," and Mannis's voice assumed a tone of sadness. "When a man sees the dearest object of his life before him, yet, like Tantalus, putting forth his hand to grasp it, it recedes, he is unhappy."

"I cannot understand you, Mannis," said the Senator. "You speak in parables; be more explicit."

"Were I married and quietly settled in life, I should be happy; but the only woman I ever loved I fear will never be mine. Your daughter, my friend, could make me supremely content."

Senator Hamblin looked into the face of his companion and replied: [Pg 246]

"It would gratify me much if your hopes could be realized. Cheer up and do not look so despondent. My daughter has been terribly grieved by the tragic death of her lover, but time will heal her wound. Be patient awhile longer."

"Ah, my friend, you can easily say that, but could I have the hope that at some future time she would be mine, I should indeed be happy. Urge her to receive my attentions. Tell her of my affectionate regard for her, and if she gives encouragement let me know. Here is a card containing my New York address. One word from you, and I will be here as soon as steam can convey me."

He arose to depart, and Senator Hamblin, warmly grasping his hand, said:

"Good-by, Mannis! Keep up a good heart and all may yet be well."

The door closing behind him, Mannis passed into the street, and said to himself:

"Pretty well played, Mannis, my dear boy. If the old man would only give me his ducats his pretty daughter might cry her eyes out if she wished."

An hour later he was on the train bound for New York.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE ATTEMPTED SUICIDE.

Over a year had elapsed since the supposed death of George Alden. During that time Senator Hamblin had become not only changed in manner, habits, and disposition, but lines indicative of approaching age had appeared upon his brow and features. Instead of forgetting his responsibility for the supposed death of George Alden, he steadily reproached himself for his villainy. [Pg 247]

His daughter carried her load of sorrow until it almost broke her heart. Losing all interest in worldly matters, despondency eclipsed the brilliancy and self-will that had always been characteristic of her. Fannie Alden passed many hours with her, although resisting the persistent efforts of Senator Hamblin, his wife, and daughter to induce her to become an inmate of the mansion.

She was a cheering comforter, for having arrived at an age where she could look back upon many sad and unhappy hours, she had become nerved to bear affliction with better grace than the young wife.

The inroads of grief upon Belle's health caused much alarm, her friends fearing she would not survive the shock. Her father, watching the gradual decline, and knowing he was the cause of all her trouble, lost all desire for public advancement. The efforts of his political friends to arouse [Pg 248]

and make him renew his canvass for the gubernatorial nomination proved futile. Attributing his physical condition to overwork and excitement, his business associates, ignorant of the true cause, urged him to temporarily lay aside all care and seek rest. His financial ruin appeared more imminent than before, and as the crisis seemed close at hand, peace of mind was impossible.

Still believing Mannis a rich man, and seeing no other way to extricate himself from financial embarrassment, he secretly hoped to induce Belle to become the young Congressman's wife. His critical situation had been sedulously kept from his wife and daughter, but he now realized it could not be a secret much longer. Renewing his notes often, and asking friends for re-endorsements, he began to be questioned. He passed many hours in his private office trying to devise a way out of his difficulties, but all without success. Since Sargent had become cashier of the bank, Senator Hamblin knew his situation must be known to at least one man, yet the cashier never uttered a word on the subject. Aware that the president was using the funds of the institution, Sargent cared not so long as the directors possessed such confidence in the presiding officer that they never looked into the affairs of the bank. The president was in full command, so the cashier never talked.

When fully convinced that the calamity could not be averted, Senator Hamblin determined to inform his wife and daughter of his condition. Belle's gradually declining health alarmed him, and he made himself believe that if prevailed upon to marry she might be spared. One day, upon leaving the dinner-table, he requested the presence of both ladies in his private room, and when they were seated he said:

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"What I have to say will undoubtedly surprise you both. For many years, enjoying the station money gives, we have been called the wealthiest family in the county. For a long time everything I touched turned to gold, and you, my dear wife and daughter, have never known lack of luxuries. Freely giving to charity, my means have been devoted toward the advancement of the community. Foolishly believing there was no end to my success, in an evil moment I stepped aside from legitimate business, and entered the political arena. I now curse the day the temptation of power and station in public life allured me from my path, for that prize once grasped only leads one farther away from friends. It is the old, old story, yet man never considers the nine hundred and ninety-nine engulfed in the maelstrom, without believing that he can be the thousandth man to overcome all obstacles and attain the desires of his heart. What fatal error!"

"Husband, what do you mean?" Mrs. Hamblin asked.

Pausing a moment to overcome his emotion, the Senator continued:

"Engrossed in public affairs, I have forgotten my duty to you both, and spent thousands of dollars to gratify my ambition. I have neglected vast business interests and suffered heavy losses. I have been blind—yes, mad! Now I must pay the penalty. Oh, pity me, help me! For a year past the torments of hell have been mine, and to-day—oh, I can hardly speak the words—to-day I am—am bankrupt."

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"Bankrupt!" exclaimed both women, rising.

"Yes, I have said it; bankrupt! Oh, I knew it would surprise you. No one else knows of it. The world calls me a millionaire, but my estate and business would not pay my debts."

"Darius," quietly but feelingly spoke Mrs. Hamblin, "why have you kept us in ignorance of this? We could have helped you instead of increasing your burden."

"I know it; but I have been a coward, walking about for a year vainly hoping a miracle would extricate me. My poor child's troubled face constantly before me, and my remorse at the crime of sending off her husband, have almost made me take my own life. My daily actions have been a lie, and the time is not far distant when I must be branded a villain—for all men failing are so called."

"Papa," said Belle, gently putting her arms about his neck, "I can do something to help you, and will get well for your sake. I have nothing to live for but you, dear mamma, and brother Geordie—all else that my heart yearns for lies in yonder graveyard. Fannie Alden supports herself, and why cannot I?"

"My dear daughter, I little deserve this from you, whom I have caused so much misery. Had it not been for my wife and children, I should not have hesitated crossing the border of eternity; but meditating such an act, the faces of my loved ones rising before me seemed to say: 'Would you leave us to bear the disgrace alone?' My heart has been full of secret woe, and now public humiliation and disgrace must be added."

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Hiding his face, for a few moments emotion overwhelmed him, and it required the combined efforts of wife and daughter to calm his agitation. For a long time he talked of his condition. He told the two women every detail of his affairs, sorrowfully confessing his own responsibility in the matter; but withholding, of course, his part in the conspiracy against George Alden.

"I have done it," he said. "No one is to blame but myself. Had I turned a deaf ear to fame, I should not now be standing on the verge of bankruptcy."

"Is there no way to extricate yourself?" asked his wife.

"I fear not, for I owe large sums of borrowed money which must be paid. People with funds lying idle have forced their hard-earned savings upon me. With unbounded credit I can raise large sums of money, but that cancer, interest, is eating the vitals of my principal. I have much real estate—enough, in fact, if advantageously disposed of, to relieve me; but what will a forced sale return? Had I another fortune to assist, I could prevent the impending disaster, and, in time,

extricate myself from my present dilemma."

"Is there not a way to do what you mention?" asked Belle.

"There might be—but no—" he said, suddenly checking himself, "no—not now—I cannot hope for that."

He spoke hesitatingly, as if revolving in his mind a method whereby he could receive help. His companions noticing this, Belle said:

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"Be frank with us, and if there is any possible way to assist you, let us know; perhaps we can advise you."

Gazing intently upon his daughter, he replied:

"Yes, there is one way out of this dilemma, and only one. But do not ask me now, for I cannot expect aid in that direction—no, it would be asking too much of my loved one."

"Tell us to what you refer; if in our power to assist, the danger might be averted."

Like a drowning man catching at straws, he seemed to be filled with hope of rescue; hesitating a moment, he said:

"You, my daughter, can save me."

The bewildered girl started with surprise.

"I can save you? How?"

"By becoming the wife of Walter Mannis."

The unexpected words went with crushing effect to the daughter's heart, causing her to sink into a chair. Choking spasmodically for a moment, she regained her feet, and replied:

"Marry him? No, I would die, beg, or even starve, before becoming his wife. Oh, you know not what you ask."

The look of partial joy that had gathered upon the Senator's face was followed by one of deep despair. He became very pale, and clasping both hands across his head, sighed heavily.

"No, that was too much to expect. I cannot blame you, Belle; but all is lost. We will say no more about it now. Let the crisis come; and we must take the consequences, be they what they may," and imprinting a kiss upon the foreheads of both wife and daughter, he left the room.

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Belle, greatly agitated, when alone with her mother indulged in a paroxysm of tears. Sadly grieved at her father's distress, his wish that she should marry Walter Mannis almost overpowered her, for, believing Mannis indirectly to blame for the death of her husband, the mention of his name by her father seemed almost a crime.

"To think that papa desires me to marry him!" she said. "Were I to comply, his victim would rise from the grave to haunt me. I wish I could prevent the calamity. Poor papa! He is greatly overcome, and I fear his failure will kill him. But marriage—and with Mannis—oh!"

In the mean time Senator Hamblin, entering his own apartment, threw himself into a chair, and muttered, "Lost—all is lost! Ruin irretrievable confronts me. The last hope is gone. I cannot blame Belle. The poor girl has greater cause than she knows for refusing to marry Mannis, but the act would have saved me. I cannot remain to face the disgrace of failure. It is only a step across the chasm, and I will take it."

Taking his pen he wrote hastily the following letter:

"MY DEAR WIFE AND DAUGHTER: Forgive and pity your poor distracted husband and father. I am lost; financial ruin cannot be averted. When this meets your eyes, I shall have solved the problem of eternity. Deeply wronging you both, I have also the death of my daughter's husband to account for before the throne of God. I cannot longer bear the burden laid upon me by my mad and insatiable ambition. I charge you both to caution my boy against following in the footsteps of his father. Politics and ambition have held out tempting promises to me, which have never been fulfilled. I have used honorable public positions for my own selfish ends. Instead of assisting at making this the best government in the world of nations, my efforts have been joined with men laboring to attain place and emolument by overthrowing honesty. By precept and example I have done my share in making my country the reverse of that intended by its founders. Educate my boy to rise above the demoralizing ways of modern politicians. Impress upon his mind the necessity of joining with better men than his father in establishing this republic upon a foundation that will assure its perpetuity. Make him understand that politics should only be avoided when it leads men to seek company that destroys self-respect and corrupts honest purpose. Have him understand that 'nothing is right in politics that is wrong in any other field of life.' I lay great stress on this now, because I feel my duty in this direction has been sinfully neglected.

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"Poor Belle! Had I been mindful of your happiness, you would not have been a victim to my mad ambition. The house and grounds were deeded to you, my wife, several years since for your maintenance and that of your children. You must not part with the property without securing a price commensurate with its value. Think of me occasionally, and remember me as the loving companion and father I was before I became infatuated with the demon who has ruined so many.

"Farewell forever.

"YOUR DISTRACTED HUSBAND AND FATHER."

Enclosing the letter in an envelope, he addressed it "To my Wife and Daughter," and placed it where it would be seen. With a sad face he then proceeded to arrange his papers and carefully prepare a schedule containing a full inventory of his indebtedness. Then he arose, and taking a hasty survey of the room, said:

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"Farewell to all my sorrows and happiness!"

Then he left the house, going toward the barn. Passing through the yard where Geordie was at play, he went to him, and putting his arms about the little fellow, said:

"My son, always be a good boy and obey your mother and sister."

As he kissed him Geordie said:

"Yes, Papa; I will try and be good to them, and to you too."

Senator Hamblin entered the barn, and looking about saw he was alone. Taking a knife from his pocket and cutting a piece from a coil of rope upon the floor, he fastened it to a beam overhead, and placing a box underneath measured the length necessary to reach his neck. Falling upon his knees he poured forth his voice to God in prayer. Yes, for the first time in many years, Senator Hamblin prayed. But the act did not seem to do him any good, for when he had finished he mounted the box, and adjusted the rope about his neck; his face was overspread with the pallor of death and his eyes were suffused with tears.

"God forgive me," he said, and as he kicked away the box it went crashing through the window near him.

The noise reaching the ears of Geordie, in an instant the boy stood in the doorway. One glance toward the writhing form suspended in mid-air, and the little fellow ran with lightning speed toward the house, meeting his mother and sister coming toward him.

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"Papa! quick! in the barn!" he exclaimed.

Mother and daughter, not waiting for further information, flew wildly in the direction indicated, and entering the barn, both paused as if paralyzed, Mrs. Hamblin catching the door for support. Belle quickly ran and, seizing the quivering body in her arms, cried to her mother:

"Quick! quick! Cut the rope, for he is not dead." Mrs. Hamblin, pulling the knife from the beam where her husband had placed it, a quick stroke severed the rope, and the limp form fell to the floor. Movements of hands and limbs showed that life still remained, and the two women quickly began the work of restoring consciousness. After five minutes they observed signs of returning life. Soon the Senator opened his eyes, and seeing the women bending over him, he said:

"Why, why did you do this? I care not to live."

Half an hour later he lay upon the bed in his own room, his wife and daughter standing over him, administering to his comfort, for he was utterly prostrated.

"Why, oh, why did you cross my purpose?" he said. "I am lost. Belle destroyed my last hope. But I do not blame her."

His daughter, engaged bathing his temples, said:

"Oh, Papa, do you wish to leave us?"

"No! but I cannot remain and face this disgrace. No! I must go, I must go unless, unless—" He hesitated.

"Unless what?" quickly interrupted Belle.

"Unless you save me by marrying Walter Mannis," he said.

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Belle, looking into his pale face and blood-shot eyes, fully realized his broken-down condition. Finding that there was but one hope of saving his life, a deep sigh escaped her, and she gasped:

"Well—I—I—I will sacrifice myself—I will—marry Mr. Mannis," and she fell fainting across the form of her father.

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CHAPTER XXXI.

A REVELATION.

The excitement over the "Three Boys" mine called many adventurers to the vicinity. Capitalists came in great numbers, and the three lucky owners were the lions of the hour. The fame of the new mine extending far away, the leading journals of the land were filled with graphic accounts of the bonanza. The owners described, men wondered who they really were, as no knowledge of whence they came could be obtained. They gave their names as George Howard, Ralph Waters, and Frank Bentley, and that was all the curious ones could learn about them.

Already, the partners had ordered improved machinery needed to work the mines. The wealth of the "Three Boys" was computed at several millions, and of course the owners were abundantly able to borrow all the funds necessary to assist them in developing their prize. Men came forward, offering to advance all the money required and take stock in the mine, but the shrewd

owners thought best to hold aloof from any connection with others. George Howard's thorough knowledge of banking was valuable in assisting them to obtain money from banks, so they were independent of any aid others could afford, and all the pressure of outsiders to be allowed an interest was unavailing.

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George Howard, under his assumed name, was the same methodical and honorable man as when in the bank at Cleverdale. He was the head of the firm in all financial matters; his advice always resulted in the concern's advantage. His embrowned and healthy face covered with a handsome beard, and his eyes sparkling with all the vivacity of yore, the impression that his frank, straightforward manner made upon all with whom he associated was always favorable. He was thoroughly relied upon by his companions, and when indulging in moments of despondency they labored earnestly to restore him to good nature. A perfect gentleman, a refined and cultivated spirit, and, withal, one versed so well in business matters, they wondered why he had become an adventurer in the wilds of Colorado. Many times the two conversed together concerning their partner, yet no suspicion of wrong on his part ever entered their mind. It was decided between them that a love affair and blasted affections had sent George Howard out into the world to seek his fortune and open a new book of life. They were satisfied to accept this explanation, and their companion rose in their respect as they did so.

One day a stranger appeared at the new mine, and asked many questions. He claimed to represent a wealthy banking-house in Chicago, and it was not long before George Howard was perfectly satisfied that the gentleman was all he represented himself to be. After forming the acquaintance of the three partners, the stranger unfolded the object of his visit, which was nothing less than to purchase the claim or induce the owners to open negotiations with a view to forming a stock company. Painting a glowing picture of the advantage to be gained by the latter plan, he assured the firm they could realize a fortune at once.

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George Howard, not in favor of the latter plan, was not averse to selling the mine, providing the purchasers would pay enough. Although not a jockey at a trade, he was shrewd enough to know the firm owned wealth such as he had never dreamed of possessing. While assuring Mr. James of the firm's disinclination to enter into a speculation, he would confer with his companions with a view to selling their claim. And the result of the consultation was the decision to sell the mine.

Mr. James requesting time to consult by mail with his partners, a week afterward a letter from the bankers asked an interview with the owners of the mine at Chicago, and three days later the four men were on their way. For two days after their arrival the banking-house labored to induce the miners to form a stock company, but, after exhausting their powers of persuasion without avail, the firm finally offered three million dollars for the mine. The offer was accepted, the sale soon effected, and the young men, with a million dollars each, were happy.

George Alden, *alias* Howard, sat alone in his room at a hotel, and said to himself:

"What a change since my first visit here, one year and a half ago! Then I was broken down in health and full of sorrow. Time has wrought many changes in me, for to-day I am strong in both body and mind, and possess a fortune of a million dollars. But with this money I cannot obtain the happiness I desire. My wife's cruel letter, that nearly killed me, recurs to my mind many times a day. What shall I do? I am a millionaire, but cannot return to Cleverdale to be spurned by her as if I were a thief! No, I will go and see the good Mrs. Nash, tell her the story of my life, and then seek a foreign clime, and in travel try to drive the one great sorrow from my heart. Oh, Belle, my darling wife, how happy we might be! Your proud father would not scorn me now on account of financial standing. I will go this day to see Mrs. Nash, remain with the good woman a short time, and see that her future is made more comfortable."

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Two hours later the three partners separated, Waters and Bentley taking trains for their destination, while George Howard went directly to the residence of Mrs. Nash. The good woman at first did not recognize him, as he stood before her in the little parlor of her home, but after closely scanning his face her delight was unbounded. She had heard of his prosperity, but when informed of his selling his interest in the mine for one million dollars, she could scarcely realize the truth of the assertion.

"One million dollars!" she exclaimed. "The day of miracles has returned to us."

That day Alden told the motherly woman his story. He told her of his childhood; his struggle to obtain an education; his career as salesman in a store; and his appointment as teller in the bank. He told of the happy weeks at Lake George, where he met the love of his heart, and then related the opposition of her father. As he proceeded, Mrs. Nash became much interested. He spoke of his adventure in the burning factory, describing his injuries and sufferings. He told of his long illness, and the secret marriage, and when he described the happy days following, he could scarcely control his emotion. He told of the parting between his wife and himself; the false accusations against his honor, his weak condition causing him to flee from home and friends, and then he related the particulars of his flight and the cruel letter. Suddenly Mrs. Nash arose excitedly, and asked:

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"What is your rightful name?"

"Alden—George Alden."

"George Alden? And was Cleverdale the place you fled from?"

"Yes; but you are agitated; what—what is it?"

"There has been a great mistake somewhere. You are mourned as dead."

"My God! Mrs. Nash, what do you mean?" exclaimed George. "I mourned as dead?"

"Yes, wait here a moment. I have a paper containing full particulars. Your poor wife could never have written that letter. But I will get the paper."

A moment later she returned. Greatly excited, Alden seized the newspaper, which bore date of a year and a half previous. His eyes fell upon a marked article, which read as follows:

"A SAD TRAGEDY.

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[From the Cleverdale, N. Y., *Investigator*.]

"We are called upon to chronicle one of the saddest tragedies that ever occurred in this locality. The facts of the case are as follows: Last fall the Cleverdale Woollen Mill was destroyed by fire, and one of the bravest and noblest acts of the age was performed by George Alden, cashier of the Cleverdale National Bank. The immense factory employed seven hundred men, women, and children, and, as the flames burst forth, one hundred and fifty persons on the third floor were cut off from escape, except by the way of two doors only reached by running a gauntlet of fire. Poor Alden succeeded in relieving the captives, but his bravery nearly cost him his life; for several months he languished on a bed of suffering, and approached the door of eternity. Kind attention and skilful treatment brought him up, but the sad catastrophe left him weak in mind and body. His lifeless form was found on Friday last, in Reynolds Grove, a bullet-hole in the brain and a pistol lying at the side of the unfortunate man telling too plainly of his death by suicide."

George Alden paused a moment to calm his agitation, and then proceeded:

"The body was horribly decomposed, the face being unrecognizable, the clothing alone proving the identity of the poor fellow.

"It was a sad ending of a noble life, and never did a community mourn for one of its citizens as the people of Cleverdale mourn for poor George Alden. Two women in this affliction are entitled to our deepest sympathy. His sister has lost the companion of her life, while the beautiful daughter of Senator Hamblin is utterly prostrated by the sad event. George Alden was an estimable young man, and the love and respect of the whole community was shown when all business was suspended to allow a public demonstration of sorrow at the grave of Cleverdale's hero."

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Alden dropped the paper and exclaimed, "Oh, my poor wife! how I have wronged you! But who are the villains who have done this? I have been the victim of a wicked conspiracy. To-night I will leave for Cleverdale. I must go at once, for I have deeply wronged my wife. But perhaps she is dead! Oh no, she *must* be alive, and her father will not turn me off now."

Making immediate preparations to leave Chicago, he presented his kind friend with a generous sum of money, promising to write her on his arrival at Cleverdale. That night he was on a train bound for the East. He remembered how full of sorrow he was when he arrived in the city, eighteen months previous. Now he was returning to his home and kindred, unconscious of the events going forward at Cleverdale to rob him of his wife.

His first thought was to telegraph his friends, informing them of his coming, but he finally concluded to hasten on and verify his existence in the flesh by his own person and with his own lips.

CHAPTER XXXII.

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THE WANDERER'S RETURN.

The day after his attempted suicide, Senator Hamblin, holding an interview with his daughter, again deceived her, saying that Mannis, fully cognizant of his financial embarrassment, offered to assist him when she became his wife. Belle exacted a promise from her father that he would inform Mannis of her marriage with George Alden, and that her heart could never be another's. If Mannis wished her to become his wife after knowing all, she would be ready to make the sacrifice to save her father.

For several days after this conversation, Belle, almost frantic with grief, remained in her own private apartment. Consenting to wed a man whom she believed indirectly responsible for her unhappiness, her condition became pitiable, and she moaned and sobbed continually.

"If I could only die and be laid beside my husband in yonder cemetery!" she said. "I fear I shall lose my reason, for this awful sacrifice I am about to make will break my heart. I cannot love another, much less this man who drove my poor sick husband into his grave. Is there no other way to avert the calamity awaiting Papa?"

"No, my child," replied her mother. "I fear not. You have promised to sacrifice yourself upon the altar of duty, to save your father. You have always been a brave girl, and you must rouse yourself from this despondency. You must be calm, or your health—yes, perhaps your life will pay the penalty."

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"Oh, why did Papa allow himself to be led into this difficulty? God pity us all!"

Her mother was with her day and night, while Fannie Alden came often, and to her Belle related all her trials. She did not withhold the fact of her father's financial troubles from her sister-in-law; she even told of the attempted suicide, which greatly shocked Fannie, for the affair had been kept from the knowledge of the public. In words accompanied by sobs, Belle related her promise to wed Walter Mannis in order to save her father from ruin, and then she gave way to an outburst of tears. Fannie mingled her tears with those of the distracted girl, but said:

"Belle, my dear sister, your duty is plain. Poor George cannot return. You are young, and time may temper the roughness of that which now seems so hard and cruel. Oh, it is hard that fate decrees this sacrifice, but the ways of Providence are mysterious and past comprehension. You will, at least, occupy a position of honor, for Mr. Mannis is a rising man in the world, and many will envy you."

"Envy me! It seems criminal to wed such a man! He was the evil genius that followed my dear husband; indirectly, he sent George into eternity."

Thus she reasoned, and instead of becoming reconciled to her fate, grieved day and night.

Senator Hamblin at first felt a return of happiness. After recovering from the shock of his attempted suicide he seemed much changed, and began to look upon life as possessing more attractions. He desired to live, and tried to believe the marriage of his daughter would prolong her days; but when he saw her rapidly sink under her load of grief his gloominess returned. He thought the calamity of failure indefinitely postponed, but when he beheld the cost he reproached himself. He had deceived his child, for he was well aware her sense of honor would not permit her to marry Mannis and be a party to deceit. This thought troubled him so greatly, his former distraction of mind returned.

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"Could I restore George Alden," he said, "I would face the disgrace of financial ruin instead of continuing this deception. Her affections are buried in the grave on yonder hillside, and I am afraid she will hardly live to become the wife of Mannis."

He visited her daily, and once sitting at her bedside, where she almost constantly remained, he said:

"Belle, my daughter, would that I could extricate myself from this dilemma at a less cost than the sacrifice of your health."

"Papa, I am a poor weak girl, and Mr. Mannis must take my hand without my heart. It is all I can give. But as he understands it, I am ready for the sacrifice; and if it will be the means of saving you from disgrace I shall be repaid."

Senator Hamblin felt guilty at his deception in not informing Mannis, as he had promised; for, writing of his daughter's consent, he simply referred to the girl's low spirits and failing health. Mannis was prepared for this information, and in his reply pretended to be affected by her suffering, and expressed much sympathy for her. He closed by informing his expectant father-in-law of his intention to visit Cleverdale the following week, when all preliminaries could be arranged for the consummation of his long-deferred wish.

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One week later Mannis arrived. Senator Hamblin took him directly to his home, when an interview between Belle and himself was arranged. As the poor girl's affianced husband met her he took her cold hand in his, raised it to his lips, and said:

"It is long since we met, but you have ever been present in my mind."

With great coldness and formality she replied:

"I have seen much trouble since then."

"I know it, and my heartfelt sympathy has ever been yours. Your decision to become my wife has brought unspeakable joy to my heart. Ah! Miss Belle, when you are mine we will seek other scenes, and drive away the dark clouds of gloom surrounding you. Your pale cheeks shall bloom again, believe me."

The interview was of short duration, Belle acting mechanically in all her movements. She was like one in a trance, and Mannis noticed a great change in her since the day he was her father's guest at Lake George, nearly three years previous. He had seen her only twice since the sad event of little Willie's death.

As he expressed his desire for an early marriage, the day was appointed for a month later.

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Mannis remained, dining with Senator Hamblin. But Belle, overcome by the interview, retired to her room, and neither mother nor daughter appeared at the table.

The engagement of Hon. Walter Mannis and Miss Belle Hamblin was soon the theme of general conversation. "Society papers" recorded it, and long, glowing descriptions of the contracting parties were printed. Mannis was spoken of as one of the leading men in the State, while the beauty of Miss Hamblin was extolled in rapturous terms of praise.

While the public congratulated the honorable gentleman and his beautiful *fiancée* on their engagement, there was one sad-hearted maiden who secretly mourned the inconstancy of man. Poor Mary Harris received the announcement as if it were a poisoned arrow. She had trusted him with all the simplicity of innocence, and she was unable to cast him out of her heart, even after being assured of his treachery.

In solitude she shed many tears, but never did she impart the secret of her trouble to any one. A motherless girl, her father's eyes had not been as watchful of her as of his farm duties. He knew

Mannis was a visitor at the farm-house, but never imagined that the attentions paid his daughter were more than that of any other neighbor. The poor girl, knowing well her father's disposition, withheld her secret, lest Mannis should be called upon to pay the debt with his life. So she had suffered and borne her load in silence, fondly hoping the man she loved would eventually keep his promise, and save her from disgrace.

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Preparations for the marriage commencing, dressmakers came, and Belle submitted herself to their manipulations. As she was unable to shed tears, the anxiety of her mother was greatly increased. Belle had met Mannis several times, but the interviews were never of long duration, the expectant bride acting like the bride of death. Mannis tried to rouse her, but she remained cold, listless, and resigned, like a lamb being prepared for slaughter. Her beautiful eyes occasionally sparkled, but all the old intelligence had been succeeded by a languid and almost meaningless look. This state of affairs could not be kept from the outside world. The dressmakers saw her condition, and of course they talked—dressmakers always do. Then Dame Rumor said the girl was slowly dying. Some attributed her decline to the death of George Alden, even accusing Belle of treating the cashier in such a manner as to make him take his own life and cause her to suffer the pangs of remorse. Another class made her the victim of a father's determination that his daughter should marry against her will; while others mercifully believed she was merely dying of quick consumption.

The wedding ceremony was to be very private, the bride's health not admitting of excitement. Mannis, somewhat disappointed, as he desired a brilliant wedding, yielded to the wishes of his betrothed. The evening before the wedding he called at the Hamblin mansion, and held an interview with Belle, remaining for an hour. When leaving he took Belle's hand in his own, and before she was aware of his intention he drew her toward him, and imprinted his first kiss upon her brow. Belle gave a spasmodic scream, placed both hands over her heart, and drew back suddenly as if bitten by a serpent.

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"What is the matter, Belle?" inquired Mannis, greatly alarmed.

"My heart is bursting! Oh, leave me, please, for the present. It is only a momentary pain. Tomorrow I will be well and cheerful. Yes, I will overflow with joy. Go—go, now!"

Noting the singular appearance of her face, Mannis was startled, for he saw that Belle appeared as if unconscious of her actions. Hastily leaving the room and going directly to the apartment of Mrs. Hamblin, he said:

"Belle is not well. Please go to her."

Mrs. Hamblin was quickly with her daughter, whom she found lying upon the sofa, shedding the first tears that had passed her eyelids for many days.

"Oh, mother!" she sobbed, "his lips touched my forehead, and I the wife of George Alden."

An hour later she was sleeping. As she roamed about dreamland, she passed through many familiar scenes. She paused at a little cottage, where she remained, enjoying many happy hours with her husband. As she took her departure, Walter Mannis suddenly appeared before her, and with one sweep of his hand dashed the little cottage and its beloved occupant to pieces. She shrieked and started to run, when, stretching forth his hand, he caught her by the waist, and as he placed his lips against her forehead sharp needles entered her quivering heart, causing her to cry with pain. The fright awakened her, and she could sleep no more for a long time.

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The day appointed for the wedding was a gloomy one. The sky was hidden by dark clouds; rain fell during the whole day, the weather being a reflex of the hearts of all within the Hamblin mansion. Even little Geordie felt the gloom in his young heart, and wondered why a wedding-day was so sad.

The ceremony was to be witnessed only by relatives of the contracting parties. Belle's face was placid, but sad resignation to her fate beaming peacefully from her beautiful eyes, she was more like an angel than a bride.

While being dressed in travelling costume for the ceremony she was passive as a doll in the hands of her mother and maid, seeming to have lost all interest in everything about her, except her kind mother, to whom she spoke often of the future, and of saving her father from disgrace.

As the hour approached when she was to be made the wife of Walter Mannis, many tokens of affection were received from friends in the way of bridal presents.

"Take them away," she said. "They are but wreaths for a tomb."

At seven o'clock, Mrs. Hamblin entered the room, informing her daughter the bridegroom awaited her. Tears sprang to Belle's eyes as she pressed her lips warmly against a photograph of George Alden.

A moment later she stood in the parlor beside Walter Mannis. The officiating clergyman had just finished a prayer, and commenced the ceremony by taking the icy hand of the bride and placing it in that of Mannis, and was about to pronounce the words making the twain one, when the door was hastily thrown open, and a handsome, black-bearded man stood in the presence of the bridal party.

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"I forbid this marriage!" he exclaimed. "The woman has a living husband."

There was astonishment on the faces of all present. Belle was the first to recognize the intruder. Throwing up her arms, she wildly cried:

"George—my husband! Thank—" and fell fainting in the arms of George Alden.

Senator Hamblin stared at the man before him as if transfixed. Mrs. Hamblin, Fannie Alden, the clergyman and all others present were like statues, still and immovable. But Mannis, having looked once at the stranger, fled hastily from the house.

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CHAPTER XXXIII.

RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE.

Mannis, reaching the street, was wild with excitement. "Curse the luck! Why didn't the fellow keep away from Cleverdale? I am lost!"

Overcome by his feelings, he entered the Cleverdale Hotel, and ordering a team was soon on his homeward way, while thoughts of inevitable failure and exposure coursed through his mind. The fugitive's return and the revelation made greatly astonished him, yet he had no doubt but that Alden and Belle were really man and wife.

Reaching the old Manor at ten o'clock, he was soon in his room, where he gave way to his feelings.

"I am a doomed man; my race is about run. What a fool I have been! To-morrow the world will learn of this beautiful little tableau at Hamblin's, and I shall be the butt of all jokes. But, pshaw! what do I care for that? Other things will make the neighborhood too warm for me. I must leave here, and at once."

Walking the room, gloom gathered upon his brow as he realized the desperate game he had been playing. Suddenly his gaze fell upon a letter lying upon his writing-table, the superscription being in the delicate handwriting of Mary Harris. With trembling hands he tore off the envelope, and read as follows:

"DEAR WALTER: When you read this, my body will be lying in the pond, back of your house, and my soul before its Maker."

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"Great God!" he exclaimed, "I have killed her! Poor girl! poor girl!"

After partially calming himself, he continued reading the letter.

"When the hour of your wedding arrives, death will be my bridegroom. I have loved you with all the affection of my heart, and I forgive the wrong you have done me. God spare your life. Tears fall so fast I can scarcely see the paper before me or even hold my pen. Think occasionally of poor Mary. I cannot live and face the disgrace that will be mine. God bless and forgive you.

"MARY HARRIS."

Dropping the letter, he staggered and fell upon the sofa, utterly overcome. For a few moments he moaned in anguish, but soon rousing himself he arose and said:

"I must overcome this nervousness, and drown these thoughts with brandy—not with water, as poor Mary did hers."

He hastily quaffed a glass of liquor, and the color returned to his face. Then he spoke rapidly to himself.

"I must go! The suicide of Mary Harris being discovered, her father will seek my life. Alden has returned. Now I must be the fugitive."

During the night he wrote several letters, rising at intervals and pacing the room in great agitation. Occasionally lying down, he tried to drive distracting thoughts from his mind, but sleep refused to respond to his summons. Toward morning he packed a trunk and valise, intending to take them with him.

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Daylight arriving and the household astir, Mrs. Culver was amazed at hearing him moving about in his room. Going to his door she rapped, and being admitted expressed much surprise at his presence in the house. He only said the wedding had been postponed, but as the good woman observed the ghastly expression upon the face of her master, she knew something had occurred which he did not wish to divulge.

Mannis partook of a light breakfast, and at nine o'clock, his trunk and valise having been placed in the carriage, he bade Mrs. Culver good-by, and said:

"I may be absent a fortnight."

As he stepped into the carriage, farmer Harris, bareheaded, with his face full of rage, suddenly appeared before him, and, pulling a pistol from his pocket, said:

"You miserable wretch, prepare to die! My poor daughter's body lies in yonder house, and you are her murderer. May the devil take your soul!"

There was a flash, followed by a sharp report, and the "Honorable" Walter Mannis fell back in his carriage. Mary Harris was avenged, as far as the death of a deliberate villain can avenge the destruction of a pure woman's life.

THE CLEVERDALE MYSTERY.

After Mannis fled so precipitately from the parlor of the Hamblin mansion, George Alden was the first to break the silence.

"Friends!" he exclaimed, "I am George Alden, whom you have supposed dead. A great wrong or mistake has made me its victim, and the body lying in yonder cemetery is that of a stranger." Then, covering the face of his wife with kisses, he moved forward, and deposited the insensible form of Belle on the sofa, when Fannie Alden sprang quickly toward him, and hysterically embraced him, exclaiming:

"Yes, it is indeed my brother! Oh, what happiness!"

The fright occasioned by the sudden appearance of the supposed dead man having been dispelled by Alden's words, all except members of the family withdrew. In a few moments the efforts at restoration were successful; Belle opened her eyes, and said:

"Was it a dream?"

Beholding the form kneeling beside her, feeling the warm breath on her face, and seeing the loving eyes looking into her own, she cried:

"No—no—it is true. Oh, George, my husband, is it indeed you?"

"Yes, Belle, and I have returned never to leave you again."

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Her joy was accompanied by hysterics, and she sobbed and laughed alternately, her arms encircling the neck of her husband.

"You must not leave me—oh, it still seems like a dream—but where is he? Had I married him? Oh, it is horrible!" and she closed her eyes, as if to hide the memory of the scene.

"But yourself, George?" she continued; "tell us where you have been all these long, long, weary months."

"Calm yourself, Belle. Be satisfied that we are reunited. My story is a long one, and after you recover from this excitement you shall know all."

Senator Hamblin, although greatly bewildered, was thoroughly convinced that George Alden really stood before him. When the apparition burst so suddenly upon him, he reeled, and for a time nearly lost his senses, but when he saw his daughter clasped in the arms of the intruder, and heard the words that fell from her lips, fright was superseded by surprise. His heart was filled with both fear and joy; the former overwhelming him as he thought of his responsibility for all the trouble of the past two years; yet joy taking possession of him when he beheld alive the man of whose death he had believed himself the immediate cause. When he had fully regained his composure, he grasped George Alden's hand, and said:

"Forgive me; I have deeply wronged you!" He stooped as if about to fall upon his knees, but Alden said:

"No, no—not that, sir! Say nothing about those matters at present. Surely this joy should wipe out all scores between you and me."

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News of the return of George Alden, who had been mourned as dead, quickly spread through the community, and Cleverdale could scarcely credit the news. The hotels, stores, and street corners were scenes of excitement; men of all classes discussed the event, and the return of George Alden caused even greater wonder than his disappearance. When the news reached Sargent, he exclaimed, "Alden returned? Thunder and Mars! I must skip out of this at once. Wonder what has become of Mannis? Well, it is every one for himself in this deal. Good-by, old Cleverdale! good-by! Perhaps I'll see you later." An hour afterward, Sargent was on a western-bound train, and the community was rid of its worst villain.

The following morning all arose early at the Hamblin mansion; Belle would not allow her husband to leave her side even for an instant, and for the first time in many months joy and happiness were visible in her eyes. Fannie Alden had remained at the mansion, and, all anxious to hear the wanderer's story, an hour later the family assembled in the parlor to listen to the remarkable revelation.

"Before George commences his story," said Senator Hamblin, "I must remove a crushing load from my own heart."

He then related every detail of the part he had acted in the conspiracy, taking upon himself all the odium belonging to him. He gave such a pitiful description of his terrible sufferings of mind and remorse of conscience, that all present were deeply affected. The proud man was truly humbled; his penitence, for once, was not assumed. Fully exonerating his son-in-law from the charge against his integrity, he took from his pocket two envelopes, and placed the intercepted letters in the hand of George Alden.

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"I am a guilty wretch," he said, "and deserve all the execration you can heap upon my head. To save myself, I even urged my daughter to marry Walter Mannis, after all the suffering I had caused her. I have been an unnatural father. Despise me—all of you—for I deserve it."

He was utterly prostrated, and Belle, leaving the side of her husband, threw her arms about his neck, and said:

"Papa, it is all over now; let us bury the past. Cheer up; George has returned, and will forgive and assist you."

"I agree with Belle," said George. "You have had your share of suffering; let us try to forget the past, and keep our secret from the outside world. Your financial matters need not distress you further, for my fortune is ample to help us all. But the body in yonder cemetery—what can you tell us about that?"

"Nothing, for I was the victim of that deception. Ah, there has been a deeper game played than I expected."

Senator Hamblin's revelation surprised all present, but no more so than a telegram that was suddenly brought in.

It read as follows:

"HAVELOCK, ——"

"SENATOR HAMBLIN: Benjamin Harris shot and killed Walter Mannis this morning. The body of Harris's daughter was found in the mill-pond, and a letter left by the unfortunate girl charged Mannis with being her betrayer."

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"What a narrow escape was mine!" exclaimed Belle. The Senator's eyes sought the floor; Alden's arm encircled Belle. Then the young husband related his story, beginning at the time of the terrible accusation and telling every occurrence up to the time of his departure from Chicago for Cleverdale.

"Never did a train move so slowly as the one that bore me on my homeward journey," said he. "I dared not send a telegram—being ignorant of matters here; but as the cars neared Cleverdale two men, seating themselves directly behind me, began to talk, and from their conversation I learned a wedding was to take place that evening. When the names of the contracting parties were mentioned, my brain whirled, and for a moment reason seemed about to leave me. Then, as they spoke of the mystery and sadness enveloping the whole affair, and the deep sorrow occasioned by my supposed death, I learned of the suffering that my precious wife had experienced. In a few moments, the train stopping at Cleverdale, I alighted, and looking at my watch saw that the hour appointed for the ceremony was only five minutes later. Jumping into a carriage, I gave the driver a gold piece to drive his best. The rest you know."

"How you have suffered!" said Belle.

"Yes, we have all suffered. But now let the curtain drop upon the past. Whatever the outside world may think, the secrets of this drama must remain locked in the hearts of those present."

The narrations concluded, Senator Hamblin was apprised of Sargent's flight, but the information did not disturb him; he merely said:

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"Another character gone whose presence here is not desired."

George Alden was warmly greeted by his old friends, his first appearance at the bank being the occasion for a spontaneous levée. Many crowded in and warmly grasped his hand; for it is not every day that one can shake hands with a man who is hero, dead-alive, and millionaire all in one.

The mystery surrounding the whole affair gave Cleverdale abundant opportunity for gossip. The secret marriage; the flight of George Alden; the mysterious body found in Reynolds Grove; the contemplated marriage of Belle with Walter Mannis; the prostration of the expectant bride; the wedding-party; the abrupt return of the supposed dead, and the good fortune of the latter; the sudden disappearance of Sargent, and the withdrawal of Senator Hamblin from politics, were events that stirred the gossiping clubs of Cleverdale as they never had been before. The body which had played a leading part in this story was disinterred and buried in another place.

After recovering from the excitement, George Alden held an interview with his father-in-law, and arranged to pay all his indebtedness. Senator Hamblin was to withdraw permanently from politics and retain his position as president of the bank. The astonishment of the ex-Senator was great when the financial affairs of the late Hon. Walter Mannis were shown up and that individual proved a bankrupt. The forged names of several well-known men were found on notes which Mannis had used in city banks, and among this forged paper the name of Senator Hamblin was discovered.

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Belle's health being already much improved, it was thought a journey would be beneficial; and as she was desirous of seeing Mrs. Nash, a visit to Chicago was arranged, where the young couple spent several happy days. While guests of the kind woman, the wayward son returned, and there was gladness in the mother's heart when she learned that her boy had become a better man.

Belle's health returned; the roses again bloomed on her cheeks, and her eyes flashed with their old-time brilliancy. Then an invitation brought George Alden's late partners to Cleverdale, and a happy reunion took place between the "Three Boys," as they were called in Colorado.

Plans were at once made for a residence on the grounds adjoining the Hamblin homestead, and a few months later a substantial and commodious residence was occupied by Mr. and Mrs. George Alden; a suite of rooms being prepared expressly for Fannie Alden.

Mrs. Hamblin saw with gladness the happiness of her children, and reoccupying the old place in her husband's affection, her joy was complete.

Later on, George Alden entered into a copartnership with others, the Cleverdale Woollen Mill

was rebuilt, and the old company's great manufactory again rattled and clattered through the busy days, to the substantial delight of many who owed their lives, in a double sense, to Alden's manliness.

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Time passed on, and excitement over the events of this story gradually subsided, but to this day many conjectures are indulged in, for the gossips never got at the heart of the story, and no one has yet been able to solve THE CLEVERDALE MYSTERY.

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CHAPTER XXXV.

EPILOGUE—THE MACHINE AND ITS WHEELS.

The political incidents of this story, taken from actual life, reflect the evils of our national system. The great political machine has many cranks, and the scheming of office-seekers, the manipulations of the caucus and convention, and the tactics resorted to on election day by wire-pullers and leaders are not exaggerations.

Every public man will recognize Senator Hamblin, Ex-Assemblyman Daley, Hon. Walter Mannis, Cyrus Hart Miller, Paddy Sullivan, Editor Rawlings, and "honest" farmer Johnson, as wheels belonging to the great machine.

Senator Hamblin, ambitious, rich, bold, possessing natural gifts of oratory, is a wheel with almost absolute power. The rising generation, looking upon such men with admiration, strive to emulate their example.

Cyrus Hart Miller, bold, unscrupulous, and aggressive, is another wheel—one that moves "the boys" at caucus and on election day.

Paddy Sullivan presides over the "gin palace," and men gathering at the bar worship spirits in decanter and keg, while imbibing political opinions.

In American politics the power of such wheels is very great, and no machine is complete without them.

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While it requires many wheels to work the machine, some are large, some small, but all are dangerous. Men becoming infatuated with politics, the desire to hold office leads them from paths of rectitude. They lose their hold on legitimate business, and grasping for the bubble fame, go headlong to destruction. One man may succeed in reaching the summit of his ambition, but it is by climbing over the ruins of the nine hundred and ninety-nine fallen on the highway.

The fight for spoils develops bad passions, creates schisms in parties. Faction fights in both political organizations are so full of bitterness and so empty of principle that they disgust the honest voters; yet the latter with their preponderant majority seem to be powerless to overthrow the politicians. One large wheel seems to have power to turn scores of little wheels in the great machine.

The dangers of the system have lately been exemplified in a tragedy that plunged the nation into sorrow; but while we mourn the death of a chief magistrate the politicians still continue to propel the machine. It is not to be supposed that all men engaged in political work or inspired by political ambition are bad men. On the contrary, there are thousands who are honest and honorable; politics is not only the privilege but the duty of every American citizen, and every inducement should be held out to the youth of the generations of to-day to go into politics with all the strength of their manhood. But the difficulty—as every intelligent man knows—is that caucuses and conventions and election work are left almost entirely to those who seek not patriotism but pelf; and the aim of this story is to show the natural tendency and actual results of the system as it exists to-day—to try and make it so plain that men may realize its vileness, and so to add another ounce to the weight of infamy that "the Machine" has to carry, hoping that the accumulation may at last beat it down. No partisan end is in view; it will puzzle the most expert politician to say which of the two great political parties in our land is aimed at—or rather, which is *not* aimed at. We all live in glass houses and cannot afford to throw stones at each other. On the other hand—to change the figure—it is sometimes wholesome to "see ourselves as others see us"—or would see us if they could get a fair inside view. It's not a pretty picture; more's the pity. Let us try to better the original.

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While the author has endeavored to briefly sketch the workings of the system, he leaves to others the task of correcting the evils resulting from "*The Machine and its Wheels*."

Transcriber's Note: Although most printer's errors have been retained, some have been silently corrected. Spelling and punctuation, capitalization, accents hyphens and formatting markup have been normalized and include the following:

Page 165: wassilent is now was silent
Page 184: dress-makers is now dressmakers
Page 253: "Were I to [inserted missing]"
Page 262: your rightful name?" [changed ' to "]

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