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Author: George Barr McCutcheon

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GREEN FANCY

By George Barr Mccutcheon

1917

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CHAPTER I — THE FIRST WAYFARER AND THE SECOND WAYFARER MEET AND PART ON THE HIGHWAY

A solitary figure trudged along the narrow road that wound its serpentinous way through the dismal, forbidding depths of the forest: a man who, though weary and footsore, lagged not in his swift, resolute advance. Night was coming on, and with it the no uncertain prospects of storm. Through the foliage that overhung the wretched road, his ever-lifting and apprehensive eye caught sight of the thunder-black, low-lying clouds that swept over the mountain and bore down upon the green, whistling tops of the trees. At a cross-road below he had encountered a small girl driving homeward the cows. She was afraid of the big, strange man with the bundle on his back and the stout walking stick in his hand: to her a remarkable creature who wore "knee pants" and stockings like a boy on Sunday, and hob-nail shoes, and a funny coat with "pleats" and a belt, and a green hat with a feather sticking up from the band. His agreeable voice and his amiable smile had no charm for her. He merely wanted to know how far it was to the nearest village, but she stared in alarm and edged away as if preparing to break into mad flight the instant she was safely past him with a clear way ahead.

"Don't be afraid," he said gently. "And here! Catch it if you can." He tossed a coin across the road. It struck at her feet and rolled into the high grass. She did not divert her gaze for the fraction of a second. "I'm a stranger up here and I want to find some place to sleep for the night. Surely you have a tongue, haven't you?" By dint of persuasive smiles and smirks that would have sickened him at any other time he finally induced her to say that if he kept right on until he came to the turnpike he would find a sign-post telling him where to get gasolene.

"But I don't want gasolene. I want bread and butter," he said.

"Well, you can git bread an' butter there too," she said. "Food fer man an' beast, it says."

"A hotel?"

"Whut?"

"A boarding-house?" he substituted.

"It's a shindy," she said, painfully. "Men get drunk there. Pap calls it a tavern, but Ma says it's a shindy."

"A road-house, eh?" She was puzzled—and silent. "Thank you. You'll find the quarter in the grass. Good-bye."

He lifted his queer green hat and strode away, too much of a gentleman to embarrass her by looking back. If he had done so he would have seen her grubbing stealthily in the grass, not with her brown little hands, but with the wriggling toes of a bare foot on which the mud, perhaps of yesterday, had caked. She was too proud to stoop.

At last he came to the "pike" and there, sure enough, was the sign-post. A huge, crudely painted hand pointed to the left, and on what was intended to be the sleeve of a very stiff and unflinching arm these words were printed in scaly white: "Hart's Tavern. Food for Man and Beast. Also Gasolene. Established 1798. 1 mile." "Also Gasolene" was freshly painted and crowded its elders in a most disrespectful manner.

The chill spring wind of the gale was sweeping in the direction indicated by the giant forefinger. There was little consolation in the thought that a mile lay between him and shelter, but it was a relief to know that he

would have the wind at his back. Darkness was settling over the land. The lofty hills seemed to be closing in as if to smother the breath out of this insolent adventurer who walked alone among them. He was an outsider. He did not belong there. He came from the lowlands and he was an object of scorn.

On the opposite side of the "pike," in the angle formed by a junction with the narrow mountain road, stood a humbler sign-post, lettered so indistinctly that it deserved the compassion of all observers because of its humility. Swerving in his hurried passage, the tall stranger drew near this shrinking friend to the uncertain traveller, and was suddenly aware of another presence in the roadway.

A woman appeared, as if from nowhere, almost at his side. He drew back to let her pass. She stopped before the little sign-post, and together they made out the faint directions.

To the right and up the mountain road Frogg's Corner lay four miles and a half away; Pitcairn was six miles back over the road which the man had travelled. Two miles and a half down the turnpike was Spanish Falls, a railway station, and four miles above the cross-roads where the man and woman stood peering through the darkness at the laconic sign-post reposed the village of Saint Elizabeth. Hart's Tavern was on the road to Saint Elizabeth, and the man, with barely a glance at his fellow-traveller, started briskly off in that direction.

Lightning was flashing fitfully beyond the barrier heights and faraway thunder came to his ears. He knew that these wild mountain storms moved swiftly; his chance of reaching the tavern ahead of the deluge was exceedingly slim. His long, powerful legs had carried him twenty or thirty paces before he came to a sudden halt.

What of this lone woman who traversed the highway? Obviously she too was a stranger on the road, and a glance over his shoulder supported a first impression: she was carrying a stout travelling bag. His first glimpse of her had been extremely casual,—indeed he had paid no attention to her at all, so eager was he to read the directions and be on his way.

She was standing quite still in front of the sign-post, peering up the road toward Frogg's Corner,—confronted by a steep climb that led into black and sinister timberlands above the narrow strip of pasture bordering the pike.

The fierce wind pinned her skirts to her slender body as she leaned against the gale, gripping her hat tightly with one hand and straining under the weight of the bag in the other. The ends of a veil whipped furiously about her head, and, even in the gathering darkness, he could see a strand or two of hair keeping them company.

He hesitated. Evidently her way was up the steep, winding road and into the dark forest, a far from appealing prospect. Not a sign of habitation was visible along the black ridge of the wood; no lighted window peeped down from the shadows, no smoke curled up from unseen kitchen stoves. Gallantry ordered him to proffer his aid or, at the least, advice to the woman, be she young or old, native or stranger.

Retracing his steps, he called out to her above the gale:

"Can I be of any assistance to you?"

She turned quickly. He saw that the veil was drawn tightly over her face.

"No, thank you," she replied. Her voice, despite a certain nervous note, was soft and clear and gentle,—the voice and speech of a well-bred person who was young and resolute.

"Pardon me, but have you much farther to go? The storm will soon be upon us, and—surely you will not consider me presumptuous—I don't like the idea of your being caught out in—"

"What is to be done about it?" she inquired, resignedly. "I must go on. I can't wait here, you know, to be washed back to the place I started from."

He smiled. She had wit as well as determination. There was the suggestion of mirth in her voice—and certainly it was a most pleasing, agreeable voice.

"If I can be of the least assistance to you, pray don't hesitate to command me. I am a sort of tramp, you might say, and I travel as well by night as I do by day,—so don't feel that you are putting me to any inconvenience. Are you by any chance bound for Hart's Tavern? If so, I will be glad to lag behind and carry your bag."

"You are very good, but I am not bound for Hart's Tavern, wherever that may be. Thank you, just the same. You appear to be an uncommonly genteel tramp, and it isn't because I am afraid you might make off with my belongings." She added the last by way of apology.

He smiled—and then frowned as he cast an uneasy look at the black clouds now rolling ominously up over the mountain ridge.

"By Jove, we're going to catch it good and hard," he exclaimed. "Better take my advice. These storms are terrible. I know, for I've encountered half a dozen of them in the past week. They fairly tear one to pieces."

"Are you trying to frighten me?"

"Yes," he confessed. "Better to frighten you in advance than to let it come later on when you haven't any one to turn to in your terror. You are a stranger in these parts?"

"Yes. The railway station is a few miles below here. I have walked all the way. There was no one to meet me. You are a stranger also, so it is useless to inquire if you know whether this road leads to Green Fancy."

"Green Fancy? Sounds attractive. I'm sorry I can't enlighten you." He drew a small electric torch from his pocket and directed its slender ray upon the sign-post. So fierce was the gale by this time that he was compelled to brace his strong body against the wind.

"It is on the road to Frogg's Corner," she explained nervously. "A mile and a half, so I am told. It isn't on the sign-post. It is a house, not a village. Thank you for your kindness. And I am not at all frightened," she added, raising her voice slightly.

"But you ARE" he cried. "You're scared half out of your wits. You can't fool me. I'd be scared myself at the thought of venturing into those woods up yonder."

"Well, then, I AM frightened," she confessed plaintively. "Almost out of my boots."

"That settles it," he said flatly. "You shall not undertake it."

"Oh, but I must. I am expected. It is import—"

"If you are expected, why didn't some one meet you at the station? Seems to me—"

"Hark! Do you hear—doesn't that sound like an automobile—Ah!" The hoarse honk of an automobile horn rose above the howling wind, and an instant later two faint lights came rushing toward them around a bend in the mountain road. "Better late than never," she cried, her voice vibrant once more.

He grasped her arm and jerked her out of the path of the on-coming machine, whose driver was sending it along at a mad rate, regardless of ruts and stones and curves. The car careened as it swung into the pike, skidded alarmingly, and then the brakes were jammed down. Attended by a vast grinding of gears and wheels, the rattling old car came to a stop fifty feet or more beyond them.

"I'd sooner walk than take my chances in an antediluvian rattle-trap like that," said the tall wayfarer, bending quite close to her ear. "It will fall to pieces before you—"

But she was running down the road towards the car, calling out sharply to the driver. He stooped over and took up the travelling bag she had dropped in her haste and excitement. It was heavy, amazingly heavy.

"I shouldn't like to carry that a mile and a half," he said to himself.

The voice of the belated driver came to his ears on the swift wind. It was high pitched and unmistakably apologetic. He could not hear what she was saying to him, but there wasn't much doubt as to the nature of her remarks. She was roundly upbraiding him.

Urged to action by thoughts of his own plight, he hurried to her side and said:

"Excuse me, please. You dropped something. Shall I put it up in front or in the tonneau?"

The whimsical note in his voice brought a quick, responsive laugh from her lips.

"Thank you so much. I am frightfully careless with my valuables. Would you mind putting it in behind? Thanks!" Her tone altered completely as she ordered the man to turn the car around—"And be quick about it," she added.

The first drops of rain pelted down from the now thoroughly black dome above them, striking in the road with the sharpness of pebbles.

"Lucky it's a limousine," said the tall traveller. "Better hop in. We'll be getting it hard in a second or two."

"I can't very well hop in while he's backing and twisting like that, can I?" she laughed. He was acutely aware of a strained, nervous note in her voice, as of one who is confronted by an undertaking calling for considerable fortitude.

"Are you quite sure of this man?" he asked.

"Absolutely," she replied, after a pause.

"You know him, eh?"

"By reputation," she said briefly, and without a trace of laughter.

"Well, that comforts me to some extent," he said, but dubiously.

She was silent for a moment and then turned to him impulsively.

"You must let me take you on to the Tavern in the car," she said. "Turn about is fair play. I cannot allow you to—"

"Never mind about me," he broke in cheerily. He had been wondering if she would make the offer, and he felt better now that she had done so. "I'm accustomed to roughing it. I don't mind a soaking. I've had hundreds of 'em."

"Just the same, you shall not have one to-night," she announced firmly. The car stopped beside them. "Get in behind. I shall sit with the driver."

If any one had told him that this rattling, dilapidated automobile,—ten years old, at the very least, he would have sworn,—was capable of covering the mile in less than two minutes, he would have laughed in his face. Almost before he realised that they were on the way up the straight, dark road, the lights in the windows of Hart's Tavern came into view. Once more the bounding, swaying car came to a stop under brakes, and he was

relaxing after the strain of the most hair-raising ride he had ever experienced.

Not a word had been spoken during the trip. The front windows were lowered. The driver,—an old, hatchet-faced man,—had uttered a single word just before throwing in the clutch at the cross-roads in response to the young woman's crisp command to drive to Hart's Tavern. That word was uttered under his breath and it is not necessary to repeat it here.

He lost no time in climbing out of the car. As he leaped to the ground and raised his green hat, he took a second look at the automobile,—a look of mingled wonder and respect. It was an old-fashioned, high-powered Panhard, capable, despite its antiquity, of astonishing speed in any sort of going.

"For heaven's sake," he began, shouting to her above the roar of the wind and rain, "don't let him drive like that over those—"

"You're getting wet," she cried out, a thrill in her voice. "Good night,—and thank you!"

"Look out!" rasped the unpleasant driver, and in went the clutch. The man in the road jumped hastily to one side as the car shot backward with a jerk, curved sharply, stopped for the fraction of a second, and then bounded forward again, headed for the cross-roads.

"Thanks!" shouted the late passenger after the receding tail light, and dashed up the steps to the porch that ran the full length of Hart's Tavern. In the shelter of its low-lying roof, he stopped short and once more peered down the dark, rain-swept road. A flash of lightning revealed the flying automobile. He waited for a second flash. It came an instant later, but the car was no longer visible. He shook his head. "I hope the blamed old fool knows what he's doing, hitting it up like that over a wet road. There'll be a double funeral in this neck of the woods if anything goes wrong," he reflected. Still shaking his head, he faced the closed door of the Tavern.

A huge, old-fashioned lantern hung above the portal, creaking and straining in the wind, dragging at its stout supports and threatening every instant to break loose and go frolicking away with the storm.

The sound of the rain on the clap-board roof was deafening. At the lower end of the porch the water swished in with all the velocity of a gigantic wave breaking over a ship at sea. The wind howled, the thunder roared and almost like cannon-fire were the successive crashes of lightning among the trees out there in the path of fury.

There were lights in several of the windows opening upon the porch; the wooden shutters not only were ajar but were banging savagely against the walls. Even in the dim, grim light shed by the lantern he could see that the building was of an age far beyond the ken of any living man. He recalled the words of the informing sign-post: "Established in 1798." One hundred and eighteen years old, and still baffling the assaults of all the elements in a region where they were never timid!

It may, in all truth, be a "shindy," thought he, but it had led a gallant life.

The broad, thick weather-boarding, overlapping in layers, was brown with age and smooth with the polishing of time and the backs, no doubt, of countless loiterers who had come and gone in the making of the narrative that Hart's Tavern could relate. The porch itself, while old, was comparatively modern; it did not belong to the century in which the inn itself was built, for in those far-off days men did not waste time, timber or thought on the unnecessary. While the planks in the floor were worn and the uprights battered and whittled out of their pristine shapeliness, they were but grandchildren to the parent building to which they clung. Stout and, beyond question, venerable benches stood close to the wall on both sides of the entrance. Directly over the broad, low door with its big wooden latch and bar, was the word "Welcome," rudely carved in the oak beam. It required no cultured eye to see that the letters had been cut, deep and strong, into the timber, not with the tool of the skilled wood carver but with the hunting knife of an ambitious pioneer.

A shocking incongruity marred the whole effect. Suspended at the side of this hundred-year-old doorway was a black and gold, shield-shaped ornament of no inconsiderable dimensions informing the observer that a certain brand of lager beer was to be had inside.

He lifted the latch and, being a tall man, involuntarily stooped as he passed through the door, a needless precaution, for gaunt, gigantic mountaineers had entered there before him and without bending their arrogant heads.

CHAPTER II — THE FIRST WAYFARER LAYS HIS PACK ASIDE AND FALLS IN WITH FRIENDS

The little hall in which he found himself was the "office" through which all men must pass who come as guests to Hart's Tavern. A steep, angular staircase took up one end of the room. Set in beneath its upper turn was the counter over which the business of the house was transacted, and behind this a man was engaged in

the peaceful occupation of smoking a corn-cob pipe. He removed the pipe, brushed his long moustache with the back of a bony hand, and bowed slowly and with grave ceremony to the arrival.

An open door to the right of the stairway gave entrance to a room from which came the sound of a deep, sonorous voice, employed in what turned out to be a conversational solo. To the left another door led to what was evidently the dining-room. The glance that the stranger sent in that direction revealed two or three tables, covered with white cloths.

"Can you put me up for the night?" he inquired, advancing to the counter.

"You look like a feller who'd want a room with bath," drawled the man behind the counter, surveying the applicant from head to foot. "Which we ain't got," he added.

"I'll be satisfied to have a room with a bed," said the other.

"Sign here," was the laconic response. He went to the trouble of actually putting his finger on the line where the guest was expected to write his name.

"Can I have supper?"

"Food for man and beast," said the other patiently. He slapped his palm upon a cracked call-bell, and then looked at the fresh name on the page. "Thomas K. Barnes, New York," he read aloud. He eyed the newcomer once more. "And automobile?"

"No. I'm walking."

"Didn't I hear you just come up in a car?"

"A fellow gave me a lift from the cross-roads."

"I see. My name is Jones, Putnam Jones. I run this place. My father an' grandfather run it before me. Glad to meet you, Mr. Barnes. We used to have a hostler here named Barnes. What's your idea fer footin' it this time o' the year?"

"I do something like this every spring. A month or six weeks of it puts me in fine shape for a vacation later on," supplied Mr. Barnes whimsically.

Mr. Jones allowed a grin to steal over his seamed face. He re-inserted the corn-cob pipe and took a couple of pulls at it.

"I never been to New York, but it must be a heavenly place for a vacation, if a feller c'n judge by what some of my present boarders have to say about it. It's a sort of play-actor's paradise, ain't it?"

"It is paradise to every actor who happens to be on the road, Mr. Jones," said Barnes, slipping his big pack from his shoulders and letting it slide to the floor.

"Hear that feller in the tap-room talkin'? Well, he is one of the leading actors in New York,—in the world, for that matter. He's been talkin' about Broadway for nearly a week now, steady."

"May I enquire what he is doing up here in the wilds?"

"At present he ain't doing anything except talk. Last week he was treadin' the boards, as he puts it himself. Busted. Up the flue. Showed last Saturday night in Hornville, eighteen mile north of here, and immediately after the performance him and his whole troupe started to walk back to New York, a good four hunderd mile. They started out the back way of the opery house and nobody missed 'em till next mornin' except the sheriff, and he didn't miss 'em till they'd got over the county line into our bailiwick. Four of 'em are still stoppin' here just because I ain't got the heart to turn 'em out ner the spare money to buy 'em tickets to New York. Here comes one of 'em now. Mr. Dillingford, will you show this gentleman to room eleven, and carry his baggage up fer him? And maybe he'll want a pitcher of warm water to wash and shave in." He turned to the new guest and smiled apologetically.

"We're a little short o' help just now, Mr. Barnes, and Mr. Dillingford has kindly consented to—"

"My God!" gasped Mr. Dillingford, staring at the register. "Some one from little old New York? My word, sir, you—Won't you have a—er—little something to drink with me before you—"

"He wants something to eat," interrupted Mr. Jones sharply. "Tell Mr. Bacon to step up to his room and take the order."

"All right, old chap,—nothing easier," said Mr. Dillingford genially. "Just climb up the elevator, Mr. Barnes. We do this to get up an appetite. When did you leave New York?"

Taking up a lighted kerosene lamp and the heavy pack, Mr. Clarence Dillingford led the way up the stairs. He was a chubby individual of indefinite age. At a glance you would have said he was under twenty-one; a second look would have convinced you that he was nearer forty-one. He was quite shabby, but chin and cheek were as clean as that of a freshly scrubbed boy. He may not have changed his collar for days but he lived up to the traditions of his profession by shaving twice every twenty-four hours.

Depositing Barnes' pack on a chair in the little bedroom at the end of the hall upstairs, he favoured the guest with a perfectly unabashed grin.

"I'm not doing this to oblige old man Jones, you know. I won't attempt to deceive you. I'm working out a daily bread-bill. Chuck three times a day and a bed to sleep in, that's what I'm doing it for, so don't get it into your head that I applied for the job. Let me take a look at you. I want to get a good square peep at a man who

has the means to go somewhere else and yet is boob enough to come to this gosh-awful place of his own free will and accord. Darn it, you LOOK intelligent. I don't get you at all. What's the matter? Are you a fugitive from justice?"

Barnes laughed aloud. There was no withstanding the fellow's sprightly impudence.

"I happen to enjoy walking," said he.

"If I enjoyed it as much as you do, I'd be limping into Harlem by this time," said Mr. Dillingford sadly. "But, you see, I'm an actor. I'm too proud to walk."

"Up against poor business, I presume?"

"Up against no business at all," said Mr. Dillingford. "We couldn't even get 'em to come in on passes. Last Saturday night we had out enough paper to fill the house and, by gosh, only eleven people showed up. You can't beat that, can you? Three of 'em paid to get in. That made a dollar and a half, box office. We nearly had to give it back."

"Bad weather?" suggested Barnes feelingly. He had removed his wet coat, and stood waiting.

"Nope. Moving pictures. They'd sooner pay ten cents to see a movie than to come in and see us free. The old man was so desperate he tried to kill himself the morning we arrived at this joint."

"You mean the star? Poison, rope or pistol?"

"Whiskey. He tried to drink himself to death. Before old Jones got onto him he had put down seven dollars' worth of booze, and now we've got to help wipe out the account. But why complain? It's all in a day's—"

The cracked bell on the office desk interrupted him, somewhat peremptorially. Mr. Dillingford's face assumed an expression of profound dignity. He lowered his voice as he gave vent to the following:

"That man Jones is the meanest human being God ever let—Yes, sir, coming, sir!" He started for the open door with surprising alacrity.

"Never mind the hot water," said Barnes, sorry for the little man.

"No use," said Mr. Dillingford dejectedly. "He charges ten cents for hot water. You've got to have it whether you want it or not. Remember that you are in the very last stages of New England. The worst affliction known to the human race. So long. I'll be back in two shakes of a lamb's—" The remainder of his promise was lost in the rush of exit.

Barnes surveyed the little bed-chamber. It was just what he had expected it would be. The walls were covered with a garish paper selected by one who had an eye but not a taste for colour: bright pink flowers that looked more or less like chunks of a shattered water melon spilt promiscuously over a background of pearl grey. There was every indication that it had been hung recently. Indeed there was a distinct aroma of fresh flour paste. The bedstead, bureau and washstand were likewise offensively modern. Everything was as clean as a pin, however, and the bed looked comfortable. He stepped to the small, many-paned window and looked out into the night. The storm was at its height. In all his life he never had heard such a clatter of rain, nor a wind that shrieked so appallingly.

His thoughts went quite naturally to the woman who was out there in the thick of it. He wondered how she was faring, and lamented that she was not in his place now and he in hers. A smile lighted his eyes. She had such a nice voice and such a quaint way of putting things into words. What was she doing up in this God-forsaken country? And how could she be so certain of that grumpy old man whom she had never laid eyes on before? What was the name of the place she was bound for? Green Fancy! What an odd name for a house! And what sort of house—

His reflections were interrupted by the return of Mr. Dillingford, who carried a huge pewter pitcher from which steam arose in volume. At his heels strode a tall, cadaverous person in a checked suit.

Never had Barnes seen anything quite so overpowering in the way of a suit. Joseph's coat of many colours was no longer a vision of childhood. It was a reality. The checks were an inch square, and each cube had a narrow border of azure blue. The general tone was a dirty grey, due no doubt to age and a constitution that would not allow it to outlive its usefulness.

"Meet Mr. Bacon, Mr. Barnes," introduced Mr. Dillingford, going to the needless exertion of indicating Mr. Bacon with a generous sweep of his free hand. "Our heavy leads. Mr. Montague Bacon, also of New York."

"Ham and eggs, pork tenderloin, country sausage, rump steak and spring chicken," said Mr. Bacon, in a cavernous voice, getting it over with while the list was fresh in his memory. "Fried and boiled potatoes, beans, succotash, onions, stewed tomatoes and—er—just a moment, please. Fried and boiled potatoes, beans —"

"Learn your lines, Ague," said Mr. Dillingford, from the washstand. "We call him Ague for short, Mr. Barnes, because he's always shaky with his lines."

"Ham and eggs, potatoes and a cup or two of coffee," said Barnes, suppressing a desire to laugh.

"And apple pie," concluded the waiter, triumphantly. "I knew I'd get it if you gave me time. As you may have observed, my dear sir, I am not what you would call an experienced waiter. As a matter of fact, I—"

"I told him you were an actor," interrupted his friend. "Run along now and give the order to Mother Jones. Mr. Barnes is hungry."

"I am delighted to meet you, Mr. Barnes," said Mr. Bacon, extending his hand. As he did so, his coat sleeve receded half way to the elbow, revealing the full expanse of a frayed cuff. "So delighted, in fact, that it gives me great pleasure to inform you that you have at last encountered a waiter who does not expect a tip. God forbid that I should ever sink so low as that. I have been a villain of the deepest dye in a score or more of productions—many of them depending to a large extent upon the character of the work I did in—"

"Actor stuff," inserted Mr. Dillingford, unfeelingly.

"—And I have been hissed a thousand times by gallery gods and kitchen angels from one end of this broad land to the other, but never, sir, never in all my career have I been obliged to play such a diabolical part as I am playing here, and, dammit, sir, I am denied even the tribute of a healthy hiss. This is—"

The bell downstairs rang violently. Mr. Bacon departed in great haste.

While the traveller performed his ablutions, Mr. Dillingford, for the moment disengaged, sat upon the edge of the bed and enjoyed himself. He talked.

"We were nine at the start," said he, pensively. "Gradually we were reduced to seven, not including the manager. I doubled and so did Miss Hughes,—a very charming actress, by the way, who will soon be heard of on Broadway unless I miss my guess. The last week I was playing Dick Cranford, light juvenile, and General Parsons, comedy old man. In the second act Dick has to meet the general face to face and ask him for his daughter's hand. Miss Hughes was Amy Parsons, and, as I say, doubled along toward the end. She played her own mother. The best you could say for the arrangement was that the family resemblance was remarkable. I never saw a mother and daughter look so much alike. You see, she didn't have time to change her make-up or costume, so all she could do was to put on a long shawl and a grey wig, and that made a mother of her. Well, we had a terrible time getting around that scene between Dick and the general. Amy and her mother were in on it too, and Mrs. Parsons was supposed to faint. It looked absolutely impossible for Miss Hughes. But we got around it, all right."

"How, may I ask?" enquired Barnes, over the edge of a towel.

"Just as I was about to enter to tackle the old man, who was seated in his library with Mrs. Parsons, the lights went out. I jumped up and addressed the audience, telling 'em (almost in a confidential whisper, there were so darned few of 'em) that there was nothing to be alarmed about and the act would go right on. Then Amy and Dick came on in total darkness, and the audience never got wise to the game. When the lights went up, there was Amy and Dick embracing each other in plain view, the old folks nowhere in sight. General Parsons had dragged the old lady into the next room. We made our changes right there on the stage, speaking all four parts at the same time."

"Pretty clever," said Barnes.

"My idea," announced Mr. Dillingford calmly.

"What has become of the rest of the company?"

"Well, as I said before, two of 'em escaped before the smash. The low comedian and character old woman. Joe Beckley and his wife. That left the old man,—I mean Mr. Rushcroft, the star—Lyndon Rushcroft, you know,—myself and Bacon, Tommy Gray, Miss Rushcroft, Miss Hughes and a woman named Bradley, seven of us. Miss Hughes happened to know a chap who was travelling around the country for his health, always meeting up with us,—accidentally, of course,—and he staked her to a ticket to New York. The woman named Bradley said her mother was dying in Buffalo, so the rest of us scraped together all the money we had,—nine dollars and sixty cents,—and did the right thing by her. Actors are always doing darn-fool things like that, Mr. Barnes. And what do you suppose she did? She took that money and bought two tickets to Albany, one for herself and another for the manager of the company,—the lowest, meanest, orneriest white man that ever,—But I am crabbing the old man's part. You ought to hear what HE has to say about Mr. Manager. He can use words I never even heard of before. So, that leaves just the four of us here, working off the two days' board bill of Bradley and the manager, Rushcroft's ungodly spree, and at the same time keeping our own slate clean. Miss Thackeray will no doubt make up your bed in the morning. She is temporarily a chambermaid. Cracking fine girl, too, if I do say—"

"Miss Thackeray? I don't recall your mentioning—"

"Mercedes Thackeray on the programme, but in real life, as they say, Emma Smith. She is Rushcroft's daughter."

"Somewhat involved, isn't it?"

"Not in the least. Rushcroft's real name is Otterbein Smith. Horrible, isn't it? He sprung from some place in Indiana, where the authors come from. Miss Thackeray was our ingenue. A trifle large for that sort of thing, perhaps, but—very sprightly, just the same. She's had her full growth upwards, but not outwards. Tommy Gray, the other member of the company, is driving a taxi in Hornville. He used to own his own car in Springfield, Mass., by the way. Comes of a very good family. At least, so he says. Are you all ready? I'll lead you to the dining-room. Or would you prefer a little appetiser beforehand? The tap-room is right on the way. You mustn't call it the bar. Everybody in that little graveyard down the road would turn over completely if you did. Hallowed tradition, you know."

"I don't mind having a cocktail. Will you join me?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm expected to," confessed Mr. Dillingford. "We've been drawing quite a bit of custom to the tap-room. The rubes like to sit around and listen to conversation about Broadway and Bunker Hill and Old Point Comfort and other places, and then go home and tell the neighbours that they know quite a number

of stage people. Human nature, I guess. I used to think that if I could ever meet an actress I'd be the happiest thing in the world. Well, I've met a lot of 'em, and God knows I'm not as happy as I was when I was WISHING I could meet one of them. Listen! Hear that? Rushcroft is reciting Gunga Din. You can't hear the thunder for the noise he's making."

They descended the stairs and entered the tap-room, where a dozen men were seated around the tables, all of them with pewter mugs in front of them. Standing at the top table,—that is to say, the one farthest removed from the door and commanding the attention of every creature in the room—was the imposing figure of Lyndon Rushcroft. He was reciting, in a sonorous voice and with tremendous fervour, the famous Kipling poem. Barnes had heard it given a score of times at The Players in New York, and knew it by heart. He was therefore able to catch Mr. Rushcroft in the very reprehensible act of taking liberties with the designs of the author. The "star," after a sharp and rather startled look at the newcomer, deliberately "cut" four stanzas and rushed somewhat hastily through the concluding verse, marring a tremendous climax.

A genial smile wiped the tragic expression from his face. He advanced upon Barnes and the beaming Mr. Dillingford, his hand extended.

"My dear fellow," he exclaimed resoundingly, "how are you?" Cordiality boomed in his voice. "I heard you had arrived. Welcome,—thricefold welcome!" He neglected to say that Mr. Montague Bacon, in passing a few minutes before, had leaned over and whispered behind his hand:

"Fellow upstairs from New York, Mr. Rushcroft,—fellow named Barnes. Quite a swell, believe me."

It was a well-placed tip, for Mr. Rushcroft had been telling the natives for days that he knew everybody worth knowing in New York.

Barnes was momentarily taken aback. Then he rose to the spirit of the occasion.

"Hello, Rushcroft," he greeted, as if meeting an old time and greatly beloved friend. "This IS good. 'Pon my soul, you are like a thriving date palm in the middle of an endless desert. How are you?"

They shook hands warmly. Mr. Dillingford slapped the newcomer on the shoulder, affectionately, familiarly, and shouted:

"Who would have dreamed we'd run across good old Barnesy up here? By Jove, it's marvellous!"

"Friends, countrymen," boomed Mr. Rushcroft, "this is Mr. Barnes of New York. Not the man the book was written about, but one of the best fellows God ever put into this little world of ours. I do not recall your names, gentlemen, or I would introduce each of you separately and divisibly. And when did you leave New York, my dear fellow?"

"A fortnight ago," replied Barnes. "I have been walking for the past two weeks."

Mr. Rushcroft's expression changed. His face fell.

"Walking?" he repeated, a trifle stiffly. Was the fellow a tramp? Was he in no better condition of life than himself and his stranded companions, against whom the mockery of the assemblage was slyly but indubitably directed? If so, what was to be gained by claiming friendship with him? It behooved him to go slow. He drew himself up to his full height. "Well, well! Really?" he said.

The others looked on with interest. The majority were farmers, hardy, rawboned men with misty eyes. Two of them looked like mechanics,—blacksmiths, was Barnes' swift estimate,—and as there was an odor of gasolene in the low, heavy-timbered room, others were no doubt connected with the tavern garage. For that matter, there was also an atmosphere of the stables.

Lyndon Rushcroft was a tall, saggy man of fifty. Despite his determined erectness, he was inclined to sag from the shoulders down. His head, huge and grey, appeared to be much too ponderous for his yielding body, and yet he carried it manfully, even theatrically. The lines in his dark, seasoned face were like furrows; his nose was large and somewhat bulbous, his mouth wide and grim. Thick, black eyebrows shaded a pair of eyes in which white was no longer apparent; it had given way to a permanent red. A two days' stubble covered his chin and cheeks. Altogether he was a singular exemplification of one's idea of the old-time actor. He was far better dressed than the two male members of his company who had come under Barnes' observation. A fashionably made cutaway coat of black, a fancy waistcoat, and trousers with a delicate stripe (sadly in need of creasing) gave him an air of distinction totally missing in his subordinates. (Afterwards Barnes was to learn that he was making daily use of his last act drawing-room costume, which included a silk hat and a pair of pearl grey gloves.) Evidently he had possessed the foresight to "skip out" in the best that the wardrobe afforded, leaving his ordinary garments for the sheriff to lay hands upon.

"A customary adventure with me," said Barnes. "I take a month's walking tour every spring, usually timing my pilgrimage so as to miss the hoi-polloi that blunders into the choice spots of the world later on and spoils them completely for me. This is my first jaunt into this part of New England. Most attractive walking, my dear fellow. Wonderful scenery, splendid air—" "Deliver me from the hoi-polloi," said Mr. Rushcroft, at his ease once more. "I may also add, deliver me from walking. I'm damned if I can see anything in it. What will you have to drink, old chap?"

He turned toward the broad aperture which served as a passageway in the wall for drinks leaving the hands of a fat bartender beyond to fall into the clutches of thirsty customers in the tap-room. There was no outstanding bar. A time-polished shelf, as old as the house itself, provided the afore-said bartender with a place on which to spread his elbows while not actively engaged in advancing mugs and bottles from more remote resting-places at his back.

"Everything comes through 'the hole in the wall,'" explained Rushcroft, wrinkling his face into a smile.

He unceremoniously turned his back on the audience of a moment before, and pounded smartly on the shelf, notwithstanding the fact that the bartender was less than a yard away and facing him expectantly. "What ho! Give ear, professor. Ye gods, what a night! Devil-brewed pandemonium—I beg pardon?"

"I was just about to ask what you will have," said Barnes, lining up beside him with Mr. Dillingford.

Mr. Rushcroft drew himself up once more. "My dear fellow, I asked you to have a—"

"But I had already invited Dillingford. You must allow me to extend the invitation—"

"Say no more, sir. I understand perfectly. A flagon of ale, Bob, for me." He leaned closer to Barnes and said, in what was supposed to be a confidential aside: "Don't tackle the whiskey. It would kill a rattlesnake."

A few minutes later he laid one hand fondly upon Barnes' shoulder and, with a graceful sweep of the other in the direction of the hall, addressed himself to Dillingford.

"Lead the way to the banquet-hall, good fellow. We follow." To the patrons he was abandoning:

"We return anon." Passing through the office, his arm linked in one of Barnes', Mr. Rushcroft hesitated long enough to impress upon Landlord Jones the importance of providing his "distinguished friend, Robert W. Barnes," with the very best that the establishment afforded. Putnam Jones blinked slightly and his eyes sought the register as if to accuse or justify his memory. Then he spat copiously into the corner, a necessary preliminary to a grin. He hadn't much use for the great Lyndon Rushcroft. His grin was sardonic. Something told him that Mr. Rushcroft was about to be liberally fed.

CHAPTER III — MR. RUSHCROFT DISSOLVES, MR. JONES INTERVENES, AND TWO MEN RIDE AWAY

Mr. Rushcroft explained that he had had his supper. In fact, he went on to confess, he had been compelled, like the dog, to "speak" for it. What could be more disgusting, more degrading, he mourned, than the spectacle of a man who had appeared in all of the principal theatres of the land as star and leading support to stars, settling for his supper by telling stories and reciting poetry in the tap-room of a tavern?

"Still," he consented, when Barnes insisted that it would be a kindness to him, "since you put it that way, I dare say I could do with a little snack, as you so aptly put it. Just a bite or two. Like you, my dear fellow, I loathe and detest eating alone. I covet companionship, convivial com—what have you ready, Miss Tilly?"

Miss Tilly was a buxom female of forty or thereabouts, with spectacles. She was one of a pair of sedentary waitresses who had been so long in the employ of Mr. Jones that he hated the sight of them. Close proximity to a real star affected her intensely. In fact, she was dazzled. For something like twenty years she had nursed an ambition that wavered between the desire to become an actress or an authoress. At present she despised literature. More than once she had confessed to Mr. Rushcroft that she hated like poison to write out the bill-o'-fare, a duty devolving solely upon her, it appears, because of a local tradition that she possessed literary talent. Every one said that she wrote the best hand in the county.

Mr. Rushcroft's conception of a bite or two may have staggered Barnes but it did not bewilder Miss Tilly. He had four eggs with his ham, and other things in proportion. He talked a great deal, proving in that way that it was a supper well worth speaking for. Among other things, he dilated at great length upon his reasons for not being a member of The Players or The Lambs in New York City. It seems that he had promised his dear, devoted wife that he would never join a club of any description. Dear old girl, he would as soon have cut off his right hand as to break any promise made to her. He brushed something away from his eyes, and his chin, contracting, trembled slightly.

"Quite right," said Barnes, sympathetically. "And how long has Mrs. Rushcroft been dead?"

A hurt, incredulous look came into Mr. Rushcroft's eyes. "Is it possible that you have forgotten the celebrated case of Rushcroft vs. Rushcroft, not more than six years back? Good Lord, man, it was one of the most sensational cases that ever—But I see that you do not recall it. You must have been abroad at the time. I don't believe I ever knew of a case being quite so admirably handled by the press as that one was. She got it after a bitter and protracted fight. Infidelity. Nothing so rotten as cruelty or desertion,—no sir!"

"Ahem!" coughed Miss Tilly.

"The dear old girl married again," sighed Mr. Rushcroft, helping himself to Barnes' butter. "Did very well, too. Man in the wine trade. He saves a great deal, you see, by getting it at cost, and I can assure you, on my word of honour, sir, that he'll find it quite an item. What is it, Mr. Bacon? Any word from New York?"

Mr. Bacon hovered near, perhaps hungrily.

"Our genial host has instructed me to say to his latest guest that the rates are two dollars a day, in advance, all dining-room checks payable on presentation," said Mr. Bacon, apologetically.

Rushcroft exploded. "A scurvy insult," he boomed. "Confound his—"

The new guest was amiable. He interrupted the outraged star. "Tell Mr. Jones that I shall settle promptly," he said, with a smile.

The "heavy leads" lowered his voice. "He told me that he had had a horrible thought."

"He never has anything else," said Mr. Rushcroft.

"It has just entered his bean that you may be an actor, Mr. Barnes," said Bacon.

Miss Tilly, overhearing, drew a step or two nearer. A sudden interest in Mr. Barnes developed. She had not noticed before that he was an uncommonly good-looking fellow. She always had said that she adored strong, "athletic" faces.

"Hence the insult," said Mr. Rushcroft bitterly. He raised both arms in a gesture of complete dejection. "My God!"

"Says it looks suspicious," went on Mr. Bacon, "flocking with us as you do. He mentioned something about birds of a feather."

Mr. Rushcroft arose majestically. "I shall see the man myself, Mr. Barnes. His infernal insolence—"

"Pray do not distress yourself, my dear Rushcroft," interrupted Barnes. "He is quite within his rights. I may be even worse than an actor. I may turn out to be an ordinary tramp." He took a wallet from his pocket, and smiled engagingly upon Miss Tilly. "The check, please."

"For both?" inquired she, blinking.

"Certainly. Mr. Rushcroft was my guest."

"Four twenty five," she announced, after computation on the back of the menu.

He selected a five dollar bill from the rather plethoric purse and handed it to her.

"Be so good as to keep the change," he said, and Miss Tilly went away in a daze from which she did not emerge for a long, long time.

Later on she felt inspired to jot down, for use no doubt in some future literary production, a concise, though general, description of the magnificent Mr. Barnes. She utilised the back of the bill-of-fare and she wrote with the feverish ardour of one who dreads the loss of a first impression. I herewith append her visual estimate of the hero of this story.

"He was a tall, shapely speciman of mankind," wrote Miss Tilly. "Broad-shouldered. Smooth shaved face. Penetrating grey eyes. Short curly hair about the colour of mine. Strong hands of good shape. Face tanned considerable. Heavy dark eyebrows. Good teeth, very white. Square chin. Lovely smile that seemed to light up the room for everybody within hearing. Nose ideal. Mouth same. Voice aristocratic and reverberating with education. Age about thirty or thirty one. Rich as Croesus. Costume resembling the picture in the English novel the woman forgot and left here last summer. Well turned legs. Would make a good nobleman."

All this would appear to be reasonably definite were it not for the note regarding the colour of his hair. It leaves to me the simple task of completing the very admirable description of Mr. Barnes by announcing that Miss Tilly's hair was an extremely dark brown.

Also it is advisable to append the following biographical information: Thomas Kingsbury Barnes, engineer, born in Montclair, New Jersey, Sept. 26, 1885. Cornell and Beaux Arts, Paris. Son of the late Stephen S. Barnes, engineer, and Edith (Valentine) Barnes. Office, Metropolitan Building, New York City. Residence, Amsterdam Mansions. Clubs: (Lack of space prevents listing them here). Recreations: golf, tennis, and horseback riding. Author of numerous articles resulting from expeditions and discoveries in Peru and Ecuador. Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society. Member of the Loyal Legion and the Sons of the American Revolution.

Added to this, the mere announcement that he was in a position to indulge a fancy for long and perhaps aimless walking tours through more or less out of the way sections of his own country, to say nothing of excursions in Europe.

Needless to say, he obtained a great deal of pleasure from these lonely jaunts, and at the same time laid up for future use an ample supply of mind's ease. His was undoubtedly a romantic nature. He loved the fancies that his susceptibilities garnered from the hills and dales and fields and forests. He never tired of the changing prospect; the simple meadow and the inspiring mountain peak were as one to his generous imagination. He found something worth while in every mile he traversed in these long and solitary tramps, and he covered no fewer than twenty of them between breakfast and dinner unless ordered by circumstance to loiter along the way.

Each succeeding spring he set out from his "diggings" in New York without having the remotest idea where his peregrinations would carry him. It was his habit to select a starting point in advance, approach that spot by train or ship or motor, and then divest himself of all purpose except to fare forward until he came upon some haven for the night. He went east or west, north or south, even as the winds of heaven blow; indeed, he not infrequently followed them.

For five or six weeks in the early spring it was his custom to forge his daily chain of miles and, when the end was reached, climb contentedly aboard a train and be transported, often by arduous means, to the city where millions of men walk with a definite aim in view. He liked the spring of the year. He liked the rains and the winds of early spring. They meant the beginning of things to him.

He was rich. Perhaps not as riches are measured in these Midas-like days, but rich beyond the demands of avarice. His legacy had been an ample one. The fact that he worked hard at his profession from one year's end to the other,—not excluding the six weeks devoted to these mentally productive jaunts,—is proof sufficient that he was not content to subsist on the fruits of another man's enterprise. He was a worker. He was a creator, a builder and a destroyer. It was part of his ambition to destroy in order that he might build the better.

The first fortnight of a proposed six weeks' jaunt through Upper New England terminated when he laid aside his heavy pack in the little bed-room at Hart's Tavern. Cock-crow would find him ready and eager to begin his third week. At least, so he thought. But, truth is, he had come to his journey's end; he was not to sling his pack for many a day to come.

After setting the mind of the landlord at rest, Barnes declined Mr. Rushcroft's invitation to "quaff" a cordial with him in the tap-room, explaining that he was exceedingly tired and intended to retire early (an announcement that caused unmistakable distress to the actor, who held forth for some time on the folly of "letting a thing like that go without taking it in time," although it was not made quite clear just what he meant by "thing"). Barnes was left to infer that he considered fatigue a malady that ought to be treated.

Instead of going up to his room immediately, however, he decided to have a look at the weather. He stepped out upon the wet porch and closed the door behind him. The wind was still high; the lantern creaked and the dingy sign that hung above the steps gave forth raucous, spasmodic wails as it swung back and forth in the stiff, raw wind. Far away to the north lightning flashed dimly; the roar of thunder had diminished to a low, half-hearted growl.

His uneasiness concerning the young woman of the cross-roads increased as he peered at the wall of blackness looming up beyond the circle of light. He could not see the towering hills, but memory pictured them as they were revealed to him in the gathering darkness before the storm. She was somewhere outside that sinister black wall and in the smothering grasp of those invisible hills, but was she living or dead? Had she reached her journey's end safely? He tried to extract comfort from the confidence she had expressed in the ability and integrity of the old man who drove with far greater recklessness than one would have looked for in a wild and irresponsible youngster.

He recalled, with a thrill, the imperious manner in which she gave directions to the man, and his surprising servility. It suddenly occurred to him that she was no ordinary person; he was rather amazed that he had not thought of it before.

She had confessed to total ignorance regarding the driver of that ramshackle conveyance; to being utterly at sea in the neighbourhood; to having walked like any country bumpkin from the railroad station, lugging an unconscionably heavy bag; and yet, despite all this, she seemed amazingly sure of herself. He recalled her frivolous remark about her jewels, and now wondered if there had not been more truth than jest in her words. Then there was the rather significant alteration in tone and manner when she spoke to the driver. The soft, somewhat deliberate drawl gave way to sharp, crisp sentences; the quaint good humour vanished and in its place he had no difficulty in remembering a very decided note of command.

Moreover, now that he thought of it, there was, even in the agreeable rejoinders she had made to his offerings, the faint suggestion of an accent that should have struck him at the time but did not for the obvious reason that he was then not at all interested in her. Her English was so perfect that he had failed to detect the almost imperceptible foreign flavour that now took definite form in his reflections. He tried to place this accent. Was it French, or Italian, or Spanish? Certainly it was not German. The lightness of the Latin was evident, he decided, but it was all so faint and remote that classification was impossible, notwithstanding his years of association with the peoples of many countries where English is spoken more perfectly by the upper classes, who have a language of their own, than it is in England itself.

He took a few turns up and down the long porch, stopping finally at the upper end. The clear, inspiring clang of a hammer on an anvil fell suddenly upon his ears. He looked at his watch. The hour was nine, certainly an unusual time for men to be at work in a forge. He remembered the two men in the tap-room who were bare-armed and wore the shapeless leather aprons of the smithy.

He had been standing there not more than half a minute peering in the direction from whence came the rhythmic bang of the anvil,—at no great distance, he was convinced,—when some one spoke suddenly at his elbow. He whirled and found himself facing the gaunt landlord.

"Good Lord! You startled me," he exclaimed. He had not heard the approach of the man, nor the opening and closing of the tavern door. His gaze travelled past the tall figure of Putnam Jones and rested on that of a second man, who leaned, with legs crossed and arms folded, against the porch post directly in front of the entrance to the house, his features almost wholly concealed by the broad-brimmed slouch hat that came far down over his eyes. He too, it seemed to Barnes, had sprung from nowhere.

"Fierce night," said Putnam Jones, removing the corn-cob pipe from his lips. Then, as an after thought: "Sorry I skeert you. I thought you heerd me."

"I was listening to the song of the anvil," said Barnes, as the landlord moved forward and took his place beside him. "It has always possessed a singular charm for me."

"Special hurry-up job," said Jones, and no more.

"Shoeing?"

"Yep. You'd think these hayseeds could git their horses in here durin' regular hours, wouldn't you?"

"I dare say they consider their own regular hours instead of yours, Mr. Jones."

"I didn't quite ketch that."

"I mean that they bring their horses in after their regular day's work is done."

"I see. Yes, I reckon that's the idee." After a few pulls at his pipe, the landlord inquired: "Where'd you walk from to-day?" "I slept in a farm-house last night, about fifteen miles south of this place I should say."

"That'd be a little ways out of East Cobb," speculated Mr. Jones.

"Five or six miles."

"Goin' over into Canada?"

"No. I shall turn west, I think, and strike for the Lake Champlain country."

"Canadian line is only a few miles from here," said Jones. "Last summer we had a couple of crooks from Boston here, makin' a dash for the border. Didn't know it till they'd been gone a day, however. The officers were just a day behind 'em. Likely lookin' fellers, too. Last men in the world you'd take for bank robbers."

"Bank robbers, as a rule, are very classy looking customers," said Barnes.

Mr. Jones grunted. After a short silence, he branched off on a new line. "What you think about the war? Think it'll be over soon?"

"It has been going on for nearly two years, and I can't see any signs of abatement. Looks to me like a draw. They're all tired of it."

"Think the Germans are going to win?"

"No. They can't win. On the other hand, I don't see how the Allies can win. I may be wrong, of course. The Allies are getting stronger every day and the Germans must surely be getting weaker. As a matter of fact, Mr. Jones, I've long since stopped speculating on the outcome of the war. It is too big for me. I am not one of your know-it-alls who figure the whole thing out from day to day, and then wonder why the fool generals didn't have sense enough to perform as expected."

"I wish them countries over there would let me fix 'em out with generals," drawled Mr. Jones. "I could pick out fifteen or twenty men right here in this district that could show 'em in ten minutes just how to win the war. You'd be surprised to know how many great generals we have running two by four farms and choppin' wood for a livin' up here. And there are fellers settin' right in there now that never saw a body of water bigger'n Plum Pond, an' every blamed one of 'em knows more'n the whole British navy about ketchin' submarines. The quickest way to end the war, says Jim Roudebush,—one of our leadin' ice-cutters,—is for the British navy to bombard Berlin from both sides, an' he don't see why in thunder they've never thought of it. I suppose you've travelled right smart in Europe?"

"Quite a bit, Mr. Jones."

"Any partic'lar part?"

"No," said Barnes, suddenly divining that he was being "pumped." "One end to the other, you might say."

"What about them countries down around Bulgaria and Roumania? I've been considerable interested in what's going to become of them if Germany gets licked. What do they get out of it, either way?"

Barnes spent the next ten minutes expatiating upon the future of the Balkan states. Jones had little to say. He was interested, and drank in all the information that Barnes had to impart. He puffed at his pipe, nodded his head from time to time, and occasionally put a leading question. And quite as abruptly as he introduced the topic he changed it.

"Not many automobiles up here at this time 'o the year," he said. "I was a little surprised when you said a feller had given you a lift. Where from?"

"The cross-roads, a mile down. He came from the direction of Frogg's Corner and was on his way to meet some one at Spanish Falls." Barnes shrewdly leaped to the conclusion that the landlord's interest in the European War was more or less assumed. The man's purpose was beginning to reveal itself. He was evidently curious, if not actually concerned, about his guest's arrival by motor.

"That's queer," he said, after a moment. "There's no train arrivin' at Spanish Falls as late as six o'clock. Gets in at four-ten, if she's on time. And she was reported on time to-day."

"It appears that there was a misunderstanding. The driver didn't meet the train, so the person he was going after walked all the way to the forks. We happened upon each other there, Mr. Jones, and we studied the sign-post together. She was bound for a place called Green Fancy."

"Did you say SHE?"

"Yes. I was proposing to help her out of her predicament when the belated motor came racing down the slope. As a matter of fact, I was wrong when I said that a man brought me here in an automobile. It was she who did it. She gave the order. He merely obeyed,—and not very willingly, I suspect."

"What for sort of looking lady was she?"

"She wore a veil," said Barnes, succinctly.

"Young?"

"I had that impression. By the way, Mr. Jones, what and where is Green Fancy?"

Jones looked over his shoulder, and his guest's glance followed. The man near the entrance had been joined by another.

"Well," began the landlord, lowering his voice, "it's about two mile and a half from here, up the mountain. It's a house and people live in it, same as any other house. That's about all there is to say about it."

"Why is it called Green Fancy?"

"Because it's a green house," replied Jones succinctly.

"You mean that it is painted green?"

"Exactly. Green as a gourd. A man named Curtis built it a couple o' year ago and he had a fool idee about paintin' it green. Might ha' been a little crazy, for all I know. Anyhow, after he got it finished he settled down to live in it, and from that day to this he's never been off'n the place. He didn't seem sick or anything, so we can't make out his object in shuttin' himself up in the house an' seldom ever stickin' his nose outside the door."

"Isn't it possible that he isn't there at all?"

"He's there all right. Every now an' then he has visitors,—just like this woman to-day,—and sometimes they come down here for supper. They don't hesitate to speak of him, so he must be there. Miss Tilly has got the idee that he is a reecluse, if you know what that is."

"It's all very interesting. I should say, judging by the visitor who came this evening, that he entertains extremely nice people."

"Well," said Jones drily, "they claim to be from New York. But," he added, "so do them cheapskate actors in there." Which was as much as to say that he had his doubts.

Further conversation was interrupted by the irregular clatter of horses' hoofs on the macadam. Off to the left a dull red glow of light spread across the roadway, and a man's voice called out: "Whoa, dang ye!"

The door of the smithy had been thrown open and some one was leading forth freshly shod horses.

A moment later the horses,—prancing, high-spirited animals,—their bridle-bits held by a strapping blacksmith, came into view. Barnes looked in the direction of the steps. The two men had disappeared. Instead of stopping directly in front of the steps, the smith led his charges quite a distance beyond and into the darkness.

Putnam Jones abruptly changed his position. He insinuated his long body between Barnes and the doorway, at the same time rather loudly proclaiming that the rain appeared to be over.

"Yes, sir," he repeated, "she seems to have let up altogether. Ought to have a nice day to-morrow, Mr. Barnes,—nice, cool day for walkin'."

Voices came up from the darkness. Jones had not been able to cover them with his own. Barnes caught two or three sharp commands, rising above the pawing of horses' hoofs, and then a great clatter as the mounted horsemen rode off in the direction of the cross-roads. The beat of the hoofs became rhythmical as the animals steadied into a swinging lope.

Barnes waited until they were muffled by distance, and then turned to Jones with the laconic remark:

"They seem to be foreigners, Mr. Jones." Jones's manner became natural once more. He leaned against one of the posts and, striking a match on his leg, relighted his pipe.

"Kind o' curious about 'em, eh?" he drawled.

"It never entered my mind until this instant to be curious," said Barnes.

"Well, it entered their minds about an hour ago to be curious about you," said the other.

CHAPTER IV — AN EXTRAORDINARY CHAMBERMAID, A MIDNIGHT TRAGEDY, AND A MAN WHO SAID "THANK YOU"

Miss Thackeray was "turning down" his bed when he entered his room after bidding his new actor friends good night. All three promised to be up bright and early in the morning to speed him on his way with good wishes. Mr. Rushcroft declared that he would break the habit of years and get up in time to partake of a seven o'clock breakfast with him. Mr. Dillingford and Mr. Bacon, though under sentence to eat at six with the rest of the "help," were quite sanguine that old man Jones wouldn't mind if they ate again at seven. So it was left that Barnes was to have company for breakfast.

He was staggered and somewhat abashed by the appearance of Miss Thackeray. She was by no means dressed as a chambermaid should be, nor was she as dumb. On the contrary, she confronted him in the choicest raiment that her wardrobe contained, and she was bright and cheery and exceedingly incompetent. It was her costume that shocked him. Not only was she attired in a low-necked, rose-coloured evening gown, liberally bespangled with tinsel, but she wore a vast top-heavy picture-hat whose crown of black was almost wholly obscured by a gorgeous white feather that once must have adorned the king of all ostriches. She was not at all his idea of a chambermaid. He started to back out of the door with an apology for having blundered into the wrong room by mistake.

"Come right in," she said cheerily. "I'll soon be through. I suppose I should have done all this an hour ago, but I just had to write a few letters." She went on with her clumsy operations. "I don't know who made up this bed but whoever did was determined that it should stay put. I never knew that bed clothes could be tucked in as far and as tight as these. Tight enough for old Mother Jones to have done it herself, and heaven knows she's a tight one. I am Miss Thackeray. This is Mr. Barnes, I believe."

He bowed, still quite overcome.

"You needn't be scared," she cried, observing his confusion. "This is my regular uniform. I'm starting a new style for chambermaids. Did it paralyse you to find me here?"

"I must confess to a moment of indecision," he said, smiling.

"Followed by a moment of uneasiness," she added, slapping the bolster. "You didn't know what to think, now did you?"

"I couldn't believe my eyes."

She abandoned her easy, careless manner. A look of mortification came into her eyes as she straightened up and faced him. Her voice was a trifle husky when she spoke again, after a moment's pause.

"You see, Mr. Barnes, these are the only duds I have with me. It wasn't necessary to put on this hat, of course, but I did it simply to make the character complete. I might just as well make beds and clean washstands in a picture hat as in a low-necked gown, so here I am."

She was a tall, pleasant-faced girl of twenty-three or four, not unlike her father in many respects. Her features were rather heavy, her mouth large but comely, her eyes dark and lustrous behind heavy lashes. As she now appeared before Barnes, she was the typical stage society woman: in other words, utterly commonplace. In a drawing-room she would have been as conspicuously out of place as she was in her present occupation.

"I am very sorry," he said lamely. "I have heard something of your misfortunes from your father and—the others. It's—it's really hard luck."

"I call it rather good luck to have got away with the only dress in the lot that cost more than tuppence," she said, smiling again. "Lord knows what would have happened to me if they had dropped down on us at the end of the first act. I was the beggar's daughter, you see,—absolutely in rags."

"You might have got away in your ordinary street clothes, however," he said; "which would have been pleasanter, I dare say."

"I dare say," she agreed brightly. "Glad to have met you. I think you'll find everything NEARLY all right. Good night, sir."

She smiled brightly, unaffectedly, as she turned toward the open door. There was something forelorn about her, after all, and his heart was touched.

"Better luck, Miss Thackeray. Every cloud has its silver lining."

She stopped and faced him once more. "That's the worst bromide in the language," she said. "If I were to tell you how many clouds I've seen and how little silver, you'd think I was lying. This experience? Why, it's a joy compared to some of the jolts we've had,—dad and me. And the others, too, for that matter. We've had to get used to it. Five years ago I would have jumped out of a ten story window before I'd have let you see me in this get-up. I know you'll laugh yourself sick over the way I look, and so will your friends when you tell them about me, but, thank the Lord, I shan't be in a position to hear you. So why should I mind? What a fellow doesn't know, isn't going to hurt him. You haven't laughed in my face, and I'm grateful for that. What you do afterward can't make the least bit of difference to me."

"I assure you, Miss Thackeray, that I shall not laugh, nor shall I ever relate the story of your—"

"There is one more bromide that I've never found much virtue in," she interrupted, not disagreeably, "and that is: 'it's too good to be true.' Good night. Sleep tight."

She closed the door behind her, leaving him standing in the middle of the room, perplexed but amused.

"By George," he said to himself, still staring at the closed door, "they're wonders, all of them. We could all

take lessons in philosophy from such as they. I wish I could do something to help them out of—" He sat down abruptly on the edge of the bed and pulled his wallet from his pocket. He set about counting the bills, a calculating frown in his eyes. Then he stared at the ceiling, summing up. "I'll do it," he said, after a moment of mental figuring. He told off a half dozen bills and slipped them into his pocket. The wallet sought its usual resting place for the night: under a pillow.

He was healthy and he was tired. Two minutes after his head touched the pillow he was sound asleep, losing consciousness even as he fought to stay awake in order that he might continue to vex himself with the extraordinary behavior and statement of Putnam Jones.

He was aroused shortly after midnight by shouts, apparently just outside his window. A man was calling in a loud voice from the road below; an instant later he heard a tremendous pounding on the tavern door.

Springing out of bed, he rushed to the window. There were horses in front of the house,—several of them,—and men on foot moving like shadows among them. A shuffling of feet came up to his open window; the intervening roof shut off his view of the porch and all that was transpiring. His eyes, accustomed to darkness, made out at least five horses in the now unlighted area before the tavern.

Turning from the window, he unlocked and opened the door into the hall. Some one was clattering down the narrow staircase. The bolts on the front door shot back with resounding force, and there came the hoarse jumble of excited voices as men crowded through the entrance. Putnam Jones's voice rose above the clamour.

"Keep quiet! Do you want to wake everybody on the place?" he was saying angrily. "What's up? This is a fine time o' night to be—Good Lord! What's the matter with him?"

"Telephone for a doctor, Put,—damn' quick! This one's still alive. The other one is dead as a door nail up at Jim Conley's house. Git ole Doc James down from Saint Liz. Bring him in here, boys. Where's your lights? Easy now! Eas-EE!"

Barnes waited to hear no more. His blood seemed to be running ice-cold as he retreated into the room and began scrambling for his clothes. The thing he feared had come to pass. Disaster had overtaken her in that wild, senseless dash up the mountain road. He was cursing half aloud as he dressed, cursing the fool who drove that machine and who now was perhaps dying down there in the tap-room. "The other one is dead as a door nail," kept running through his head,—"the other one."

The rumble of voices and the shuffling of feet continued, indistinct but laden with tragedy. The curious hush of catastrophe seemed to top the confusion that infected the place, inside and out. Barnes found his electric pocket torch and dressed hurriedly, though not fully, by its constricted light. As he was pulling on his heavy walking shoes, a head was inserted through the half open door, and an excited voice called out:

"You awake? Good work! Hustle along, will you? No more sleep to-night, old chap. Man dying downstairs. Shot smack through the lungs. Get a move—"

"Shot?" exclaimed Barnes.

"So they say," replied the agitated Mr. Dillingford, entering the room. He had slipped on his trousers and was then in the act of pulling his suspenders over his shoulders. His unlaced shoes gaped broadly; the upper part of his body was closely encased in a once blue undershirt; his abundant black hair was tousled,—some of it, indeed, having the appearance of standing on end. And in his wide eyes there was a look of horror. "I didn't hear much of the story. Old man Jones is telephoning for a doctor and—"

"Did you say that the man was shot?" repeated Barnes, bewildered. "Wasn't it an automobile accident?"

"Search ME. Gosh, I had one look at that fellow's face down there and—I didn't hear another word that was said. I never saw a man's face look like that. It was the colour of grey wall paper. Hurry up! Old man Jones told me to call you. He says you understand some of the foreign languages, and maybe you can make out what the poor devil is trying to say." "Do they know who he is?"

"Sure. He's been staying in the house for three days. The other one spoke English all right but this one not a word."

"Did they ride away from here about nine o'clock?"

"Yes. They had their own horses and said they were going to spend the night at Spanish Falls so's they could meet the down train that goes through at five o'clock in the morning. But hustle along, please. He's trying to talk and he's nearly gone."

Barnes, buoyed by a sharp feeling of relief, followed the actor downstairs and into the tap-room. A dozen men were there, gathered around two tables that had been drawn together. Transient lodgers, in various stages of dishabille, popped out of all sorts of passageways and joined the throng. The men about the table, on which was stretched the figure of the wounded man, were undoubtedly natives: farmers, woodsmen or employees of the tavern. At a word from Putnam Jones, they opened up and allowed Barnes to advance to the side of the man.

"See if you c'n understand him, Mr. Barnes," said the landlord. Perspiration was dripping from his long, raw-boned face. "And you, Bacon,—you and Dillingford hustle upstairs and get a mattress off'n one of the beds. Stand at the door there, Pike, and don't let any women in here. Go away, Miss Thackeray! This is no place for you."

Miss Thackeray pushed her way past the man who tried to stop her and joined Barnes. Her long black hair hung in braids down her back; above her forehead clustered a mass of ringlets, vastly disordered but not untidy. A glance would have revealed the gaudy rose-coloured skirt hanging below the bottom of the long

rain-coat she had snatched from a peg in the hall-way.

"It is the place for me," she said sharply. "Haven't you men got sense enough to put something under his head? Where is he hurt? Get that cushion, you. Stick, it under here when I lift his head. Oh, you poor thing! We'll be as quick as possible. There!"

"You'd better go away," said Barnes, himself ghastly pale. "He's been shot. There is a lot of blood—don't you know. It's splendid of you—"

"Dangerously?" she cried, shrinking back, her eyes fixed in dread upon the white face.

The man's eyes were closed, but at the sound of a woman's voice he opened them. The hand with which he clutched at his breast slid off and seemed to be groping for hers. His breathing was terrible. There was blood at the corners of his mouth, and more oozed forth when his lips parted in an effort to speak.

With a courage that surprised even herself, the girl took his hand in hers. It was wet and warm. She did not dare look at it.

"Merci, madame," struggled from the man's lips, and he smiled.

Barnes had heard of the French soldiers who, as they died, said "thank you" to those who ministered to them, and smiled as they said it. He had always marvelled at the fortitude that could put gratefulness above physical suffering, and his blood never failed to respond to an exquisite thrill of exaltation under such recitals. He at once deduced that the injured man, while probably not a Frenchman, at least was familiar with the language.

He was young, dark-haired and swarthy. His riding-clothes were well-made and modish.

Barnes leaned over and spoke to him in French. The dark, pain-stricken eyes closed, and an almost imperceptible shake of the head signified that he did not understand. Evidently he had acquired only a few of the simple French expressions. Barnes had a slight knowledge of Spanish and Italian, and tried again with no better results. German was his last resort, and he knew he would fail once more, for the man obviously was not Teutonic.

The bloody lips parted, however, and the eyes opened with a piteous, appealing expression in their depths. It was apparent that there was something he wanted to say, something he had to say before he died. He gasped a dozen words or more in a tongue utterly unknown to Barnes, who bent closer to catch the feeble effort. It was he who now shook his head; with a groan the sufferer closed his eyes in despair. He choked and coughed violently an instant later.

"Get some water and a towel," cried Miss Thackeray, tremulously. She was very white, but still clung to the man's hand. "Be quick! Behind the bar." Then she turned to Jones. "Don't call my father. He can't stand the sight of blood," she said.

Barnes unbuttoned the coat and revealed the blood-soaked white shirt.

"Better leave this to me," he said in her ear. "There's nothing you can do. He's done for. Please go away."

"Oh, I sha'n't faint—at least, not yet. Poor fellow! I've seen him upstairs and wondered who he was. Is he really going to die?"

"Looks bad," said Barnes, gently opening the shirt front. Several of the craning men turned away suddenly.

"Can't you understand him?" demanded Putnam Jones, from the opposite side.

"No. Did you get the doctor?"

"He's on the way by this time. He's got a little automobile. Ought to be here in ten or fifteen minutes."

"Who is he, Mr. Jones?"

"He is registered as Andrew Paul, from New York. That's all I know. The other man put his name down as Albert Roon. He seemed to be the boss and this man a sort of servant, far as I could make out. They never talked much and seldom came downstairs. They had their meals in their room. Bacon served them. Where is Bacon? Where the hell—oh, the mattress. Now, we'll lift him up gentle-like while you fellers slip it under him. Easy now. Brace up, my lad, we—we won't hurt you. Lordy! Lordy! I'm sorry—Gosh! I thought he was gone!" He wiped his brow with a shaking hand.

"There is nothing we can do," said Barnes, "except try to stanch the flow of blood. He is bleeding inwardly, I'm afraid. It's a clean wound, Mr. Jones. Like a rifle shot, I should say."

"That's just what it is," said one of the men, a tall woodsman. "The feller who did it was a dead shot, you c'n bet on that. He got t' other man square through the heart."

"Lordy, but this will raise a rumpus," groaned the landlord. "We'll have detectives an'—"

"I guess they got what was comin' to 'em," said another of the men.

"What's that? Why, they was ridin' peaceful as could be to Spanish Falls. What do you mean by sayin' that, Jim Conley? But wait a minute! How does it happen that they were up near your dad's house? That certainly ain't on the road to Span—"

"Spanish Falls nothin'! They wasn't goin' to Spanish Falls any more'n I am at this minute. They tied their hosses up the road just above our house," said young Conley, lowering his voice out of consideration for the

feelings of the helpless man. "It was about 'leven o'clock, I reckon. I was comin' home from singin' school up at Number Ten, an' I passed the hosses hitched to the fence. Naturally I stopped, curious like. There wasn't no one around, fer as I could see, so I thought I'd take a look to see whose hosses they were. I thought it was derned funny, them hosses bein' there at that time o' night an' no one around. So as I said before, I thought I'd take a look. I know every hoss fer ten mile around. So I thought I'd take—"

"You said that three times," broke in Jones impatiently.

"Well, to make a long story short, I thought I'd take a look. I never seen either of them animals before. They didn't belong around here. So I thought I'd better hustle down to the house an' speak to pa about it. Looked mighty queer to me. Course, thinks I, they might belong to somebody visitin' in there at Green Fancy, so I thought I'd—"

"Green Fancy?" said Barnes, starting.

"Was it up that far?" demanded Jones.

"They was hitched jest about a hundred yards below Mr. Curtis's propity, on the off side o' the road. Course it's quite a ways in from the road to the house, an' I couldn't see why if it was anybody callin' up there they didn't ride all the ways up, 'stead o' walkin' through the woods. So I thought I'd speak to pa about it. Say," and he paused abruptly, a queer expression in his eyes, "you don't suppose he knows what I'm sayin', do you? I wouldn't say anything to hurt the poor feller's feelin's fer—"

"He doesn't know what you are saying," said Barnes.

"But, dern it, he jest now looked at me in the funniest way. It's given me the creeps."

"Go on," said one of the men.

"Well, I hadn't any more'n got to our front gate when I heard some one running in the road up there behind me. 'Fore I knowed what was happenin', bang went a gun. I almost jumped out'n my boots. I lept behind that big locus' tree in front of our house and listened. The runnin' had stopped. The hosses was rarin' an' tearin' so I thought I'd—"

"Where'd the shot come from?" demanded Jones.

"Up the road some'eres, I couldn't swear just where. Must 'a' been up by the road that cuts in to Green Fancy. So I thought I'd hustle in an' see if pa was awake, an' git my gun. Looked mighty suspicious, thinks I, that gun shot. Jest then pa stuck his head out'n the winder an' yelled what the hell's the matter. You betcher life I sung out who I was mighty quick, 'cause pa's purty spry with a gun an' I didn't want him takin' me fer burglars sneakin' around the house. While we wuz talkin' there, one of the hosses started our way lickety-split, an' in about two seconds it went by us. It was purty dark but we see plain as day that there was a man in the saddle, bendin' low over the hoss's neck and shoutin' to it. Well, we shore was guessin'. We waited a couple o' minutes, wonderin' what to do, an' listenin' to the hoss gittin' furder and furder away in the direction of the cross-roads. Then, 'way down there by the pike we heerd another shot. Right there an' then pa said he'd put on his clothes an' we'd set out to see what it was all about. I had it figgered out that the feller on the hoss had shot the other one and was streakin' it fer town or some'eres. That second shot had me guessin' though. Who wuz he shootin' at now, thinks I.

"Well, pa come out with my gun an' his'n an' we walks up to where I seen the hosses. Shore 'nough, one of 'em was still hitched to the fence, an' t'other was gone. We stood around a minute or two examinin' the hoss an' then pa says let's go up the road aways an' see if we c'n see anything. An' by gosh, we hadn't gone more'n fifty feet afore we come plumb on a man layin' in the middle of the road. Pa shook him an' he didn't let out a sound. He was warm but deader'n a tombstone. I wuz fer leavin' him there till we c'd git the coroner, but pa says no. We'd carry him down to our porch, an' lay him there, so's he'd be out o' danger. Ma an' the kids wuz all up when we got him there, an' pa sent Bill and Charley over to Mr. Pike's and Uncle John's to fetch 'em quick. I jumps on Polly an' lights out fer here, Mr. Jones, to telephone up to Saint Liz fer the sheriff an' the coroner, not givin' a dang what I run into on the way. Polly shied somethin' terrible jest afore we got to the pike an' I come derned near bein' throwed. An' right there 'side the road was this feller, all in a heap. I went back an' jumped off. He was groanin' somethin' awful. Thinks I, you poor cuss, you must 'a' tried to stop that feller on hossback an' he plunked you. That accounted fer the second shot. But while I wuz tryin' to lift him up an' git somethin' out'n him about the matter, I sees his boss standin' in the road a couple o' rods away. I couldn't understand a word he said, so I thought I better go back home an' git some help, seein's I couldn't manage him by myself. So I dragged him up on the bank an' made him comfortable as I could, and lit out fer home. We thought we'd better bring him up here, Mr. Jones, it bein' just as near an' you could git the doctor sooner. I hitched up the buck-board and went back. Pa an' some of the other fellers took their guns an' went up in the woods lookin' fer the man that done the shootin'. The thing that worries all of us is did the same man do the shootin', or was there two of 'em, one waitin' down at the cross-roads?"

"Must have been two," said Jones, thoughtfully. "The same man couldn't have got down there ahead of him, that's sure. Did anybody go up to Green Fancy to make inquiries?"

"'Twasn't necessary. Mr. Curtis heard the shootin' an' jest before we left he sent a man out to see what it was all about. The old skeezicks that's been drivin' his car lately come down half-dressed. He said nothin' out of the way had happened up at Green Fancy. Nobody had been nosin' around their place, an' if they had, he said, there wasn't anybody there who could hit the side of a barn with a rifle."

"It's most mysterious," said Barnes, glancing around the circle of awed faces. "There must have been some one lying in wait for these men, and with a very definite purpose in mind."

"Strikes me," said Jones, "that these two men were up to some kind of dirty work themselves, else why did they say they were goin' to Spanish Falls? It's my idee that they went up that road to lay fer somebody comin' down from the border, and they got theirs good an' plenty instead of the other way round. They were queer actin' men, I'll have to say that."

His eyes met Barnes' and there was a queer light in them.

"You don't happen to know anything about this, do you, Mr. Barnes?" he demanded, suddenly.

CHAPTER V — THE FARM-BOY TELLS A GHASTLY STORY AND AN IRISHMAN ENTERS

Barnes stared. "What do you mean?" he demanded sharply.

"I mean just what I said. What do you know about this business?"

"How should I know ANYTHING about it?"

"Well, we don't know who you are, nor what you're doing up here, nor what your real profession is. That's why I ask the question."

"I see," said Barnes, after a moment. He grasped the situation and he admitted to himself that Jones had cause for his suspicions. "It has occurred to you that I may be a detective or a secret service man, isn't that the case? Well, I am neither. Moreover, this man and his companion evidently had their doubts about me, if I am to judge by your remark and your actions on the porch earlier in the evening."

"I only said that they were curious about you. The man named Roon asked me a good many questions about you while you were in at supper. Who knows but what he was justified in thinkin' you didn't mean any good to him and his friend?"

"Did you know any more about these two men, Mr. Jones, than you know about me?"

"I don't know anything about 'em. They came here like any one else, paid their bills regular, 'tended to their own business, and that's all."

"What was their business?"

"Mr. Roon was lookin' for a place to bring his daughter who has consumption. He didn't want to take her to a reg'lar consumptive community, he said, an' so he was lookin' for a quiet place where she wouldn't be associatin' with lungers all the time. Some big doctor in New York told him to come up here an' look around. That was his business, Mr. Barnes, an' I guess you'd call it respectable, wouldn't you?"

"Perfectly. But why should he be troubled by my presence here if—" Miss Thackeray put an end to the discussion in a most effectual manner.

"Oh, for the Lord's sake, cut it out! Wait till he's dead, can't you?" she whispered fiercely. "You've got all the time in the world to talk, and he hasn't more than ten minutes left to breathe unless that rube doctor gets here pretty soon. If you've GOT to settle the question right away, at least have the decency to go out of this room."

Barnes flushed to the roots of his hair. Jones was aghast, dumb with surprise and anger.

"You are right, Miss Thackeray," said the former, deeply mortified. "This is not the time nor the place to ——"

"He can't understand a word we say," said Putnam Jones loudly. "You better get out of here yourself, young woman. This is a job for men, not—"

"I think he's going now," she whispered in an awe-struck voice. "Keep still, all of you. Is he breathing, Mr. Barnes? That awful cough just now seemed to—"

"Come away, please," said Barnes, taking her gently by the arm. "I—I believe that was the end. Don't stay here, Miss Thackeray. Dillingford, will you be good enough to escort Miss—"

"I've never seen any one die before," she said in a low, tense voice. Her eyes were fixed on the still face. "Why—why, how tightly he holds my hand! I can't get it away—he must be alive, Mr. Barnes. Where is that silly doctor?"

Barnes unclasped the rigid fingers of the man called Andrew Paul, and, shaking his head sadly, drew her away from the improvised bier. He and the shivering Mr. Dillingford conducted her to the dining-room, where a single kerosene lamp gave out a feeble, rather ghastly light. The tall Bacon followed, the upper part of his person enveloped in the blanket Putnam Jones had hastily snatched from the mattress before it was slipped

under the dying man. Several of the women of the house, including the wife of the landlord, clogged the little entrance hall, chattering in hushed undertones.

"Would you like a little brandy?" inquired Barnes, as she sat down limply in the chair he pulled out for her. "I have a flask upstairs in my—"

"I never touch it," she said. "I'm all right. My legs wabble a little but—Sit down, Mr. Barnes. I've got something to say to you and I'd better say it now, because it may come in pretty handy for you later on. Don't let those women come in here, Dilly."

Barnes drew a chair close beside her. Bacon, with scant regard for elegance, seated himself on the edge of the table and bent an ear.

"It's all rot about that man Roon being here to look for a place for his daughter." She spoke rapidly and cautiously. "I don't know whether Jones knows, but that certainly wasn't what he was here for. The young fellow in there was a sort of secretary. Roon had a room at the other end of the hall from yours, on the corner, facing the road and also looking toward the cross-roads. Young Paul had the next room, with a door between. I was supposed to make up their rooms after they'd gone out in the forenoon for a horseback ride. I kept out of their sight, because I knew they were the kind of men who would laugh at me. They couldn't understand, and, of course, I couldn't explain. Yesterday morning I found a sort of map on the floor under young Paul's washstand. The wind had blown it off the table by the window and he hadn't missed it. It was in lead pencil and looked like a map of the roads around here. I couldn't read the notations, but it required only a glance to convince me that this place was the central point. All of the little mountain roads were there, and the cross-roads. There wasn't anything queer about it, so I laid it on his table and put a book on it.

"This afternoon I walked up in the woods back of the Tavern to go over some lines in a new piece we are to do later on,—God knows when! I could see the house from where I was sitting. Roon's windows were plainly visible. I wasn't very far away, you see, the climb being too steep for me. I saw Roon standing at a window looking toward the cross-roads with a pair of field-glasses. Every once in awhile he would turn to Paul, who stood beside him with a notebook, and say something to him. Paul wrote it down. Then he would look again, turning the glasses this way and that. I wouldn't have thought much about it if they hadn't spent so much time there. I believe I watched them for an hour. Suddenly my eyes almost popped out of my head. Paul had gone away from the window. He came back and he had a couple of revolvers in his hands. They stood there for a few minutes carefully examining the weapons and reloading them with fresh cartridges. The storm was coming up, but I love it so that I waited almost until dark, watching the clouds and listening to the roar of the wind in the trees. I'm a queer girl in that way. I like turmoil. I could sit out in the most dreadful thunder storm and just revel in the crashes. Just as I was about to start down to the house—it was a little after six o'clock, and getting awfully dark and overcast,—Roon took up the glasses again. He seemed to be excited and called his companion. Paul grabbed the glasses and looked down the road. They both became very much excited, pointing and gesticulating, and taking turn about with the glasses."

"About six o'clock, you say?" said Barnes, greatly interested.

"It was a quarter after six when I got back to the house. I spoke to Mr. Bacon about what I'd seen and he said he believed they were German spies, up to some kind of mischief along the Canadian border. Everybody is a German spy nowadays, Mr. Barnes, if he looks cross-wise. Then about half an hour later you came to the Tavern. I saw Roon sneak out to the head of the stairs and listen to your conversation with Jones when you registered. That gave me an idea. It was you they were watching the road for. They saw you long before you got here, and it was—"

Barnes held up his hand for silence. "Listen," he said in a low voice, "I will tell you who they were looking for." As briefly as possible he recounted his experience with the strange young woman at the cross-roads. "From the beginning I have connected this tragedy with the place called Green Fancy. I'll stake my last penny that they have been hanging around here waiting for the arrival of that young woman. They knew she was coming and they doubtless knew what she was bringing with her. They went to Green Fancy to-night with a very sinister purpose in mind, and things didn't turn out as they expected. What do you know about the place called Green Fancy?"

He was vastly excited. His active imagination was creating all sorts of possibilities and complications, depredations and intrigues.

Bacon was the one who answered. He drew the blanket closer about his lean form and shivered as with a chill.

"I know this much about the place from hearsay," he said in a guttural whisper. "It's supposed to be haunted. I've heard more than one of these jays,—big huskies too,—say they wouldn't go near the place after dark for all the money in the state."

"That's just talk to scare you, Ague," said Dillingford. "People live up there and since we've been here two or three men visitors have come down from the place to sample our stock of wet goods. Nothing suspicious looking or ghostly about them either. I talked with a couple of 'em day before yesterday. They were out for a horseback ride and stopped here for a mug of ale."

"Were they foreigners?" inquired Barnes.

"If you want to call an Irishman a foreigner, I'll have to say one of them was. He had a beautiful brogue. I'd never seen an Irishman in slick riding clothes, however, so I doubted my ears at first. You don't associate a plain Mick with anything so swell as that, you know. The other was an American, I'm sure. Yesterday they rode past here with a couple of swell looking women. I saw them turn up the road to Green Fancy, so that knocks your ghost story all to smash, Bacon."

"It isn't MY ghost story," began Mr. Bacon indignantly. The arrival of four or five men, who stamped into the already crowded hallway from the porch outside, claimed the attention of the quartette. Among them was the doctor who, they were soon to discover, was also the coroner of the county. A very officious deputy sheriff was also in the group.

Before rejoining the crowd in the tap-room, Barnes advised his companions, especially the girl, to say as little as possible about what they had heard and seen.

"This thing is going to turn out to be a whacking sensation, and it may be a great deal more important than we think. You don't want to become involved in the investigation, which may become a national affair. I'd like to have a hand in clearing it up. My head is chock-full of theories that might—"

"Maybe Roon was right," said Dillingford, slowly, as he edged a step or two away from Barnes.

"In what respect?"

"He certainly thought you were a detective or something like that. Maybe he thought you came with that young woman, or maybe he thought you were shadowing her, or—"

"There are a lot of things he may have thought," interrupted Barnes, smiling. "It is barely possible that my arrival may have caused him to act more hastily than he intended. That may be the reason why the job ended so disastrously for him."

Mrs. Jones called out from the doorway. "Mr. Barnes, you're wanted in there."

"All right," he responded.

"Better let me get you a wet towel to wash your hand," said Bacon to Miss Thackeray. "My God, I wouldn't have THAT on my hand for a million dollars."

The doctor had been working over the prostrate form on the tables. As Barnes entered the room, he looked up and declared that the man was dead.

"This is Mr. Barnes," said Putnam Jones, indicating the tall traveller with a short jerk of his thumb.

"I am from the sheriff's office," said the man who stood beside the doctor. The rest of the crowd evidently had been ordered to stand back from the tables. The sheriff was a burly fellow, whose voice shook in a most incongruous manner, despite his efforts to appear composed and otherwise efficient. "Did you ever see this man before?"

"Not until he was carried in here half an hour ago. I arrived here this evening."

"What's your business up here, Mr. Barnes?"

"I have no business up here. I just happened to stroll in this evening."

"Well," said the sheriff darkly, "I guess I'll have to ask you to stick around here till we clear this business up. We don't know you an'—Well, we can't take any chances. You understand, I reckon."

"I certainly fail to understand, Mr. Sheriff. I know nothing whatever of this affair and I intend to continue on my way to-morrow morning."

"Well, I guess not."

"Do you mean to say that I am to be detained here against my—"

"You got to stay here till we are satisfied that you don't know anything about this business. That's all."

"Am I to consider myself under arrest, sir?"

"I wouldn't go as far as to say that. You just stick around here, that's all I got to say. If you're all right, we'll soon find it out. What's more, if you are all right you'll be willin' to stay. Do you get me?"

"I certainly do. And I can now assure you, Mr. Sheriff, that I'd like nothing better than to stick around here, as you put it. I'd like to help clear this matter up. In the meantime, you may readily find out who I am and why I am here by telegraphing to the Mayor of New York City. This document, which experience has taught me to carry for just such an emergency as this, may have some weight with you." He opened his bill-folder and drew forth a neatly creased sheet of paper. This he handed to the sheriff. "Read it, please, and note the date, the signature, the official seal of the New York Police department, and also the rather interesting silver print pasted in the lower left hand corner. I think you will agree that it is a good likeness of me. Each year I take the precaution of having myself properly certified by the police department at home before venturing into unknown and perhaps unfriendly communities. This, in a word, is a guarantee of good citizenship, good intentions and-good health. I was once taken up by a rural Sherlock on suspicion of being connected with the theft of a horse and buggy, although all the evidence seemed to indicate that I was absolutely afoot and weary at the time, and didn't have the outfit concealed about my person. I languished in the calaboose for twenty-four hours, and might have remained there indefinitely if the real desperado hadn't been captured in the nick o' time. Have you read it?"

"Yes," said the sheriff dubiously; "but how do I know it ain't a forgery?"

"You don't know, of course. But in case it shouldn't be a forgery and I am subjected to the indignity of arrest or even detention, you would have a nasty time defending yourself in a civil suit for damages. Don't misunderstand me. I appreciate your position. I shall remain here, as you suggest, but only for the purpose of aiding you in getting to the bottom of this affair."

"What do you think about it, Doc?"

"He says he's willing to stay, don't he? Well, what more can you ask?" snapped the old doctor. "I should say the best thing for you to do, Abner, is to get a posse of men together and begin raking the woods up yonder for the men that did the shooting. You say there is another one dead up at Jim Conley's? Well, I'll go over and view him at once. The first thing to do is to establish the corpus delicti. We've got to be able to say the men are dead before we can charge anybody with murder. This man was shot in the chest, from in front. Now we'll examine his clothes and so forth and see if they throw any additional light on the matter."

The most careful search of Andrew Paul's person established one thing beyond all question: the man had deliberately removed everything that might in any way serve to aid the authorities in determining who he really was and whence he came. The tailor's tags had been cut from the smart, well-fitting garments; the buttons on the same had been replaced by others of an ordinary character; the names of the haberdasher, the hat dealer and the boot maker had been as effectually destroyed. There were no papers of any description in his pockets. His wrist watch bore neither name, date nor initials. Indeed, nothing had been overlooked in his very palpable effort to prevent actual identification, either in life or death.

Subsequent search of the two rooms disclosed the same extreme precautions. Not a single object, not even a scrap of paper had been left there on the departure of the men at nine o'clock. Ashes in an old-fashioned fireplace in Roon's room suggested the destruction of tell-tale papers. Everything had vanished. A large calibre automatic revolver, all cartridges unexploded, was found in Paul's coat pocket. In another pocket, lying loose, were a few bank notes and some silver, amounting all told to about thirty dollars.

The same thorough search of the dead body of Roon later on by the coroner and sheriff, revealed a similar condition. The field-glasses, of English make, were found slung across his shoulder, and a fully loaded revolver, evidently his, was discovered the next morning in the grass beside the road near the point where he fell. There were several hundred dollars in the roll of bills they found in his inside coat pocket.

Roon was a man of fifty or thereabouts. Although both men were smooth-faced, there was reason to suspect that Roon at least had but recently worn a mustache. His upper lip had the thick, stiff look of one from which a beard of long-standing recently had been shaved.

Later on it was learned that they purchased the two horses in Hornville, paying cash for the beasts and the trappings. The transaction took place a day or two before they came to Hart's Tavern for what had been announced as a short stay.

Standing on Jim Conley's front porch a little after sunrise, Barnes made the following declaration:

"Everything goes to show that these men were up here for one of two reasons. They were either trying to prevent or to enact a crime. The latter is my belief. They were afraid of me. Why? Because they believed I was trailing them and likely to spoil their game. Gentlemen, those fellows were here for the purpose of robbing the place you call Green Fancy."

"What's that?" came a rich, mellow voice from the outskirts of the crowd. A man pushed his way through and confronted Barnes. He was a tall, good-looking fellow of thirty-five, and it was apparent that he had dressed in haste. "My name is O'Dowd, and I am a guest of Mr. Curtis at Green Fancy. Why do you think they meant to rob his place?"

"Well," began Barnes drily, "it would seem that his place is the only one in the neighbourhood that would BEAR robbing. My name is Barnes. Of course, Mr. O'Dowd, it is mere speculation on my part."

"But who shot the man?" demanded the Irishman. "He certainly wasn't winged by any one from our place. Wouldn't we have known something about it if he had attempted to get into the house and was nailed by—Why, Lord love you, sir, there isn't a soul at Green Fancy who could shoot a thief if he saw one. This is Mr. De Soto, also a guest at Green Fancy. He will, I think, bear me out in upsetting your theory."

A second man approached, shaking his head vigorously. He was a thin, pale man with a singularly scholastic face. Quite an unprepossessing, unsanguinary person, thought Barnes.

"Mr. Curtis's chauffeur, I think it was, said the killing occurred just above this house," said he, visibly excited. "Green Fancy is at least a mile from here, isn't it? You don't shoot burglars a mile from the place they are planning to rob, do you? Is the man a native of this community?"

"No," said Barnes, on whom devolved the duties of spokesman. "By the way, his companion lies dead at Hart's Tavern. He was shot from his horse at the cross-roads."

"God bless me soul," gasped O'Dowd. "The chauffeur didn't mention a second one. And were there two of them?"

"And both of them dead?" cried De Soto. "At the cross-roads? My dear sir, how can you reconcile—" He broke off with a gesture of impatience.

"I'll admit it's a bit out of reason," said Barnes. "The second man could only have been shot by some one who was lying in wait for him."

"Why, the thing's as clear as day," cried O'Dowd, facing the crowd. His cheerful, sprightly face was alive with excitement. "They were not trying to rob any one. They were either trying to get across the border into Canada themselves or else trying to head some one off who was coming from that side of the line."

"Gad, you may be right," agreed Barnes instantly. "If you'd like to hear more of the story I'll be happy to relate all that we know at present."

While the coroner and the others were loading the body of Albert Roon into a farm wagon for conveyance to the county-seat, Barnes, who had taken a sudden fancy to the two men from Green Fancy, gave them a brief but full account of the tragedy and the result of investigations as far as they had gone.

"Bedad," said O'Dowd, "it beats the devil. There's something big in this thing, Mr. Barnes,—something a long shot bigger than any of us suspects. The extraordinary secrecy of these fellows, their evident gentility, their doubtful nationality—why, bedad, it sounds like a penny-dreadful thriller."

"You'll find that it resolves itself into a problem for Washington to solve," said De Soto darkly. "Nothing local about it, take my word for it. These men were up to some international devilment. I'm not saying that Germany is at the back of it, but, by Jove, I don't put anything beyond the beggars. They are the cleverest, most resourceful people in the world, damn 'em. You wait and see if I'm not right. There'll be a stir in Washington over this, sure as anything."

"What time was it that you heard the shots up at Green Fancy?" ventured Barnes.

"Lord love you," cried O'Dowd, "we didn't hear a sound. Mr. Curtis, who has insomnia the worst way, poor devil, heard them and sent some one out to see what all the racket was about. It wasn't till half an hour or so ago that De Soto and I were routed out of our peaceful nests and ordered,—virtually ordered, mind you,—to get up and guard the house. Mr. Curtis was in a pitiful state of nerves over the killing, and so were the ladies. 'Gad, everybody seemed to know all about the business except De Soto and me. The man, it seems, made such a devil of a racket when he came home with the news that the whole house was up in pajamas and peignoirs. He didn't say anything about a second Johnnie being shot, however. I'm glad he didn't know about it, for that matter. He'll be seeing one ghost for the rest of his days and that's enough, without having another foisted upon him."

"I think I have a slight acquaintance with the chauffeur," said Barnes. "He gave me the most thrilling motor ride I've ever experienced. 'Gad, I'll never forget it."

The two men looked at him, plainly perplexed.

"When was all this?" inquired De Soto.

"Early last evening. He took me from the cross-roads to Hart's Tavern in a minute and a half, I'll bet my soul."

"Last evening?" said O'Dowd, something like skepticism in his tone.

"Yes. He picked up your latest guest at the corners, and she insisted on his driving me to the Tavern before the storm broke. I've been terribly anxious about her. She must have been caught out in all that frightful—"

"What's this you are saying, Mr. Barnes?" cut in De Soto, frowning. "No guest arrived at Green Fancy last evening, nor was one expected."

Barnes stared. "Do you mean to say that she didn't get there, after all?"

"She? A woman, was it?" demanded O'Dowd. "Bedad, if she said she was coming to Green Fancy she was spoofing you. Are you sure it was old Peter who gave you that jolly ride?"

"No, I am not sure," said Barnes, uneasily. "She was afoot, having walked from the station below. I met her at the corners and she asked me if I knew how far it was to Green Fancy, or something like that. Said she was going there. Then along came the automobile, rattling down this very road,—an ancient Panhard driven by an old codger. She seemed to think it was all right to hop in and trust herself to him, although she'd never seen him before."

"The antique Panhard fits in all right," said O'Dowd, "but I'm hanged if the woman fits at all. No such person arrived at Green Fancy last night."

"Did you get a square look at the driver's face?" demanded De Soto.

"It was almost too dark to see, but he was old, hatchet-faced, and spoke with an accent."

"Then it couldn't have been Peter," said De Soto positively. "He's old, right enough, but he is as big as the side of a house, with a face like a full moon, and he is Yankee to his toes. By gad, Barnes, the plot thickens! A woman has been added to the mystery. Now, who the devil is she and what has become of her?"

CHAPTER VI — CHARITY BEGINS FAR FROM HOME, AND A STROLL IN THE WILDWOOD FOLLOWS

Mr. Rushcroft as furious when he arose at eleven o'clock on the morning after the double murder, having slept like a top through all of the commotion. He boomed all over the place, vocal castigations falling right

and left on the guilty and the innocent without distinction. He wouldn't have missed the excitement for anything in the world. He didn't mind missing the breakfast he was to have had with Barnes, but he did feel outraged over the pusillanimous trick played upon him by the remaining members of his troupe. Nothing was to have been expected of Putnam Jones and his damnation crew; they wouldn't have called him if the house was afire; they would let him roast to death; but certainly something was due him from the members of his company, something better than utter abandonment!

He was still deep in the sulks when he came upon Barnes, who was pacing the sunlit porch, deep in thought.

"There will never be another opportunity like that," he groaned, at the close of a ten minute dissertation on the treachery of friends; "never in all the years to come. The driveling fools! What do I pay them for? To let me lie there snoring so loud that I couldn't hear opportunity for the noise I was making? As in everything else I undertake, my dear Barnes, I excel at snoring. My lung capacity is something amazing. It has to have an outlet. They let me lie there like a log while the richest publicity material that ever fell to the lot of an actor went to waste,—utter waste. Why, damme, sir, I could have made that scene in the tap-room historic; I could have made it so dramatic that it would have thrilled to the marrow every man, woman and child in the United States of America. That's what I mean. They allowed a chance like that to get away. Can you beat it? Tragedy at my very elbow,—by gad, almost nudging me, you might say,—and no one to tell me to get up. Think of the awful requiem I could have—But what's the use thinking about it now? I am so exasperated I can't think of anything but anathemas, so—"

"I don't see how you managed to sleep through it," Barnes broke in. "You must have an unusually clear conscience, Mr. Rushcroft."

"I haven't any conscience at all, sir," roared the star. "I had an unusually full stomach, that's what was the matter with me. Damme, I ought to have known better. I take oath now, sir, never to eat again as long as I live. A man who cannot govern his beastly appetite ought to defy it, if nothing else."

"I gather from that remark that you omitted breakfast this morning."

"Breakfast, sir? In God's name, I implore you not to refer to anything so disgusting as stewed prunes and bacon at a time like this. My mind is—"

"How about luncheon? Will you join me at twelve-thirty?"

"That's quite another matter," said Mr. Rushcroft readily. "Luncheon is an aesthetic tribute to the physical intelligence of man, if you know what I mean. I shall be delighted to join you. Twelve-thirty, did you say?"

"It would give me great pleasure if your daughter would also grace the festal board."

"Ahem! My daughter and I are—er—what you might say 'on the outs' at present. I dare say I was a trifle crusty with her this morning. She was a bit inconsiderate, too, I may add. As a matter of fact she told me to go and soak my head." Mr. Rushcroft actually blushed as he said it. "I don't know where the devil she learned such language, unless she's been overhearing the disrespectful remarks that some of these confounded opera house managers make when I try to argue with them about—But never mind! She's a splendid creature, isn't she? She has it born in her to be one of the greatest actresses in—"

"I think it is too bad that she has to go about in the gown she wears, Mr. Rushcroft," said Barnes. "She's much too splendid for that. I have a proposition I'd like to make to you later on. I cannot make it, however, without consulting Miss Thackeray's feelings."

"My dear fellow!" beamed Rushcroft, seizing the other's hand. "One frequently reads in books about it coming like this, at first sight, but, damme, I never dreamed that it ever really happened. Count on me! She ought to leave the stage, the dear child. No more fitted to it than an Easter lily. Her place is in the home, the —"

"Good Lord, I'm not thinking of—" And Barnes, aghast, stopped before blurting out the words that leaped to his lips. "I mean to say, this is a proposition that may also affect your excellent companions, Bacon and Dillingford, as well as yourselves."

"Abominations!" snorted Rushcroft. "I fired both of them this morning. They are no longer connected with my company. I won't have 'em around. What's more, they can't act and never will. The best bit of acting that Bacon ever did in his life was when he told me to go to hell a little while ago. I say 'acting,' mind you, because the wretch COULDN'T have been in earnest, and yet he gave the most convincing performance of his life. If I'd ever dreamed that he had it in him to do it so well, I'd have had the line in every play we've done since he joined us, author or no author."

At twelve-thirty sharp, Barnes came down from his room freshly shaved and brushed, to find not only Mr. Rushcroft and Miss Thackeray awaiting him in the office, but the Messrs. Dillingford and Bacon as well. Putnam Jones, gloomy and preoccupied behind the counter, allowed his eyes to brighten a little as the latest guest of the house approached the group.

"I've given all of 'em an hour or two off," he said genially. "Do what you like to 'em."

Rushcroft expanded. "My good man, what the devil do you mean by a remark like that? Remember—"

"Never mind, dad," said Miss Thackeray, lifting her chin haughtily. "Forgive us our trespassers as we forgive our trespasses. And remember, also, that poor, dear Mr. Jones is all out of sorts to-day. He is all keyed up over the notoriety his house is going to achieve before the government gets through annoying him."

"See here, Miss," began Mr. Jones, threateningly, and then, overcome by his Yankee shrewdness, stopped

as suddenly as he started. "Go on in and have your dinner. Don't mind me. I am out of sorts." He was smart enough to realise that it was wiser to have the good rather than the ill-will of these people. He dreaded the inquiry that was imminent.

"That's better," mumbled Mr. Rushcroft, partially mollified. "I took the liberty, old fellow," he went on, addressing Barnes, "of asking my excellent co-workers to join us in our repast. In all my career I have not known more capable, intelligent players than these—"

"Delighted to have you with us, gentlemen," said Barnes affably. "In fact, I was going to ask Mr. Rushcroft if he had the slightest objection to including you—"

"Oh, the row's all over," broke in Mr. Dillingford magnanimously. "It didn't amount to anything. I'm sure if Mr. Rushcroft doesn't object to us, we don't object to him."

"Peace reigns throughout the land," said Mr. Bacon, in his deepest bass. "Precede us, my dear Miss Thackeray."

The sole topic of conversation for the first half hour was the mysterious slaying of their fellow lodgers. Mr. Rushcroft complained bitterly of the outrageous, high-handed action of the coroner and sheriff in imposing upon him and his company the same restrictions that had been applied to Barnes. They were not to leave the county until the authorities gave the word. One would have thought, to hear the star's indignant lamentations, that he and his party were in a position to depart when they pleased. It would have been difficult to imagine that he was not actually rolling in money instead of being absolutely penniless.

"What were these confounded rascals to me?" he demanded, scowling at Miss Tilly as if she were solely to blame for his misfortune. "Why should I be held up in this God-forsaken place because a couple of scoundrels got their just deserts? Why, I repeat? I'd—"

"I—I'm sure I—I don't know," stammered Miss Tilly, wetting her dry lips with her tongue in an attempt to be lucid.

"What?" exploded Mr. Rushcroft, somewhat taken aback by the retort from an unexpected quarter. "Upon my soul, I—I—What?"

"He won't bite, Miss Tilly," said Miss Thackeray soothingly.

"Oh, dear!" said Miss Tilly, putting her hand over her mouth.

Barnes had been immersed in his own thoughts for some time. A slight frown, as of reflection, darkened his eyes. Suddenly,—perhaps impolitely,—he interrupted Mr. Rushcroft's flow of eloquence.

"Have you any objection, Mr. Rushcroft, to a more or less personal question concerning your own private—er—misfortunes?" he asked, leaning forward.

For a moment one could have heard a pin drop. Mr. Rushcroft evidently held his breath. There could be no mistake about that.

"I don't mean to be offensive," Barnes made haste to add.

"My misfortunes are not private," said Mr. Rushcroft, with dignity. "They are decidedly public. Ask all the questions you please, my dear fellow."

"Well, it's rather delicate, but would you mind telling me just how much you were stuck up for by the—er—was it a writ of attachment?"

"It was," said the star. "A writ of inquisition, you might as well substitute. The act of a polluted, impecunious, parsimonious,—what shall I say? Well, I will be as simple as possible: hotel keeper. In other words, a damnation blighter, sir. Ninety-seven dollars and forty cents. For that pitiful amount he subjected me to—"

"Well, that isn't so bad," said Barnes, vastly relieved. "It would require that amount to square everything and release your personal effects?"

"It would release the whole blooming production," put in Mr. Dillingford, with unction. "Including my dress suit and a top hat, to say nothing of a change of linen and—"

"Two wood exteriors and a parlor set, make-up boxes, wardrobe trunks, a slide trombone and—" mused Mr. Bacon, and would have gone on but for Barnes' interruption.

He was covertly watching Miss Thackeray's half-averted face as he ventured upon the proposition he had decided to put before them. She was staring out of the window, and there was a strained, almost harassed expression about the corners of her mouth. The glimpse he had of her dark eyes revealed something sullen, rebellious in them. She had taken no part in the conversation for some time.

"I am prepared and willing to advance this amount, Mr. Rushcroft, and to take your personal note as security."

Rushcroft leaned back in his chair and stuck his thumbs in the arm holes of his vest. He displayed no undue elation. Instead he affected profound calculation. His daughter shot a swift, searching look at the would-be Samaritan. There was a heightened colour in her cheeks.

"Ahem," said Rushcroft, squinting at the ceiling beams.

"Moreover, I shall be happy to increase the amount of the loan sufficiently to cover your return at once to

New York, if you so desire,—by train." Barnes smiled as he added the last two words.

"Extremely kind of you, my dear Barnes," said the actor, running his fingers through his hair. "Your faith in me is most gratifying. I—I really don't know what to say to you, sir."

"Of course, Mr. Barnes, you ought to know that you may be a long time in getting your money back," said his daughter levelly. "We are poor pay."

"My dear child," began Mr. Rushcroft, amazed.

"I shall permit your father himself to specify the number of months or years to be written in the body of the note," said Barnes.

"And if he never pays, what then?" said she.

"I shall not trouble him with demands for the money," said Barnes.

"May I inquire just how you expect to profit by this transaction, Mr. Barnes?" she asked steadily.

He started, suddenly catching her meaning.

"My dear Miss Thackeray," he exclaimed, "this transaction is solely between your father and me. I shall have no other claim to press."

"I wish I could believe that," she said.

"You may believe it," he assured her.

"It isn't the usual course," she said quietly, and her face brightened. "You are not like most men, Mr. Barnes."

"My dear child," said Rushcroft, "you must leave this matter to our friend and me. I fancy I know an honest man when I see him. My dear fellow, fortune is but temporarily frowning upon me. In a few weeks I shall be on my feet again, zipping along on the crest of the wave. I dare say I can return the money to you in a month or six weeks. If—"

"Oh, father!" cried Miss Thackeray.

"We'll make it six months, and I'll pay any rate of interest you desire. Six per cent, eight per cent, ten per—"

"Six per cent, sir, and we will make it a year from date."

"Agreed. And now, Miss Tilly, will you ask the barmaid,—who happens to be masculine,—to step in here and take the orders? We would drink to Dame Fortune, who has a smile that defies all forms of adversity. Out of the clouds falls a slice of silver lining. It alights in my trembling palm. I—I—Damme, sir, you are a nobleman! In behalf of my daughter, my company and the—Heaven forfend! I was about to add the accursed management!—I thank you. Get up and dance for us, Dilly! We shall be in New York to-morrow!"

"You forget the dictatorial sheriff, Mr. Rushcroft," said Barnes.

"The varlet!" barked Mr. Rushcroft.

It was arranged that Dillingford and Bacon were to go to Hornville in a hired motor that afternoon, secure the judgment, pay the costs, and attend to the removal of the personal belongings of the stranded quartette from the hotel to Hart's Tavern. The younger actors stoutly refused to accept Barnes' offer to pay their board while at the Tavern. That, they declared, would be charity, and they preferred his friendship and his respect to anything of that sort. Miss Thackeray, however, was to be immediately relieved of her position as chambermaid. She was to become a paying guest.

"I'll be glad to have my street togs, such as they are," said she, rosily. "I dare say you are sick of seeing me in this rig, Mr. Barnes. That's probably why you opened your heart and purse."

"Not at all," said he gaily. "As I presume I shall have to remain here for some time, I deem it my right to improve the service as much as possible. You are a very incompetent chambermaid, Miss Thackeray."

Rushcroft took the whole affair with the most noteworthy complacency. He seemed to regard it as his due, or more properly speaking as if he were doing Barnes a great favour in allowing him to lend money to a person of his importance.

"A thought has just come to me, my dear fellow," he remarked, as they arose from table. "With the proper kind of backing I could put over one of the most stupendous things the theatre has known in fifty years. I don't mind saying to you,—although it's rather sub rosa—that I have written a play. A four act drama that will pack the biggest house on Broadway to the roof for as many months as we'd care to stay. Perhaps you will allow me to talk it over with you a little later on. You will be interested, I'm sure. I actually shudder sometimes when I think of the filthy greenbacks I'll have to carry around on my person if the piece ever gets into New York. Yes, yes, I'll be glad to talk it over with you. Egad, sir, I'll read the play to you. I'll—What ho, landlord! When my luggage arrives this evening will you be good enough to have it placed in the room just vacated by the late Mr. Roon? My daughter will have the room adjoining, sir. By the way, will you have your best automobile sent around to the door as quickly as possible? A couple of my men are going to Hornville—damned spot!—to fetch hither my—"

"Just a minute," interrupted Putnam Jones, wholly unimpressed. "A man just called you up on the 'phone, Mr. Barnes. I told him you was entertaining royalty at lunch and couldn't be disturbed. So he asked me to have you call him up as soon as you revived. His words, not mine. Call up Mr. O'Dowd at Green Fancy. Here's

the number."

The mellow voice of the Irishman soon responded.

"I called you up to relieve your mind regarding the young woman who came last night," he said. "You observe that I say 'came.' She's quite all right, safe and sound, and no cause for uneasiness. I thought you meant that she was coming here as a guest, and so I made the very natural mistake of saying she hadn't come at all, at all. The young woman in question is Mrs. Van Dyke's maid. But bless me soul, how was I to know she was even in existence, much less expected by train or motor or Shanks' mare? Well, she's here, so there's the end of our mystery. We sha'n't have to follow your gay plan of searching the wilderness for beauty in distress. Our romance is spoiled, and I am sorry to say it to you. You were so full of it this morning that you had me all stirred up meself."

Barnes was slow in replying. He was doubting his own ears. It was not conceivable that an ordinary—or even an extraordinary—lady's maid could have possessed the exquisite voice and manner of his chance acquaintance of the day before, or the temerity to order that sour-faced chauffeur about as if—The chauffeur!

"But I thought you said that Mr. Curtis's chauffeur was moon-faced and—"

"He is, bedad," broke in Mr. O'Dowd, chuckling. "That's what deceived me entirely, and no wonder. It wasn't Peter at all, but the rapscallion washer who went after her. He was instructed to tell Peter to meet the four o'clock train, and the blockhead forgot to give the order. Bedad, what does he do but sneak out after her himself, scared out of his boots for fear of what he was to get from Peter. I had the whole story from Mrs. Van Dyke."

"Well, I'm tremendously relieved," said Barnes slowly.

"And so am I," said O'Dowd, with conviction. "I have seen the heroine of our busted romance. She's a good-looking girl. I'm not surprised that she kept her veil down. If you were to leave it to me, though, I'd say that it's a sin to carry discretion so far as all that. I thought I'd take the liberty of calling you up as soon as I had the facts, so that you wouldn't go forth in knightly ardour—You see what I mean, don't you?" His rich laugh came over the wire.

"Perfectly. Thank you for letting me know. My mind is at rest."

"Will you be staying on for some days at the Tavern?"

"I think so."

"Well, I shall give myself the pleasure of running over to see you in a day or so."

"Do," said Barnes. "Good by." As he hung up the receiver he said to himself, "You are a most affable, convincing chap, Mr. O'Dowd, but I don't believe a word you say. That woman is no lady's maid, and you've known all the time that she was there."

At four o'clock he set out alone for a tramp up the mountain road in which the two men had been shot down. A number of men under the direction of the sheriff were scouring the lofty timberland for the deadly marksmen. He knew it would turn out to be as futile as the proverbial effort to find the needle in the haystack.

His mind was quite clear on the subject. Roon and Paul were not ordinary robbers. They were, no doubt, honest men. He would have said that they were thieves bent on burglarising Green Fancy were it not for the disclosures of Miss Thackeray and the very convincing proof that they were not shot by the same man. Detected on the grounds about Green Fancy by a watchman, they would have had an encounter with him there and then. Moreover, they would have taken an active part in the play of firearms. Desperadoes would not have succumbed so tamely.

It was not beyond reason,—indeed, it was quite probable,—that they were trying to cross the border; in that event, their real operations would be confined to the Canadian side of the line. They were unmistakably foreigners. That fact, in itself, went far toward establishing in his mind the conviction that they were not attempting to intercept any one coming from the other side. Equally as strong was the belief that the Canadian authorities would not have entered upon United States territory for the purpose of apprehending these suspects, no matter how thoroughly the movements and motives of the two men might have been known to them.

He could not free himself of the suspicion that Green Fancy possessed the key to the situation. Roon and his companion could not have had the slightest interest in his movements up to the instant he encountered the young woman at the cross-roads. It was ridiculous to even consider himself an object of concern to these men who had been haunting the border for days prior to his appearance on the scene. They were interested only in the advent of the woman, and as her destination confessedly was Green Fancy, what could be more natural than the conclusion that their plans, evil or otherwise, depended entirely upon her arrival at the strange house on the mountainside? They had been awaiting her appearance for days. The instant it became known to them that she was installed at Green Fancy, their plans went forward with a swiftness that bespoke complete understanding.

His busy brain suddenly suffered the shock of a distinct conclusion. So startling was the thought that he stopped abruptly in his walk and uttered an exclamation of dismay. Was she a fellow-conspirator? Was she the inside worker at Green Fancy in a well-laid plan to rifle the place? She too was unmistakably a foreigner.

Could it be possible that she was the confederate of these painstaking agents who lurked with sinister patience outside the very gates of the place called Green Fancy?

In support of this theory was the supposition that O'Dowd may have been perfectly sincere in his declarations over the telephone. Opposed to it, however, was the absolute certainty that Roon and Paul were waylaid and killed at widely separated points, and not while actively employed in raiding the house. That was the rock over which all of his theories stumbled.

His ramble carried him far beyond the spot where Roon's body was found and where young Conley had come upon the tethered horses. His eager, curious gaze swept the forest to the left of the road in search of Green Fancy. Overcome by a rash, daring impulse, he climbed over the stake and rider fence and sauntered among the big trees which so far had obscured the house from view. He had looked in vain for the lane or avenue leading from the road up to Mr. Curtis's house. He could not have passed it in his stroll, of that he was sure, and yet he remembered distinctly seeing O'Dowd and De Soto turn their horses into the forest at a point far back of the place where he now entered the grounds.

The trees grew very thickly on the slope, and they were unusually large. Virgin timber, he decided, on which the woodman's axe had made no inroads. The foliage was dense. Tree tops seemed to intermingle in one vast canopy through which the sun but rarely penetrated. The bright green of the grass, the sponginess of the soil, the presence of great stretches of ferns and beds of moss told of almost perpetual moisture. Strangely enough there was no suggestion of dankness in these shadowy glades, rich with the fulness of early Spring.

He progressed deeper into the wood. At the end of what must have been a mile, he halted. There was no sign of habitation, no indication that man had ever penetrated so far into the forest. As he was on the point of retracing his steps toward the road, his gaze fell upon a huge moss-covered rock less than a hundred yards away. He stared, and gradually it began to take on angles and planes and recesses of the most astounding symmetry. Under his widening gaze it was transformed into a substantial object of cubes and gables and—yes, windows.

He was looking upon the strange home of the even stranger Mr. Curtis: Green Fancy.

Now he understood why it was called Green Fancy. Its surroundings were no greener than itself; it seemed to melt into the foliage, to become a part of the natural landscape. For a long time he stood stock-still, studying the curious structure. Mountain ivy literally enveloped it. Exposed sections of the house were painted green,—a mottled green that seemed to indicate flickering sunbeams against an emerald wall. The doors were green; the leafy porches and their columns, the chimney pots, the window hangings,—all were the colour of the unchanging forest. And it was a place of huge dimensions, low and long and rambling. It seemed to have been forcibly jammed into the steep slope that shot high above its chimneys; the mountain hung over its vine clad roof, an ominous threat of oblivion.

There was no lawn, no indication of landscape gardening, and yet Barnes was singularly impressed by the arrangement of the shrubbery that surrounded the place. There was no visible approach to the house through the thick, unbroken sea of green; everywhere was dense underbrush, standing higher than the head of the tallest of men,—clean, bright bushes, revealing the most astonishing uniformity in size and character.

"'Gad," he said to himself, "what manner of crank is he who would bury himself like this? Of all the crazy ideas I ever—"

His reflections ended there. A woman crossed his vision; a woman strolling slowly toward him through the intricate avenues of the wildwood.

CHAPTER VII — SPUN-GOLD HAIR, BLUE EYES, AND VARIOUS ENCOUNTERS

She was quite unaware of his presence, and yet he was directly in her path, though some distance away. Her head was bent; her mien was thoughtful, her stride slow and aimless.

The azure blue of the sweater she wore presented an inharmonious note on the field of velvety green;—it was strangely out of place, he thought,—almost an offence to the eye. He was conscious of an instant protest against this profanation.

She was slender, graceful and evidently quite tall, although she seemed a pigmy among the towering giants that attended her stroll. Her hands were thrust deep into the pockets of a white duck skirt. A glance revealed white shoes and trim ankles in blue. She wore no hat. Her hair was like spun gold, thick, wavy and shimmering in the subdued light.

Suddenly she stopped, and looked up. He had a full view of her face as she gazed about as if startled by some unexpected, even alarming, sound. For a second or two he held his breath, stunned by the amazing loveliness that was revealed to him. Then she discovered him standing there.

He was never to forget the expression that came into her eyes; nor had he ever seen eyes so blue. Alarm gave way to bewilderment as she stared at the motionless intruder not thirty feet away. Then, to his utter

astonishment, her lips parted and a faint, wondering smile came into her eyes. His heart leaped. She recognised him!

In a flash he realised that he was face to face with the stranger of the day before,—she of the veil, the alluring voice, the unfaltering spirits, and the weighty handbag!

He took two or three impulsive steps forward, his hand going to his hat,—and then halted. Evidently his senses had deceived him. There was no smile in her eyes,—and yet he could have sworn that it was there an instant before. Instead, there was a level stare.

"I am sorry if I startled—" he began.

The figure of a man appeared, as if discharged bodily from some magic tree-trunk, and stood directly in his path: A tall, rugged man in overalls was he, who held a spade in his hand and eyed him inimically. Without another glance in his direction, the first and more pleasing vision turned on her heel and continued her stroll, sauntering off to the right, her fair head once more bent in study, her back eloquently indifferent to the gaze that followed her.

"Who do you want to see?" inquired the man with the spade.

Before Barnes could reply, a hearty voice accosted him from behind. He whirled and saw O'Dowd approaching, not twenty yards away. The Irishman's face was aglow with pleasure.

"I knew I couldn't be mistaken in the shape of you," he cried, advancing with outstretched hand. "You've got the breadth of a dock-hand in your shoulders, and the trimness of a prize-fighter in your waist."

They shook hands. "I fear I am trespassing," said Barnes. His glance went over his shoulder as he spoke. The man with the spade had been swallowed up by the earth! He could not have vanished more quickly in any other way. Off among the trees there were intermittent flashes of blue and white.

"I am quite sure you are," said O'Dowd promptly, but without a trace of unfriendliness in his manner. "Bedad, loving him as I do, I can't help saying that Curtis is a bally old crank. Mind ye, I'd say it to his face,—I often do, for the matter of that. Of course," he went on seriously, "he is a sick man, poor devil. I have the unholy courage to call him a chronic crank every once in awhile, and the best thing I can say for his health is that he grins when I say it to him. You see, I've known him for a dozen years and more, and he likes me, though God knows why, unless it may be that I once did his son a good turn in London."

"Sufficient excuse for reparation, I should say," smiled Barnes.

"I introduced the lad to me only sister," said O'Dowd, "and she kept him happy for the next ten years. No doubt, I also provided Mr. Curtis with three grandchildren he might never have had but for my graciousness. As for that, I let meself in for three of the most prodigious nephews a man ever had, God bless them. I'll show you a photograph of them if ye'd care to look." He opened the back of his watch and held it out to Barnes. "Nine, seven and five, and all of them as bright as Gladstone."

"They must be stunning," said Barnes warmly.

"They'll make a beggar of me, if I live long enough," groaned O'Dowd. "It beats the deuce how childer as young as they are can have discovered what a doddering fool their uncle is. Bedad, the smallest of them knows it. The very instant I pretend to be a sensible, provident, middle-aged gentleman he shows me up most shamelessly. 'Twas only a couple of months ago that his confounded blandishments wiggled a sixty-five dollar fire engine out of me. He squirted water all over the drawing-room furniture, and I haven't been allowed to put foot into the house since. My own darlin' sister refused to look at me for a week, and it wouldn't surprise me in the least if she changed me namesake's title to something less enfuriating than William." A look of distress came into his merry eyes. "By Jove, I'd like nothing better than to ask you in to have a dish of tea,—it's tea-time, I'm sure,—but I'd no more think of doing it than I'd consider cutting off me head. He doesn't like strangers. He—"

"My dear fellow, don't distress yourself," cried Barnes heartily. "There isn't the least reason in the world why—"

"You see, the poor old chap asks us up here once or twice a year,—that is to say, De Soto and me,—to keep his sister from filling the house up with men he can't endure. So long as we occupy the only available rooms, he argues, she can't stuff them full of objectionables. Twice a year she comes for a month, in the late fall and early spring. He's very fond of her, and she stands by him like a major."

"Why does he continue to live in this out-of-the-world spot, Mr. O'Dowd? He is an old man, I take it, and ill."

"You wouldn't be wondering if you knew the man," said O'Dowd. "He is a scholar, a dreamer, a sufferer. He doesn't believe in doctors. He says they're all rascals. They'd keep him alive just for the sake of what they could get out of him. So he's up here to die in peace, when his time comes, and he hopes it will come soon. He doesn't want it prolonged by a grasping, greedy doctor man. It's his kidneys, you know. He's not a very old man at that. Not more than sixty-five."

"He certainly has a fanciful streak in him, building a place like that," said Barnes, looking not at the house but into the thicket above. There was no sign of the blue and white and the spun gold that still defied exclusion from his mind's eye. He had not recovered from the thrall into which the vision of loveliness plunged him. He was still a trifle dazed and distraught.

"Right you are," agreed O'Dowd; "the queerest streak in the world. It's his notion of simplicity. I wish you could see the inside of the place. You'd wonder to what exalted heights his ideas of magnificence would carry him if he calls this simplicity. He loves it all, he dotes on it. It's the only joy he knows, this bewildering

creation of his. For nearly three years he has not been more than a stone's throw from the walls of that house. I doubt if he's been as far as the spot where we're standing now."

"Green Fancy. Is that the name he gave the place or does it spring from—"

"'Twas christened by me own sister, Mr. Barnes, the first time she was here, two years ago. I'll walk with you to the fence beyond if you've no objections," said O'Dowd, genially, and linked his arm through that of Barnes.

The latter was at once subtly aware of the fact that he was being deliberately conducted from the grounds. Moreover, he was now convinced that O'Dowd had been close upon his heels from the instant he entered them. There was something uncanny in the feeling that possessed him. Such espionage as this signified something deep and imperative in the presence not only of O'Dowd but the Jack-in-the-box gardener a few minutes earlier. He had the grim suspicion that he would later on encounter the spectacled De Soto.

His mind was still full of the lovely stranger about whom O'Dowd had so manifestly lied over the telephone.

"I must ask you to apologise to the young lady on whom I blundered a few moments ago, Mr. O'Dowd. She must have been startled. Pray convey to her my solicitude and excuses."

"Consider it done, my dear sir," said the Irishman. "Our most charming and seductive guest," he went on. "Bedad, of the two of you, I'll stake me head you were startled the most. Coming suddenly upon such rare loveliness is almost equivalent to being struck by a bolt of lightning. It did something like that to me when I saw her for the first time a couple of weeks ago. I didn't get over it for the better part of a day,—I can't say that I really got over it at all. More than one painter of portraits has said that she is the most beautiful woman in the world. I don't take much stock in portrait painters, but I'm always fair to the lords of creation when their opinions coincide with mine. Mayhap you have heard of her. She is Miss Cameron of New Orleans, a friend of Mrs. Van Dyke. We have quite an enchanting house-party, Mr. Barnes, if you consider no more than the feminine side of it. Unfortunate creatures! To be saddled with such ungainly lummixes as De Soto and me! By the way, have you heard when the coroner is to hold his inquests?"

"Nothing definite. He may wait a week," said Barnes.

"I suppose you'll stick around until it's all over," ventured O'Dowd. Barnes thought he detected a slight harshness in his voice.

"I have quite made up my mind to stay until the mystery is entirely cleared up," he said. "The case is so interesting that I don't want to miss a shred of it."

"I don't blame ye," said O'Dowd heartily. "I'd like nothing better meself than to mix up in it, but, Lord love ye, if I turned detective I'd also be turned out of the spare bed-room beyond, and sped on me way with curses. Well, here we are. The next time you plan to pay us a visit, telephone in advance. I may be able to persuade my host that you're a decent, law-abiding, educated gentleman, and he'll consent to receive you at Green Fancy. Good day to ye," and he shook hands with the departing trespasser.

A quarter of a mile below the spot where he parted from O'Dowd, Barnes caught a glimpse of De Soto sauntering among the trees. He smiled to himself. It was just what he had expected.

"Takin' a walk?" was the landlord's greeting as he mounted the tavern steps at dusk. Putnam Jones's gaunt figure had been discernible for some time, standing motionless at the top of the steps.

"Going over the ground of last night's affair," responded Barnes, pausing. "Any word from the sheriff and his party?"

"Nope. The blamed fools are still up there turnin' over all the loose stones they c'n find," said Jones sarcastically. "Did you get a glimpse of Green Fancy?"

Barnes nodded. "I strolled a little distance into the woods," he said briefly.

"I wouldn't do it again," said Jones. "Strangers ain't welcome. I might have told you as much if I'd thought you were going up that way. Mr. Curtis notified me a long while ago to warn my guests not to set foot on his grounds, under penalty of the law."

"Well, I escaped without injury," laughed Barnes. "No one took a shot at me."

As he entered the door he was acutely aware of an intense stare levelled at him from behind by the landlord of Hart's Tavern. Half way up the stairway he stopped short, and with difficulty repressed the exclamation that rose to his lips.

He had recalled a significant incident of the night before. Almost immediately after the departure of Roon and Paul from the Tavern, Putnam Jones had made his way to the telephone behind the desk, and had called for a number in a loud, brisk voice, but the subsequent conversation was carried on in subdued tones, attended by haste and occasional furtive glances in the direction of the tap-room.

Upon reaching his room, Barnes permitted the suppressed emotion to escape his lips in the shape of a soft whistle, which if it could have been translated into words would have said: "By Gad, why haven't I thought of it before? He sent out the warning that Roon and Paul were on the way! And I'd like to bet my last dollar that some one at Green Fancy had the other end of the wire."

Mr. Rushcroft stalked majestically into his room while he was shaving, without taking the trouble to knock at the door, and in his most impressive manner announced that if there was another hostelry within reasonable distance he would move himself, his luggage and his entire company out of Putnam Jones's

incomprehensible house.

"Why, sir," he declared, "the man is not only a knave but a fool. He flatly declines the prodigious offer I have made for the corner rooms at the end of the corridor. In fact, he refuses to transfer my daughter and me from our present quarters into what might be called the royal suite if one were disposed to be facetious. The confounded blockhead insists on seeing the colour of my money in advance." He sat down on the edge of the bed, dejectedly. "My daughter, perversity personified, takes the extraordinary stand that the wretch is right. She agrees with him. She has even gone so far as to say, to my face, that beggars cannot be choosers, although I must give her credit for not using the expression in the scoundrel's presence. 'Pon my soul, Barnes, I have never been so sorely tried in all my life. Emma,—I should say, Mercedes,—denounces me to my face. She says I am a wastrel, a profligate,—(there I have her, however, for she failed to consult the dictionary before applying the word to me),—an ingrate, and a lot of other things I fail to recall in my dismay. She contends that I have no right to do what I please with my own money. Indeed, she goes so far as to say that I haven't any money at all. I have tried to explain to her the very simple principles upon which all financial transactions are based, but she remains as obtuse as Cleopatra's Needle. Her ignorance would be pitiful if she wasn't so damned obstinate about it. And to cap the climax, she had the insolence to ask me to show her a dollar in real money. By gad, sir, she's as unreasonable as Putnam Jones himself."

Barnes gallantly came to the daughter's defense. He was more than pleased by the father's revelations. They proved her to be possessed of fine feelings and a genuine sense of appreciation.

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Rushcroft, I think she is quite right," he said flatly. "It isn't a bad idea to practice economy."

"My dear sir," said Rushcroft peevishly, "where would I be now in my profession if I had practiced economy at the expense of progress?"

"I don't know," confessed Barnes, much too promptly.

"I can tell you, sir. I would be nowhere at all. I would not be the possessor of a name that is known from one end of this land to the other, a name that guarantees to the public the most elaborate productions known to —"

"Pardon me," interrupted the other; "it doesn't get you anywhere with Putnam Jones, and that is the issue at present. The government puts the portrait of George Washington on one of its greenbacks but his face and name wouldn't be worth the tenth of a penny if the United States went bankrupt. As it is, however, if you were to go downstairs and proffer one of those bills to Putnam Jones he would make his most elaborate bow and put you into the best room in the house. George Washington has backing that even Mr. Jones cannot despise. So, you see, your daughter is right. Your name and face is yet to be stamped on a government bank note, Mr. Rushcroft, and until that time comes you are no better off than I or any of the rest of the unfortunates who, being still alive, have to eat for a living."

"You speak in parables," said Mr. Rushcroft, arising. "Am I to assume that you wish to withdraw your offer to lend me—"

"Not at all," said Barnes. "My desire to stake you to the comforts and dignity your station deserves remains unchanged. If you will bear with me until I have finished shaving I will go with you to Mr. Jones and show him the colour of your money."

Mr. Rushcroft grinned shamelessly. "My daughter was right when she said another thing to me," he observed, sitting down once more.

"She appears to be more or less infallible."

"A woman in a million," said the star. "She said that I wouldn't make a hit with you if I attempted to put on too much side. I perceive that she was right,—as usual."

"Absolutely," said Barnes, with decision.

"So I'll cut it out," remarked Rushcroft quaintly. "I will be everlastingly grateful to you, Mr. Barnes, if you'll fix things up with Jones. God knows when or whether I can ever reimburse you, but as I am not really a dead-beat the time will certainly come when I may begin paying in installments. Do we understand each other?"

"We do," said Barnes, and started downstairs with him.

Half an hour later Barnes succeeded in striking a bargain with Putnam Jones. He got the two rooms at the end of the hall at half price, insisting that it was customary for every hotel to give actors a substantial reduction in rates.

"You shall be treasurer and business-manager in my reorganized company," said Rushcroft. "With your acumen and my eccentricity united in a common cause we will stagger the universe."

Despite his rehabilitation as a gentleman of means and independence, Mr. Rushcroft could not forego the pleasure of staggering a small section of the world that very night. He was giving Hamlet's address to the players in the tap-room when Barnes came downstairs at nine o'clock. Bacon and Dillingford having returned earlier in the evening with the trunks, bags and other portable chattels of the defunct "troupe," Mr. Rushcroft was performing in a sadly wrinkled Norfolk suit of grey which Dillingford was under solemn injunction to press before breakfast the next morning.

"I know I don't have to do it," said the star, catching the surprised look in Barnes's eye and pausing to explain, sotto voce, "but I hadn't the heart to refuse. They're eating it up, my dear fellow. Up to this instant they've been sitting with their mouths wide open while I hurled it, word after word, into their very vitals.

"Whereupon he resumed the sonorous monologue, glowering balefully upon his transfixed hearers.

Barnes, leaning against the door-jamb, listened with an amused smile on his lips. His gaze swept the rapt faces of the dozen or more customers seated at the tables, and he found himself wondering if one of these men was the father of the little girl whose mother had described Hart's Tavern as a "shindy." Was it only yesterday that he had spoken with the barefoot child? An age seemed to have passed since that brief encounter.

Rushcroft ended Hamlet's speech in fine style, and almost instantly a mild voice from the crowd asked if he knew "Casey at the Bat." Not in the least distressed by this woeful commentary, Mr. Rushcroft cheerfully, obligingly tackled the tragic fizzle of the immortal Casey.

A small, dark man who sat alone at a table in the corner, caught Barnes's eye and smiled almost mournfully. He was undoubtedly a stranger; his action was meant to convey to Barnes the information that he too was from a distant and sophisticated community, and that a bond of sympathy existed between them.

Putnam Jones spoke suddenly at Barnes's shoulder. He started involuntarily. The man was beginning to get on his nerves. He seemed to be dogging his footsteps with ceaseless persistency.

"That feller over there in the corner," said Jones, softly, "is a book-agent from your town. He sold me a set of Dickens when he was here last time, about six weeks ago. A year's subscription to two magazines throwed in. By gosh, these book-agents are slick ones. I didn't want that set of Dickens any more'n I wanted a last year's bird's nest. The thing I'm afraid of is that he'll talk me into taking a set of Scott before he moves on. He's got me sweatin' already."

"He's a shrewd looking chap," commented Barnes.

"Says he won't be satisfied till he's made this section of the country the most cultured, refined spot in the United States," said Jones dolefully. "He brags about how much he did toward makin' Boston the literary centre of the United States, him and his father before him. Together, he says, they actually elevated Boston from the bottomless pit of ignorance and——Excuse me. There goes the telephone. Maybe it's news from the sheriff."

With the spasmodic tinkling of the telephone bell, the book-agent arose and made his way to the little office. As he passed Barnes, he winked broadly, and said, out of the corner of his mouth:

"He'd make DeWolf Hopper look sick, wouldn't he?"

Barnes glanced over his shoulder a moment later and saw the book-agent studying the register. The poise of his sleek head, however, suggested a listening attitude. Putnam Jones, not four feet away, was speaking into the telephone receiver. As the receiver was restored to its hook, Barnes turned again. Jones and the book-agent were examining the register, their heads almost meeting from opposite sides of the desk.

The latter straightened up, stretched his arms, yawned, and announced in a loud tone that he guessed he'd step out and get a bit of fresh air before turning in.

"Any news?" inquired Barnes, approaching the desk after the door had closed behind the book-agent.

"It wasn't the sheriff," replied Jones shortly, and immediately resumed his interrupted discourse on books, book-agents and the reclamation of Boston. Ten minutes elapsed before the landlord's garrulity was checked by the sound of an automobile coming to a stop in front of the house. Barnes turned expectantly toward the door. Almost immediately the car started up again, with a loud shifting of gears, and a moment later the door opened to admit, not a fresh arrival, but the little book-agent.

"Party trying to make Hornville to-night," he announced casually. "Well, good night. See you in the morning."

Barnes was not in a position to doubt the fellow's word, for the car unmistakably had gone on toward Hornville. He waited a few minutes after the man disappeared up the narrow stairway, and then proceeded to test his powers of divination. He was as sure as he could be sure of anything that had not actually come to pass, that in a short time the automobile would again pass the tavern but this time from the direction of Hornville.

Lighting a cigarette, he strolled outside. He had barely time to take a position at the darkened end of the porch before the sounds of an approaching machine came to his ears. A second or two later the lights swung around the bend in the road a quarter of a mile above Hart's Tavern, and down came the car at a high rate of speed. It dashed past the tavern with a great roar and rattle and shot off into the darkness beyond. As it rushed through the dim circle of light in front of the tavern, Barnes succeeded in obtaining a brief but convincing view of the car. That glance was enough, however. He would have been willing to go before a jury and swear that it was the same car that had deposited him at Hart's Tavern the day before.

Having guessed correctly in the one instance, he allowed himself another and even bolder guess: the little book-agent had either received a message from or delivered one to the occupant or driver of the car from Green Fancy.

CHAPTER VIII — A NOTE, SOME FANCIES, AND AN EXPEDITION IN QUEST OF FACTS

Dillingford gave him a lighted candle at the desk and he started upstairs, his mind full of the events and conjectures of the day. Uppermost in his thoughts was the dazzling vision of the afternoon, and the fleeting smile that had come to him through the leafy interstices. As he entered the room, his eyes fell upon a white envelope at his feet. It had been slipped under the door since he left the room an hour before.

Terse reminder from the prudent Mr. Jones! His bill for the day! He picked it up, glanced at the inscription, and at once altered his opinion. His full name was there in the handwriting of a woman. For a moment he was puzzled; then he thought of Miss Thackeray. A note of thanks, no doubt, unpleasantly fulsome! Vaguely annoyed, he ripped open the envelope and read:

"In case I do not have the opportunity to speak with you to-night, this is to let you know that the little man who says he is a book-agent was in your room for three-quarters of an hour while you were away this afternoon. You'd better see if anything is missing.
M.T."

He read the note again, and then held it over the candle flame. Surprise and a temporary indignation gave way before the thrill of exultation as the blazing paper fell upon the hearth.

"'Gad, it grows more and more interesting," he mused, and chuckled aloud. "They're not losing a minute's time in finding out all they can about me, that's certain. Thanks, my dear Miss Thackeray. You are undoubtedly deceived but I am not. This chap may be a detective but he isn't looking for evidence to connect me with last night's murders. Not a bit of it. He is trying to find out whether I ought to be shot the next time I go snooping around Green Fancy. I'd give a good deal to know what he put into the report he sent off a little while ago. And I'd give a good deal more to know just where Mr. Jones stands in this business. Selling sets of Dickens, eh? Book-agent by day, secret agent by night,—'gad, he may even be a road-agent!"

He made a hasty but careful examination of his effects. There was not the slightest evidence that his pack had been opened or even disturbed. Naturally he travelled without surplus impedimenta; he carried the lightest outfit possible. There were a few papers containing notes and memoranda; a small camera and films; a blank book to which he transferred his daily experiences, observations and impressions; a small medicine case; tobacco and cigarettes; a flask of brandy; copies of Galworthy's "Man of Property" and Hutchinson's "Happy Warrior"; wearing apparel, and a revolver. His purse and private papers rarely were off his person. If the little book-agent spent three-quarters of an hour in the room he managed most effectually to cover up all traces of his visit.

Barnes did not go to sleep until long after midnight. He now regarded himself as definitely committed to a combination of sinister and piquant enterprises, not the least of which was the determination to find out all there was to know about the mysterious young woman at Green Fancy.

His operations along any line of endeavour were bound to be difficult, perhaps hazardous. Every movement that he made would be observed and reported; his every step followed. He could hope to disarm suspicion only by moving with the utmost boldness and unconcern. Success rested in his ability to convince O'Dowd, Jones and the rest of them that they had nothing to fear from his innocuous wanderings.

His interest in the sensational affair that had disturbed his first night's rest at Hart's Tavern must remain paramount. His theories, deductions and suggestions as to the designs and identity of Roon and Paul; the stated results of personal and no doubt ludicrous experiments; sly and confidential jabs at the incompetent investigators, uttered behind the hand to Putnam Jones and, if possible, to the book-agent;—a quixotic philanthropy in connection with the fortunes of Rushcroft and his players; all these would have to be put forward in the scheme to dispel suspicion at Green Fancy.

It did not occur to him that he ought to be furthering the ends of justice by disclosing to the authorities his secret opinion of Putman Jones, the strange behaviour of Roon as observed by Miss Thackeray, and his own adventure with the lady of the cross-roads. The chance that Jones, subjected to third degree pressure, might break down and reveal all that he knew was not even considered.

Back of all his motives was the spur of Romance: his real interest was centred in the lovely lady of Green Fancy.

He was confident that O'Dowd's system of espionage would quickly absolve him of all interest in or connection with the plans of Albert Roon; it remained therefore for him to convince the Irishman that he had no notions or vagaries inimical to the well-being of Green Fancy or its occupants. With that result achieved, he need have no fear of meeting the fate that had befallen Roon and his lieutenant; nothing worse could happen than an arrest and fine for trespass.

The next day he, with other lodgers in the Tavern, was put through an examination by police and county officials from Saint Elizabeth, and notified that, while he was not under suspicion or surveillance, it would be necessary for him to remain in the "bailiwick" until detectives, already on the way, were satisfied that he possessed no knowledge that would be useful to them in clearing up what had now assumed the dignity of a "national problem."

O'Dowd rode down from Green Fancy and created quite a sensation among the officials by announcing that Mr. Curtis desired them to feel that they had a perfect right to extend their search for clues to all parts of his estate, and that he was deeply interested in the outcome of their investigations.

"The devils may have laid their ambush on his property," said O'Dowd, "and they may have made their escape into the hills back of his place without running the risk of tackling the highways. Nothing, Mr. Curtis says, should stand in the way of justice. While he knows that you have a legal right to enter his grounds, and even his house, in the pursuit of duty, he urges me to make it clear to you gentlemen, that you are welcome to come without even so much as a demand upon him. If I may be so bold as to offer my services, you may count on me to act as guide at any time you may elect. I know the lay of the land pretty well, and what I don't know the gardeners and other men up there do. You are to call upon all of us if necessary. Mr. Curtis, as you know, is an invalid. May I suggest, therefore, that you conduct your examination of the grounds near his home with as little commotion as possible? Incidentally, I may inform you, but one person at Green Fancy heard the shots. That person was Mr. Curtis himself. He rang for his attendant and instructed him to send some one out to find out what it was all about. The chauffeur went down to Conley's, as you know. If you consider it absolutely necessary to question Mr. Curtis as to the time the shots were fired, he will receive you; but I think you may properly establish that fact by young Conley without submitting a sick man to the excitement and distress of a—"

The sheriff hastily broke in with the assurance that it was not at all necessary to disturb Mr. Curtis. It wasn't to be thought of for a moment. He would, however, like to "run over the ground a bit" that very afternoon, if it was agreeable to Mr. O'Dowd.

It being quite agreeable, the genial Irishman proposed that his friend, Mr. Barnes,—(here he bestowed an almost imperceptible wink upon the New Yorker),—should join the party. He could vouch for the intelligence and discretion of the gentleman.

Barnes, concealing his surprise, expressed himself as happy to be of any service. He glanced at Putnam Jones as he made the statement. It was at once borne in upon him that the landlord's attitude toward him had undergone a marked change in the last few minutes. The furtive, distrustful look was missing from his eyes and in its place was a friendly, approving twinkle.

O'Dowd stayed to dinner. (Dinner was served in the middle of the day at Hart's Tavern.) He made a great impression upon Lyndon Rushcroft, who, with his daughter, joined the two men. Indeed, the palavering Irishman extended himself in the effort to make himself agreeable. He was vastly interested in the stage, he declared. As a matter of fact, he had been told a thousand times that he ought to go on the stage. He had decided talent....

"If you change your mind," said Mr. Rushcroft, "and conclude to try a whirl at it, just let me know. I can find a place for you in my company at any time. If there isn't a vacancy, we can always write in an Irish comedy part."

"But I never wanted to be a comedian," said O'Dowd. "I've always wanted to play the young hero,—the fellow who gets the girl, you know." He bestowed a gallant smile upon Miss Thackeray.

"You may take my word for it, sir," said Mr. Rushcroft with feeling, "heroism, and nothing less, is necessary to the man who has to play opposite most of the harridans you, in your ignorance, speak of as girls." And he launched forth upon a round of soul-trying experiences with "leading-ladies."

The little book-agent came in while they were at table. He sat down in a corner of the dining-room and busied himself with his subscription lists while waiting for the meal to be served. He was still poring over them, frowning intently, when Barnes and the others left the room.

Barnes walked out beside Miss Thackeray.

"The tailor-made gown is an improvement," he said to her.

"Does that mean that I look more like a good chambermaid than I did before?"

"If you would consider it a compliment, yes," he replied, smiling. He was thinking that she was a very pretty girl, after all.

"The frock usually makes the woman," she said slowly, "but not always the lady."

He thought of that remark more than once during the course of an afternoon spent in the woods about Green Fancy.

O'Dowd virtually commanded the expedition. It was he who thought of everything. First of all, he led the party to the corner of the estate nearest the point where Paul was shot from his horse. Sitting in his own saddle, he called the attention of the other riders to what appeared to be a most significant fact in connection with the killing of this man.

"From what I hear, the man Paul was shot through the lungs, directly from in front. The bullet went straight through his body. He was riding very rapidly down this road. When he came to a point not far above cross-roads, he was fired upon. It is safe to assume that he was looking intently ahead, trying to make out the crossing. He was not shot from the side of the road, gentlemen, but from the middle of it. The bullet came from a point almost directly in front of him, and not from Mr. Curtis's property here to the left, or Mr. Conley's on the right. Understand, this is my whimsey only. I may be entirely wrong. My idea is that the man who shot him waited here at the cross-roads to head off either or both of them in case they were not winged by men stationed farther up. Of course, that must be quite obvious to all of you. My friend De Soto is inclined to the belief that they were trying to get across the border. I don't believe so. If that were the case, why did they dismount above Conley's house, hitch their horses to the fence, and set forth on foot? I am convinced in my own mind that they came here to meet some one to whom they were to deliver a verbal report of vital importance,—some one from across the border in Canada. This message was delivered. So far as Roon and

Paul were concerned their usefulness was ended. They had done all that was required of them. The cause they served was better off with them dead than alive. Without the slightest compunction, without the least regard for faithful service, they were set upon and slain by their supposed friends. Now, you may laugh at my fancy if you like, but you must remember that frightful things are happening in these days. The killing of these men adds but a drop to the ocean of blood that is being shed. Roon and Paul, suddenly confronted by treachery, fled for their lives. The trap had been set with care, however; they rushed into it."

"I am inclined to your hypothesis, O'Dowd," said Barnes. "It seems sound and reasonable. The extraordinary precautions taken by Roon and Paul to prevent identification, dead or alive, supports your whimsey, as you call it. The thing that puzzles me, however, is the singular failure of the two men to defend themselves. They were armed, yet neither fired a shot. You would think that when they found themselves in a tight place, such as you suggest, their first impulse would be to shoot."

"Well," mused O'Dowd, squinting his eyes in thought, "there's something in that. It doesn't seem reasonable that they'd run like whiteheads with guns in—By Jove, here's a new thought!" His eyes glistened with boyish elation. "They had delivered their message,—we'll assume that much, of course,—and were walking back to their horses when they were ordered to halt by some one hidden in the brush at the roadside. You can't very well succeed in hitting a man if you can't see him at all, so they made a dash for it instead of wasting time in shooting at the air. What's more, they may have anticipated the very thing that happened: they were prepared for treachery. Their only chance lay in getting safely into their saddles. Oh, I am a good romancer! I should be writing dime novels instead of living the respectable life I do. Conley heard them running for their lives. Assassins had been stationed along the road to head them off, however. The man who had his place near the horses, got Roon. The chances are that Paul did not accompany Roon to the meeting place up the road. He remained near the horses. That's how he managed to get away so quickly. It remained for the man at the cross-roads to settle with him. But, we're wasting time with all this twaddle of mine. Let us be moving. There is one point on which we must all agree. The deadliest marksmen in the world fired those shots. No bungling on that score, bedad."

In course of time, the party, traversing the ground contiguous to the public road, came within sight of the green dwelling among the trees. Barnes's interest revived. He had, from the outset, appreciated the futility of the search for clues in the territory they had covered. The searchers were incapable of conducting a scientific examination. It was work for the most skilful, the most practised, the most untiring of tracers. His second view of the house increased his wonder and admiration. If O'Dowd had not actually located it among the trees for him, he would have been at a loss to discover it, although it was immediately in front of him and in direct line of vision.

"Astonishing, isn't it?" said the Irishman, as they stood side by side, peering ahead.

"Marvellous is the better word," said Barnes.

"The fairies might have built it," said the other, with something like awe in his voice. He shook his head solemnly.

"One could almost fancy that a fairy queen dwelt there, surrounded by Peter Pans and Aladdins," mused Barnes.

"Instead of an ogre attended by owls and nightbirds and the devil knows what,—for I don't."

Barnes looked at him in amazement, struck by the curious note in his voice.

"If you were a small boy in knickers, O'Dowd, I should say that you were mortally afraid of the place."

"If I were a small boy," said O'Dowd, "I'd be scairt entirely out of me knickers. I'd keep me boots on, mind ye, so that I could run the better. It's me Irish imagination that does the trick. You never saw an Irishman in your life that wasn't conscious of the 'little people' that inhabit the places that are always dark and green."

De Soto was seen approaching through the green sea, his head appearing and disappearing intermittently in the billows formed by the undulating underbrush. He shook hands with Barnes a moment later.

"I'm glad you had the sense to bring Mr. Barnes with you, O'Dowd," said he. "You didn't mention him when you telephoned that you were personally conducting a sight-seeing party. I tried to catch you afterwards on the telephone, but you had left the tavern. Mrs. Collier wanted me to ask you to capture Mr. Barnes for dinner to-night."

"Mrs. Collier is the sister of Mr. Curtis," explained O'Dowd. Then he turned upon De Soto incredulously. "For the love of Pat," he cried "what's come over them? When I made so bold as to suggest last night that you were a chap worth cultivating, Barnes,—and that you wouldn't be long in the neighbourhood,—But, to save your feelings I'll not repeat what they said, the two of them. What changed them over, De Soto?"

"A chance remark of Miss Cameron's at lunch to-day. She wondered if Barnes could be the chap who wrote the articles about Peru and the Incas, or something of the sort, and that set them to looking up the back numbers of the geographic magazine in Mr. Curtis's library. Not only did they find the articles but they found your picture. I had no difficulty in deciding that you were one and the same. The atmosphere cleared in a jiffy. It became even clearer when it was discovered that you have had a few ancestors and are received in good society—both here and abroad, as the late Frederic Townsend Martin would have said. I hereby officially present the result of subsequent deliberation. Mr. Barnes is invited to dine with us to-night."

Barnes's heart was still pounding rapidly as he made the rueful admission that he "didn't have a thing to wear." He couldn't think of accepting the gracious invitation—

"Don't you think the clothes you have on your back will last through the evening?" inquired O'Dowd

quaintly.

"But look at them!" cried Barnes. "I've tramped in 'em for two weeks and—"

"All the more reason why you should be thankful they're good and stout," said O'Dowd.

"We live rather simply up here, Mr. Barnes," said De Soto. "There isn't a dinner jacket or a spike tail coat on the place. It's strictly against the law up here to have such things about one's person. Come as you are, sir. I assure you I speak the truth when I say we don't dress for dinner."

"Bedad," said O'Dowd enthusiastically, "if it will make ye feel any more comfortable I'll put on the corduroy outfit I go trout fishing in, bespattered and patched as it is. And De Soto will appear in the white duck trousers and blazer he tries to play tennis in,—though, God bless him, poor wretch, he hates to put them on after all he's heard said about his game."

"If they'll take me as I am," began Barnes, doubtfully.

"I say," called out O'Dowd to the sheriff, who was gazing longingly at the horses tethered at the bottom of the slope; "would ye mind leading Mr. Barnes's nag back to the Tavern? He is stopping to dinner. And, while I think of it, are you satisfied, Mr. Sheriff, with the day's work? If not, you will be welcome again at any time, if ye'll only telephone a half minute in advance." To Barnes he said: "We'll send you down in the automobile to-night, provided it has survived the day. We're expecting the poor thing to die in its tracks at almost any instant."

Ten minutes later Barnes passed through the portals of Green Fancy.

CHAPTER IX — THE FIRST WAYFARER, THE SECOND WAYFARER, AND THE SPIRIT OF CHIVALRY ASCENDANT

The wide green door, set far back in a recess not unlike a kiosk, was opened by a man-servant who might easily have been mistaken for a waiter from Delmonico's or Sherry's. He did not have the air or aplomb of a butler, nor the smartness of a footman. On the contrary, he was a thick-set, rather scrubby sort of person with all the symptoms of cafe servitude about him, including the never-failing doubt as to nationality. He might have been a Greek, a Pole, an Italian or a Turk.

"Say to Mrs. Collier, Nicholas, that Mr. Barnes is here for dinner," said De Soto. "I will make the cocktails this evening."

Much to Barnes's surprise,—and disappointment,—the interior of the house failed to sustain the bewildering effect produced by the exterior. The entrance hall and the living-room into which he was conducted by the two men were singularly like others that he had seen. The latter, for example, was of ordinary dimensions, furnished with a thought for comfort rather than elegance or even good taste. The rugs were thick and in tone held almost exclusively to Turkish reds; the couches and chairs were low and deep and comfortable, as if intended for men only, and they were covered with rich, gay materials; the hangings at the windows were of deep blue and gold; the walls an unobtrusive cream colour, almost literally thatched with etchings.

Barnes, somewhat of a connoisseur, was not slow to recognise the value and extreme rarity of the prints. Rembrandt, Whistler, Hayden, Merryon, Cameron, Muirhead Bone and Zorn were represented by their most notable creations; two startling subjects by Brangwyn hung alone in one corner of the room, isolated, it would seem, out of consideration for the gleaming, jewel-like surfaces of other and smaller treasures. There were at least a dozen Zorns, as many Whistlers and Camerons.

O'Dowd, observing the glance of appreciation that Barnes sent about the room, said: "All of thim are in the very rarest state. He has one of the finest collections in America. Ye'll want your boots cleaned and polished, and your face needs scrubbing, if ye don't mind my saying so," he went on, critically surveying the visitor's person. "Come up to my room and make yourself tidy. My own man will dust you off and furbish you up in no time at all."

They passed into another room at the left and approached a wide stairway, the lower step of which was flush with the baseboard on the wall. Not so much as an inch of the stairway protruded into the room, and yet Barnes, whose artistic sense should have been offended, was curiously pleased with the arrangement and effect. He made a mental note of this deliberate violation of the holy rules of construction, and decided that one day he would try it out for himself.

The room itself was obviously a continuation of the larger one beyond, a sort of annex, as it were. The same scheme in decoration and furnishings was observed, except here the walls were adorned with small paintings in oil, heavily framed. Hanging in the panel at the right of the stairway was an exquisite little Corot, silvery and feathery even in the dim light of early dusk. On the opposite side was a brilliant little Cazin.

The stairs were thickly carpeted. At the top, his guide turned to the left and led the way down a long corridor. They passed at least four doors before O'Dowd stopped and threw open the fifth on that side of the hall. There were still two more doors beyond.

"Suggests a hotel, doesn't it?" said the Irishman, standing aside for Barnes to enter. "All of the sleeping apartments are on this floor, and the baths, and boudoirs, and what-not. The garret is above, and that's where we deposit our family skeletons, intern our grievances, store our stock of spitefulness, and hide all the little devils that must come sneaking up from the city with us whether we will or no. Nothing but good-humour, contentment, happiness and mirth are permitted to occupy this floor and the one below. I might also add beauty, for you can't conceive any of the others without it, me friend. God knows I couldn't be good-natured for a minute if I wasn't encouraged by beauty appreciative, and as for being contented, happy or mirthful,—bedad, words fail me! Dabson," he said, addressing the man who had quietly entered the room through the door behind them, "do Mr. Barnes, will ye, and fetch me from Mr. De Soto's room when you've finished. I leave you to Dabson's tender mercies. The saints preserve us! Look at the man's boots! Dabson, get out your brush and dauber first of all. He's been floundering in a bog."

The jovial Irishman retired, leaving Barnes to be "done" by the silent, swift-moving valet. Dabson was young and vigorous and exceedingly well-trained. He made short work of "doing" the visitor; barely fifteen minutes elapsed before O'Dowd's return.

Presently they went downstairs together. Lamps had been lighted, many of them, throughout the house. A warm, pleasing glow filled the rooms, softening,—one might even say tempering,—the insistent reds in the rugs, which now seemed to reflect rather than to project their hues; a fire crackled in the cavernous fireplace at the end of the living-room, and grouped about its cheerful, grateful blaze were the ladies of Green Fancy.

Barnes was aware of a quickening of his pulses as he advanced with O'Dowd. De Soto was there ahead of them, posed ungracefully in front of the fire, his feet widespread, his hands in his pockets. Another man, sallow-faced and tall, with a tired looking blond moustache and sleepy eyes, was managing, with amazing skill, the retention of a cigarette which seemed to be constantly in peril of detaching itself from his parted though inactive lips.

SHE was there, standing slightly aloof from the others, but evidently amused by the tale with which De Soto was regaling them. She was smiling; Barnes saw the sapphire lights sparkling in her eyes, and experienced a sensation that was woefully akin to confusion.

He had the feeling that he would be absolutely speechless when presented to her; in the full, luminous glow of those lovely eyes he would lose consciousness, momentarily, no doubt, but long enough to give her,—and all the rest of them,—no end of a fright.

But nothing of the kind happened. Everything went off quite naturally. He favoured Miss Cameron with an uncommonly self-possessed smile as she gave her hand to him, and she, in turn, responded with one faintly suggestive of tolerance, although it certainly would have been recorded by a less sensitive person than Barnes as "ripping."

In reply to his perfunctory "delighted, I'm sure, etc.," she said, quite clearly: "Oh, now I remember. I was sure I had seen you before, Mr. Barnes. You are the magic gentleman who sprung like a mushroom out of the earth yesterday afternoon."

"And frightened you," he said; "whereupon you vanished like the mushroom that is gobbled up by the predatory glutton."

He had thrilled at the sound of her voice. It was the low, deliberate voice of the woman of the crossroads, and, as before, he caught the almost imperceptible accent. The red gleam from the blazing logs fell upon her shining hair; it glistened like gold. She wore a simple evening gown of white, softened over the shoulders and neck with a fall of rare vallenciennes lace. There was no jewelry,—not even a ring on her slender, tapering fingers. Oddly enough, now that he stood beside her, she was not so tall as he had believed her to be the day before. The crown of her silken head came but little above his shoulder. As she had appeared to him among the trees he would have sworn that she was but little below his own height, which was a liberal six feet. He recalled a flash of wonder on that occasion; she had seemed so much taller than the woman at the cross-roads that he was almost convinced that she could not, after all, be the same person. Now she was back to the height that he remembered, and he marvelled once more.

Mrs. Collier, the hostess, was an elderly, heavy-featured woman, decidedly over-dressed. Barnes knew her kind. One encounters her everywhere: the otherwise intelligent woman who has no sense about her clothes. Mrs. Van Dyke, her daughter, was a woman of thirty, tall, dark and handsome in a bold, dashing sort of way. She too was rather resplendent in a black jet gown, and she was liberally bestrewn with jewels. Much to Barnes's surprise, she possessed a soft, gentle speaking-voice and a quiet, musical laugh instead of the boisterous tones and cackle that he always associated with her type. The lackadaisical gentleman with the moustache turned out to be her husband.

"My brother is unable to be with us to-night, Mr. Barnes," explained Mrs. Collier. "Mr. O'Dowd may have told you that he is an invalid. Quite rarely is he well enough to leave his room. He has been feeling much better of late, but now his nerves are all torn to pieces by this shooting affair. The mere knowledge that our grounds were being inspected to-day by the authorities upset him terribly. He has begged me to present his apologies and regrets to you. Another time, perhaps, you will give him the pleasure he is missing to-night. He wanted so much to talk with you about the quaint places you have described so charmingly in your articles. They must be wonderfully appealing. One cannot read your descriptions without really envying the people who live in those enchanted—"

"Ahem!" coughed O'Dowd, who actually had read the articles and could see nothing alluring in a prospect that contemplated barren, snow-swept wildernesses in the Andes. "The only advantage I can see in living up there," he said, with a sly wink at Barnes, "is that one has all the privileges of death without being put to the expense of burial."

"How very extraordinary, Mr. O'Dowd," said Mrs. Collier, lifting her lorgnon.

"Mrs. Collier has been reading my paper on the chateau country in France," said Barnes mendaciously. (It had not yet been published, but what of that?)

"Perfectly delightful," said Mrs. Collier, and at once changed the subject.

De Soto's cocktails came in. Miss Cameron did not take one. O'Dowd proposed a toast.

"To the rascals who went gunning for the other rascals. But for them we should be short at least one member of this agreeable company."

It was rather startling. Barnes's glass stopped half-way to his lips. An instant later he drained it. He accepted the toast as a compliment from the whilom Irishman, and not as a tribute to the prowess of those mysterious marksmen.

"Rather grewsome, O'Dowd," drawled Van Dyke, "but offset by the foresightedness of the maker of this cocktail. Uncommonly good one, De Soto."

The table in the spacious dining-room was one of those long, narrow Italian boards, unmistakably antique and equally rare. Sixteen or eighteen people could have been seated without crowding, and when the seven took their places wide intervals separated them. No effort had been made by the hostess to bring her guests close together, as might have been done by using one end or the centre of the table. Except for scattered doylies, the smooth, nut-brown top was bare of cloth; there was a glorious patina to this huge old board, with tiny cracks running like veins across its surface.

Decorations were scant. A half dozen big candlesticks, ecclesiastical in character, were placed at proper intervals, and at each end of the table there was a shallow, alabaster dish containing pansies. The serving plates were of silver. Especially beautiful were the long-stemmed water goblets and the graceful champagne glasses. They were blue and white and of a design and quality no longer obtainable except at great cost. The aesthetic Barnes was not slow to appreciate the rarity of the glassware and the chaste beauty of the serving plates.

The man Nicholas was evidently the butler, despite his Seventh Avenue manner. He was assisted in serving by two stalwart and amazingly clumsy footmen, of similar ilk and nationality. On seeing these additional men-servants, Barnes began figuratively to count on his fingers the retainers he had so far encountered on the place. Already he has seen six, all of them powerful, rugged fellows. It struck him. as extraordinary, and in a way significant, that there should be so many men at Green Fancy.

Somewhere back in his mind was the impression that O'Dowd had spoken of Pierre the cook, a private secretary and male attendant who looked after Mr. Curtis. Then there was Peter, the regular chauffeur, whom he had not seen, and doubtless there were able-bodied woodchoppers and foresters besides. Not forgetting the little book-agent! It suddenly occurred to him that he was surrounded by a company of the most formidable character: no less than twenty men would be a reasonable guess if he were to include O'Dowd, De Soto and Van Dyke.

Much to his disappointment, he was not placed near Miss Cameron at table. Indeed, she was seated as far away from him as possible. He sat at Mrs. Collier's right. On his left was Mrs. Van Dyke, with Miss Cameron at the foot of the table flanked by O'Dowd and De Soto. Van Dyke had nearly the whole of the opposite side of the table to himself. There was, to be sure, a place set between him and De Soto, for symmetry's sake, Barnes concluded. In this he was mistaken; they had barely seated themselves when Mrs. Collier remarked:

"Mr. Curtis's secretary usually joins us here for coffee. He has his dinner with my brother and then, poor man, comes in for a brief period of relaxation. When my brother is in one of his bad spells poor Mr. Loeb doesn't have much time to himself. It seems to me that my brother is at his best when his health is at its worst. You may be interested to know, Mr. Barnes, that he is writing a history of the Five Nations."

"Indians, you know," explained Van Dyke.

"A history of the Mohawks, Oneidas, Cayugas, Onondagas and Senecas, and their 'Long House' should be of great value, Mrs. Collier," said Barnes, a trifle didactically. "When does he expect to have it completed?"

"'Gad, you know a little of everything, don't you?" said Van Dyke, sitting up a little straighter in his chair and eyeing Barnes fishily. ("Awfully smart chap," he afterwards confided to O'Dowd.) "If he lives long enough, he'll finish it in 1999," he added, lifting his voice above Mrs. Collier's passive reply out of which Barnes gathered the words "couple" and "years."

It is not necessary to dilate upon the excellence of the dinner, to repeat the dialogue, or to comment on the service, other than to say, for the sake of record, that the first WAS excellent; the second sprightly, and the third atrocious.

Loeb, the private secretary, came in for coffee. He was a tall, spare man of thirty, pallidly handsome, with dark, studious eyes and features of an unmistakably Hebraic cast, as his name might have foretold. His teeth were marvellously white, and his slow smile attractive. When he spoke, which was seldom unless a remark was directed specifically to him, his voice was singularly deep and resonant. More than once during the hour that Loeb spent with them Barnes formed and dismissed a stubborn, ever-recurring opinion that the man was

not a Jew. Certainly he was not an American Jew. His voice, his manner of speech, his every action stamped him as one born and bred in a land far removed from Broadway and its counterparts. If a Jew, he was of the East as it is measured from Rome: the Jew of the carnal Orient.

And as the evening wore on, there came to Barnes the singular fancy that this man was the master and not the servant of the house! He could not put the ridiculous idea out of his mind.

He was to depart at ten. The hour drew near and he had had no opportunity for detached conversation with Miss Cameron. He had listened to her bright retorts to O'Dowd's sallies, and marvelled at the ease and composure with which she met the witty Irishman on even terms. Her voice, always low and distinct, was never without the suggestion of good-natured raillery; he was enchanted by the faint, delicious chuckle that rode in every sentence she uttered during these sprightly tilts.

When the conversation turned to serious topics, her voice steadied perceptibly, the blue in her eyes took on a deeper and darker hue, the half-satirical smile vanished from her adorable lips, and she spoke with the gravity of a profound thinker. Barnes watched her, fascinated, bereft of the power to concentrate his thoughts on anything else. He hung on her every movement, hoping and longing for the impersonal glance or remark with which she occasionally favoured him.

Not until the very close of the evening, and when he had resigned himself to hopelessness, did the opportunity come for him to speak with her alone. She caught his eye, and, to his amazement, made a slight movement of her head, unobserved by the others but curiously imperative to him. There was no mistaking the meaning of the direct, intense look that she gave him.

She was appealing to him as a friend,—as one on whom she could depend!

The spirit of chivalry took possession of him. His blood leaped to the call. She needed him and he would not fail her. And it was with difficulty that he contrived to hide the exaltation that might have ruined everything!

Loeb had returned to his labours in Mr. Curtis's study, after bidding Barnes a courteous good-night. It seemed to the latter that with the secretary's departure an indefinable restraint fell away from the small company.

While he was trying to invent a pretext for drawing her apart from the others, she calmly ordered Van Dyke to relinquish his place on the couch beside her to Barnes.

"Come and sit beside me, Mr. Barnes," she called out, gaily. "I will not bite you, or scratch you, or harm you in any way. Ask Mr. O'Dowd and he will tell you that I am quite docile. What is there about me, sir, that causes you to think that I am dangerous? You have barely spoken a word to me, and you've been disagreeably nice to Mrs. Collier and Mrs. Van Dyke. I don't bite, do I, Mr. O'Dowd?"

"You do," said O'Dowd promptly. "You do more than that. You devour. Bedad, I have to look in a mirror to convince meself that you haven't swallowed me whole. That's another way of telling you, Barnes, that she'll absorb you entirely."

It was a long, deep and comfortable couch of the davenport class, and she sat in the middle of it instead of at the end, a circumstance that he was soon to regard as premeditated. She had planned to bring him to this place beside her and had cunningly prepared against the possibility that he might put the full length of the couch between them if she settled herself in a corner. As it was, their elbows almost touched as he sat down beside her.

For a few minutes she chided him for his unseemly aversion. He was beginning to think that he had been mistaken in her motive, and that after all she was merely satisfying her vanity. Suddenly, and as she smiled into his eyes, she said, lowering her voice slightly:

"Do not appear surprised at anything I may say to you. Smile as if we were uttering the silliest nonsense. So much depends upon it, Mr. Barnes."

CHAPTER X — THE PRISONER OF GEEEN FANCY, AND THE LAMENT OF PETER THE CHAUFFEUR

He envied Mr. Rushcroft. The barn-stormer would have risen to the occasion without so much as the blinking of an eye. He would have been able to smile and gesticulate in a manner that would have deceived the most acute observer, while he—ah, he was almost certain to flounder and make a mess of the situation. He did his best, however, and, despite his eagerness, managed to come off fairly well. Any one out of ear-shot would have thought that he was uttering some trifling inanity instead of these words:

"You may trust me. I have suspected that something was wrong here."

"It is impossible to explain now," she said. "These people are not my friends. I have no one to turn to in my

predicament."

"Yes, you have," he broke in, and laughed rather boisterously for him. He felt that they were being watched in turn by every person in the room.

"To-night,—not an hour ago,—I began to feel that I could call upon you for help. I began to relax. Something whispered to me that I was no longer utterly alone. Oh, you will never know what it is to have your heart lighten as mine—But I must control myself. We are not to waste words."

"You have only to command me, Miss Cameron. No more than a dozen words are necessary."

"I knew it,—I felt it," she cried eagerly. "Nothing can be done to-night. The slightest untoward action on your part would send you after—the other two. There is one man here who, I think, will stand between me and actual peril. Mr. O'Dowd. He is—"

"He is the liveliest liar I've ever known," broke in Barnes quickly. "Don't trust him."

"But he is also an Irishman," she said, as if that fact overcame all other shortcomings. "I like him; he must be an honest man, for he has already lied nobly in MY behalf." She smiled as she uttered this quaint anomaly.

"Tell me how I can be of service to you," said he, disposing of O'Dowd with a shrug.

"I shall try to communicate with you in some way—to-morrow. I beg of you, I implore you, do not desert me. If I can only be sure that you will—"

"You may depend on me, no matter what happens," said he, and, looking into her eyes was bound forever.

"I have been thinking," she said. "Yesterday I made the discovery that I—that I am actually a prisoner here, Mr. Barnes. I—Smile! Say something silly!"

Together they laughed over the meaningless remark he made in response to her command.

"I am constantly watched. If I venture outside the house, I am almost immediately joined by one of these men. You saw what happened yesterday. I am distracted. I do not know how to arrange a meeting so that I may explain my unhappy position to you."

"I will ask the authorities to step in and—"

"No! You are to do nothing of the kind. The authorities would never find me if they came here to search." (It was hard for him to smile at that!) "It must be some other way. If I could steal out of the house,—but that is impossible," she broke off with a catch in her voice.

"Suppose that I were to steal INTO the house," he said, a reckless light in his eyes.

"Oh, you could never succeed!"

"Well, I could try, couldn't I?" There was nothing funny in the remark but they both leaned back and laughed heartily. "Leave it to me. I once got into and out of a Morrocan harem,—but that story may wait. Tell me, where—"

"The place is guarded day and night. The stealthiest burglar in the world could not come within a stone's throw of the house."

"By Jove! Those two men night before last were trying to—" He said no more, but turned his head so that the others could not see the hard look that settled in his eyes. "If it's as bad as all that, we cannot afford to make any slips. You think you are in no immediate peril?"

"I am in no peril at all unless I bring it upon myself," she said, significantly.

"Then a delay of a day or so will not matter," he said, frowning. "Leave it to me. I will find a way."

"Be careful!" De Soto came lounging up behind them. She went on speaking, changing the subject so abruptly and so adroitly that for a moment Barnes was at a loss. "But if she could obtain all those luxuries without using a penny of his money, what right had he to object? Surely a wife may do as she pleases with her own money."

"He was trying to break her of selfishness," said Barnes, suddenly inspired. "The difference between men and women in the matter of luxuries lies in the fact that one is selfish and the other is not. A man slaves all the year round to provide luxuries for his wife. The wife comes into a nice little fortune of her own, and what does she proceed to do with it? Squander it on her husband? Not much! She sets out immediately to prove to the world that he is a miser, a skinflint who never gave her more than the bare necessities of life. The chap I was speaking of—I beg pardon, Mr. De Soto."

"Forgive me for interrupting, but I am under command from royal headquarters. Peter, the king of chauffeurs, sends in word that the car is in an amiable mood and champing to be off. So seldom is it in a good-humour that he—"

"I'll be off at once," exclaimed Barnes, arising.

"By Jove, it is half-past ten. I had no idea—Good night, Miss Cameron. Sorry my time is up. I am sure I could have made you hate your own sex in another half hour."

She held out her hand. "One of our virtues is that we never pretend to be in love with our own sex, Mr. Barnes. That, at least, is a luxury reserved solely for your sex."

He bowed low over her hand. "A necessity, if I may be pardoned for correcting you." He pressed her hand re-assuringly and left her.

She had arisen and was standing, straight and slim by the corner of the fireplace, a confident smile on her lips.

"If you are to be long in the neighbourhood, Mr. Barnes," said his hostess, "you must let us have you again."

"My stay is short, I fear. You have only to reveal the faintest sign that I may come, however, and I'll hop into my seven league boots before you can utter Jack Robinson's Christian name. Good night, Mrs. Van Dyke. I have you all to thank for a most delightful evening. May I expect to see you down our way, Mr. Van Dyke? We have food for man and beast at all times and in all forms."

"I've tackled your liquids," said Van Dyke. "You are likely to see me 'most any day. I'm always rattling 'round somewhere, don't you know." (He said "rettling," by the way.) The car was waiting at the back of the house. O'Dowd walked out with Barnes, their arms linked,—as on a former occasion, Barnes recalled.

"I'll ride out to the gate with you," said the Irishman. "It's a winding, devious route the road takes through the trees. As the crow flies it's no more than five hundred yards, but this way it can't be less than a mile and a half. Eh, Peter?"

Peter opined that it was at least a mile and a quarter. He was a Yankee, as O'Dowd had said, and he was not extravagant in estimates.

The passengers sat in the rear seat. Two small lamps served to light the way through the Stygian labyrinth of trees and rocks. O'Dowd had an electric pocket torch with which to pick his way back to Green Fancy.

"I can't, for the life of me, see why he doesn't put in a driveway straight to the road beyond, instead of roaming all over creation as we have to do," said O'Dowd.

"We foller the bed of the crick that used to run through here 'fore it was dammed a little ways up to make the ice-pond 'tween here an' Spanish Falls," supplied Peter. "Makes a durned good road, 'cept when there's a freshet. It would cost a hull lot o' money to build a road as good as this-un."

"I was only thinking 'twould save a mile and more," said O'Dowd.

"What's the use o' him savin' a mile, er ten miles, fer that matter, when he never puts foot out'n the house?" said Peter, the logician.

"Well, then," persisted O'Dowd testily, "he ought to consider the saving in gasolene."

Peter's reply was a grunt.

They came in time, after many "hair-pins" and right angles, to the gate opening upon the highway. Peter got down from the seat to release the pad-locked chain and throw open the gate.

O'Dowd leaned closer to Barnes and lowered his voice.

"See here, Barnes, I'm no fool, and for that reason I've got sense enough to know that you're not either. I don't know what's in your mind, nor what you're trying to get into it if it isn't already there. But I'll say this to you, man to man: don't let your imagination get the better of your common-sense. That's all. Take the tip from me."

"I am not imagining anything, O'Dowd," said Barnes quietly. "What do you mean?"

"I mean just what I say. I'm giving you the tip for selfish reasons. If you make a bally fool of yourself, I'll have to see you through the worst of it,—and it's a job I don't relish. Ponder that, will ye, on the way home?"

Barnes did ponder it on the way home. There was but one construction to put upon the remark: it was O'Dowd's way of letting him know that he could be depended upon for support if the worst came to pass.

His heart warmed to the lively Irishman. He jumped to the conclusion that O'Dowd, while aligned with the others in the flesh, was not with them in spirit. His blithe heart was a gallant one as well. The lovely prisoner at Green Fancy had a chivalrous defender among the conspirators, and that fact, suddenly revealed to the harassed Barnes, sent a thrill of exultation through his veins.

He realised that he could not expect O'Dowd to be of any assistance in preparing the way for her liberation. Indeed, the Irishman probably would oppose him out of loyalty to the cause he espoused. His hand would be against him until the end; then it would strike for him and the girl who was in jeopardy.

O'Dowd evidently had not been deceived by the acting that masked the conversation on the couch. He knew that Miss Cameron had appealed to Barnes, and that the latter had promised to do everything in his power to help her.

Suspecting that this was the situation, and doubtless sacrificing his own private interests, he had uttered the vague but timely warning to Barnes. The significance of this warning grew under reflection. The mere fact that he could bring himself to the point of speaking to Barnes as he did, established beyond all question that his position was not inimical. He was, to a certain extent, delivering himself into the hands of one who, in his rashness, might not hesitate to cast him to the lions: the beasts in this instance being his own companions.

Barnes was not slow to appreciate the position in which O'Dowd voluntarily placed himself. A word or a sign from him would be sufficient to bring disaster upon the Irishman who had risked his own safety in a few

irretrievable words. The more he thought of it, the more fully convinced was he that there was nothing to fear from O'Dowd. The cause for apprehension in that direction was wiped out by a simple process of reasoning: O'Dowd would have delivered his warning elsewhere if he intended evil. While it was impossible to decide how far O'Dowd's friendly interest would carry him, Barnes was still content to believe that he would withhold his suspicions, for the present at least, from the others at Green Fancy.

He was at a loss to account for his invitation to Green Fancy under the circumstances. The confident attitude of those responsible for Miss Cameron's detention evidently was based upon conditions which rendered their position tenable. Their disregard for the consequences that might reasonably be expected to result from this visit was puzzling in the extreme. He could arrive at no other conclusion than that their hospitality was inspired by a desire to disarm him of suspicion. An open welcome to the house, while a bold piece of strategy, was far better than an effort to cloak the place in mystery.

As he left the place behind him, he found himself saying that he had received his first and last invitation to visit Green Fancy.

Peter drove slowly, carefully over the road down the mountain, in direct contrast to the heedless rush of the belated "washer."

Responding to a sudden impulse, Barnes lowered one of the side-seats in the tonneau and moved closer to the driver. By leaning forward he was in a position to speak through the window at Peter's back.

"Pretty bad going, isn't it?" he ventured.

"Bad enough in the daytime," said Peter, without taking his eyes from the road, "but something fierce at night."

"I suppose you've been over it so often, however, that you know every crook and turn."

"I know 'em well enough not to get gay with 'em," said Peter.

"How long have you been driving for Mr. Curtis?"

"Ever since he come up here, more'n two years ago. I used to drive the station bus fer the hotel down below Spanish Falls. He stayed there while he was buildin'. Guess I'm going to get the G. B. 'fore long, though."

His listener started. "You don't say so! Cutting down expenses?"

"Not so's you could notice it," growled Peter. "Seems that he's gettin' a new car an' wants an expert machinist to take hold of it from the start. I was good enough to fiddle around with this second-hand pile o' junk an' the Buick he had last year, but I ain't qualified to handle this here twin-six Packard he's expectin', so he says. I guess they's been some influence used against me, if the truth was known. This new sec'etary he's got cain't stummick me."

"Why don't you see Mr. Curtis and demand—" "SEE him?" snorted Peter. "Might as well try to see Napoleon Bonyparte. Didn't you know he was a sick man?"

"Certainly. But he isn't so ill that he can't attend to business, is he?"

"He sure is. Parylised, they say. He's a mighty fine man. It's awful to think of him bein' so helpless he cain't ever git out'n his cheer ag'in. Course, if he was hisself he wouldn't think o' lettin' me out. But bein' sick-like, he jest don't give a durn about anything. So that's how this new sec'etary gets in his fine work on me."

"What has Mr. Loeb against you, if I may ask?"

"Well, it's like this. I ain't in the habit o' bein' ordered aroun' as if I was jest nobody at all, so when he starts in to cuss me about somethin' a week or so ago, I ups and tells him I'll smash his head if he don't take it back. He takes it back all right, but the first thing I know I get a call-down from Mrs. Collier. She's Mr. Curtis's sister, you know. Course I couldn't tell her what I told the sheeny, seein' as she's a female, so I took it like a lamb. Then they gits a feller up here to wash the car. My gosh, mister, the durned ole rattle-trap ain't wuth a bucket o' water all told. You could wash from now till next Christmas an' she wouldn't look any cleaner'n she does right now. So I sends word in to Mr. Curtis that if she has to be washed, I'll wash her. I don't want no dago splashin' water all over the barn floor an' drawin' pay fer doin' it. Then's when I hears about the new car. Mr. Loeb comes out an' asts me if I ever drove a Packard twin-six. I says no I ain't, an' he says it's too bad. He asts the dago if he's ever drove one and the dago lies like thunder. He says he's handled every kind of a Packard known to science, er somethin' like that. I cain't understand half the durn fool says. Next day Mrs. Collier sends fer me an' I go in. She says she guesses she'll try the new washer on the Packard when it comes, an' if I keer to stay on as washer in his place she'll be glad to have me. I says I'd like to have a word with Mr. Curtis, if she don't mind, an' she says Mr. Curtis ain't able to see no one. So I guess I'm goin' to be let out. Not as I keer very much, 'cept I hate to leave Mr. Curtis in the lurch. He was mighty good to me up to the time he got bed-ridden."

"I dare say you will have no difficulty in finding another place," said Barnes, feeling his way.

"'Tain't easy to git a job up here. I guess I'll have to try New York er some of the big cities," said Peter, confidently.

An idea was taking root in Barnes's brain, but it was too soon to consider it fixed.

"You say Mr. Loeb is new at his job?"

"Well, he's new up here. Mr. Curtis was down to New York all last winter bein' treated, you see. He didn't come up here till about five weeks ago. Loeb was workin' fer him most of the winter, gittin' up a book er

somethin', I hear. Mr. Curtis's mind is all right, I guess, even if his body ain't. Always was a great feller fer books an' writin' 'fore he got so sick."

"I see. Mr. Loeb came up with him from New York."

"Kerect. Him and Mr. O'Dowd and Mr. De Soto brought him up 'bout the last o' March."

"I understand that they are old friends."

"They was up here visitin' last spring an' the fall before. Mr. Curtis is very fond of both of 'em."

"It seems to me that I have heard that his son married O'Dowd's sister."

"That's right. She's a widder now. Her husband was killed in the war between Turkey an' them other countries four er five years ago."

"Really?"

"Yep. Him and Mr. O'Dowd—his own brother-in-law, y' know—was fightin' on the side of the Boolgarians and young Ashley Curtis was killed. Mr. O'Dowd's always fightin' whenever they's a war goin' on anywheres. I cain't understand why he ain't over in Europe now helpin' out one side or t'other."

"Was this son Mr. Curtis's only child?"

"So fer as I know. He left three little kids. They was all here with their mother jest after the house was finished. Finest children I ever—"

"They will probably come into this property when Mr. Curtis dies," said Barnes, keeping the excitement out of his voice.

"More'n likely."

"Was he very feeble when you saw him last?"

"I ain't seen him in more'n six months. He was failin' then. That's why he went to the city."

"Oh, I see. You did not see him when he arrived the last of March?"

"I was visitin' my sister up in Hornville when he come back unexpected-like. This ijiot Loeb says he wrote me to meet 'em at Spanish Falls but I never got the letter. Like as not the durn fool got the address wrong. I didn't know Mr. Curtis was home till I come back from my sister's three days later. The wust of it was that I had tooken the automobile with me,—to have a little work done on her, mind ye,—an' so they had to hire a Ford to bring him up from the Falls. I wouldn't 'a' had it happen fer fifty dollars." Peter's tone was convincingly doleful.

"And he has been confined to his room ever since? Poor old fellow! It's hard, isn't it?"

"It sure is. Seems like he'll never be able to walk ag'in. I was talkin' to his nurse only the other day. He says it's a hopeless case."

"Fortunately his sister can be here with him."

"By gosh, she ain't nothin' like him," confided Peter. "She's all fuss an' feathers an' he is jest as simple as you er me. Nothin' fluffy about him, I c'n tell ye. Course, he must 'a' had a screw loose some'eres when he made sich a botch of that house up there, but it's his'n an' there ain't no law ag'in a man doin' what he pleases with his own property." He sighed deeply. "I'm jest as well pleased to go as not," he went on. "Mrs. Collier's got a lot o' money of her own, an' she's got highfalutin' New York ideas that don't seem to jibe with mine. Used to be a time when everything was nice an' peaceful up here, with Sally Perkins doin' the cookin' and her daughter waitin' table, but 'tain't that way no more. Got to have a man cook an' men waitresses, an' a butteler. An' it goes ag'in the grain to set down to a meal with them hayseeds from Italy. You never saw sich table manners."

He rambled on for some minutes, expanding under the soulful influence of his own woes and the pleasure of having a visible auditor instead of the make-believe ones he conjured out of the air at times when privacy afforded him the opportunity to lament aloud.

At any other time Barnes would have been bored by such confidences as these. Now he was eagerly drinking in every word that Peter uttered. His lively brain was putting the whole situation into a nutshell. Assuming that Peter was not the most guileful person on earth, it was quite obvious that he not only was in ignorance of the true state of affairs at Green Fancy but that he was to be banished from the place while still in that condition.

Long before they came to the turnpike, Barnes had reduced his hundred and one suppositions to the following concrete conclusion: Green Fancy was no longer in the hands of its original owner for the good and sufficient reason that Mr. Curtis was dead. The real master of the house was the man known as Loeb. Through O'Dowd he had leased the property from the widowed daughter-in-law, and had established himself there, surrounded by trustworthy henchmen, for the purpose of carrying out some dark and sinister project.

Putting two and two together, it was easy to determine how and when O'Dowd decided to cast his fortunes with those of the leader in this mysterious enterprise. Their intimacy undoubtedly grew out of association at the time of the Balkan Wars. O'Dowd was a soldier of fortune. He saw vast opportunities in the scheme proposed by Loeb, and fell in with it, whether through a mistaken idea as to its real character or an active desire to profit nefariously time only would tell. Green Fancy afforded an excellent base for operations.

O'Dowd induced his sister to lease the property to Loeb,—or he may even have taken it himself. He had visited Mr. Curtis on at least two occasions. He knew the place and its advantages. The woman known as Mrs. Collier was not the sister of Curtis. She—but here Barnes put a check upon his speculations. He appealed to Peter once more.

"I suppose Mrs. Collier has spent a great deal of time up here with her brother."

"First time she was ever here, so far as I know," said Peter, and Barnes promptly took up his weaving once more.

With one exception, he decided, the entire company at Green Fancy was involved in the conspiracy. The exception was Miss Cameron. It was quite clear to him that she had been misled or betrayed into her present position; that a trap had been set for her and she had walked into it blindly, trustingly. This would seem to establish, beyond question, that her capture and detention was vital to the interests of the plotters; otherwise she would not have been lured to Green Fancy under the impression that she was to find herself among friends and supporters. Supporters! That word started a new train of thought. He could hardly wait for the story that was to fall from her lips.

Peter swerved into the main-road. "Guess I c'n hit her up a little now," he said.

"Take it slowly, if you please," said Barnes. "I've had one experience in this car, going a mile a minute, and I didn't enjoy it."

"You never been in this car before," corrected Peter.

"Is it news to you? Day before yesterday I was picked up at this very corner and taken to Hart's Tavern in this car. The day Miss Cameron arrived and the car failed to meet her at Spanish Falls."

"You must be dreamin'," said Peter slowly.

"If you should have the opportunity, Peter, just ask Miss Cameron," said the other. "She will tell you that I'm right."

"Is she the strange young lady that come a day er so ago?"

"The extremely pretty one," explained Barnes.

Peter lapsed into silence. It was evident that he considered it impossible to continue the discussion without offending his passenger.

"By the way, Peter, it has just occurred to me that I may be able to give you a job in case you are let out by Mr. Curtis. I can't say definitely until I have communicated with my sister, who has a summer home in the Berkshires. Don't mention it to Mr. Curtis. I wouldn't, for anything in the world, have him think that I was trying to take you away from him. That is regarded as one of the lowest tricks a man can be guilty of."

"We call it ornery up here," said Peter. "I'll be much obliged, sir. Course I won't say a word. Will I find you at the Tavern if I get my walkin' papers soon?"

"Yes. Stop in to see me to-morrow if you happen to be passing."

There was additional food for reflection in the fact that Peter was allowed to conduct him to the Tavern alone. It was evident that not only was the garrulous native ignorant of the real conditions at Green Fancy, but that the opportunity was deliberately afforded him to proclaim his private grievances to the world. After all, mused Barnes, it wasn't a bad bit of diplomacy at that!

Barnes said good night to the man and entered the Tavern a few minutes later. Putnam Jones was behind the desk and facing him was the little book-agent.

"Hello, stranger," greeted the landlord. "Been sashaying in society, hey? Meet my friend Mr. Sprouse, Mr. Barnes. Sic-em, Sprouse! Give him the Dickens!" Mr. Jones laughed loudly at his own jest.

Sprouse shook hands with his victim.

"I was just saying to our friend Jones here, Mr. Barnes, that you look like a more than ordinarily intelligent man and that if I had a chance to buzz with you for a quarter of an hour I could present a proposition—-"

"Sorry, Mr. Sprouse, but it is half-past eleven o'clock, and I am dog-tired. You will have to excuse me."

"To-morrow morning will suit me," said Sprouse cheerfully, "if it suits you."

CHAPTER XI — MR. SPROUSE ABANDONS LITERATURE AT AN EARLY HOUR IN THE MORNING

After thrashing about in his bed for seven sleepless hours, Barnes arose and gloomily breakfasted alone. He was not discouraged over his failure to arrive at anything tangible in the shape of a plan of action. It was inconceivable that he should not be able in very short order to bring about the release of the fair guest of Green Fancy. He realised that the conspiracy in which she appeared to be a vital link was far-reaching and undoubtedly pernicious in character. There was not the slightest doubt in his mind that international affairs of considerable importance were involved and that the agents operating at Green Fancy were under definite orders.

Mr. Sprouse came into the dining-room as he was taking his last swallow of coffee.

"Ah, good morning," was the bland little man's greeting. "Up with the lark, I see. It is almost a nocturnal habit with me. I get up so early that you might say it's a nightly proceeding. I'm surprised to see you circulating at seven o'clock, however. Mind if I sit down here and have my eggs?" He pulled out a chair opposite Barnes and coolly sat down at the table.

"You can't sell me a set of Dickens at this hour of the day," said Barnes sourly. "Besides, I've finished my breakfast. Keep your seat." He started to rise.

"Sit down," said Sprouse quietly. Something in the man's voice and manner struck Barnes as oddly compelling. He hesitated a second and then resumed his seat. "I've been investigating you, Mr. Barnes," said the little man, unsmilingly. "Don't get sore. It may gratify you to know that I am satisfied you are all right."

"What do you mean, Mr.—Mr.—?" began Barnes, angrily.

"Sprouse. There are a lot of things that you don't know, and one of them is that I don't sell books for a living. It's something of a side line with me." He leaned forward. "I shall be quite frank with you, sir. I am a secret service man. Yesterday I went through your effects upstairs, and last night I took the liberty of spying upon you, so to speak, while you were a guest at Green Fancy."

"The deuce you say!" cried Barnes, staring.

"We will get right down to tacks," said Sprouse. "My government,—which isn't yours, by the way,—sent me up here five weeks ago on a certain undertaking. I am supposed to find out what is hatching up at Green Fancy. Having satisfied myself that you are not connected with the gang up there, I cheerfully place myself in your hands, Mr. Barnes. Just a moment, please. Bring me my usual breakfast, Miss Tilly." The waitress having vanished in the direction of the kitchen, he resumed. "You were at Green Fancy last night. So was I. You had an advantage over me, however, for you were on the inside and I was not."

"Confound your impudence! I—"

"One of my purposes in revealing myself to you, Mr. Barnes, is to warn you to steer clear of that crowd. You may find yourself in exceedingly hot water later on if you don't. Another purpose, and the real one, is to secure, if possible, your co-operation in beating the game up there. You can help me, and in helping me you may be instrumental in righting one of the gravest wrongs the world has ever known. Of course, I am advising you in one breath to avoid the crowd up there and in the next I ask you to do nothing of the kind. If you can get into the good graces of—But there is no use counting on that. They are too clever. There is too much at stake. You might go there for weeks and—"

"See here, Mr. Sprouse or whatever your name is, what do you take me for?" demanded Barnes, assuming an injured air. "You have the most monumental nerve in—"

"Save your breath, Mr. Barnes. We may just as well get together on this thing first as last. I've told you what I am,—and almost who,—and I know who and what you are. You don't suppose for an instant that I, with a record for having made fewer blunders than any man in the service, could afford to take a chance with you unless I was absolutely sure of my ground, do you? You ask me what I take you for. Well, I take you for a meddler who, if given a free rein, may upset the whole pot of beans and work an irreparable injury to an honest cause."

"A meddler, am I? Good morning, Mr. Sprouts. I fancy—"

"Sprouse. But the name doesn't matter. Keep your seat. You may learn something that will be of untold value to you. I used the word meddler in a professional sense. You are inexperienced. You would behave like a bull in a china shop. I've been working for nearly six months on a job that you think you can clear up in a couple of days. Fools walk in where angels fear to tread. You—"

"Will you be good enough, Mr. Sprouse, to tell me just what you are trying to get at? Come to the point. I know nothing whatever against Mr. Curtis and his friends. You assume a great deal—"

"Excuse me, Mr. Barnes. I'll admit that you don't know anything against them, but you suspect a whole lot. To begin with, you suspect that two men were shot to death because they were in wrong with some one at Green Fancy. Now, I could tell you who those two men really were and why they were shot. But I sha'n't do anything of the sort,—at least not at present. I—"

"You may have to tell all this to the State if I choose to go to the authorities with the statement you have just made."

"I expect, at the proper time, to tell it all to the State. Are you willing to listen to what I have to say, or are you going to stay on your high-horse and tell me to go to the devil? You interest yourself in this affair for the sake of a little pleasurable excitement. I am in it, not for fun, but because I am employed by a great Power to risk my life whenever it is necessary. This happens to be one of the times when it is vitally necessary. This is not child's play or school-boy romance with me. It is business."

Barnes was impressed. "Perhaps you will condescend to tell me who you are, Mr. Sprouse. I am very much in the dark."

"I am a special agent,—but not a spy, sir,—of a government that is friendly to yours. I am known in Washington. My credentials are not to be questioned. At present it would be unwise for me to reveal the name of my government. I dare say if I can afford to trust you, Mr. Barnes, you can afford to trust me. There is too much at stake for me to take the slightest chance with any man. I am ready to chance you, sir, if you will do the same by me."

"Well," began Barnes deliberately, "I guess you will have to take a chance with me, Mr. Sprouse, for I refuse to commit myself until I know exactly what you are up to."

Sprouse had a pleasant word or two for Miss Tilly as she placed the bacon and eggs before him and poured his coffee.

"Skip along now, Miss Tilly," he said. "I'm going to sell Mr. Barnes a whole library if I can keep him awake long enough."

"I can heartily recommend the Dickens and Scott—" began Miss Tilly, but Sprouse waved her away.

"In the first place, Mr. Barnes," said he, salting his eggs, "you have been thinking that I was sent down from Green Fancy to spy on you. Isn't that so?"

"I am answering no questions, Mr. Sprouse."

"You were wrong," said Sprouse, as if Barnes had answered in the affirmative. "I am working on my own. You may have observed that I did not accompany the sheriff's posse to-day. I was up in Hornville getting the final word from New York that you were on the level. You have a document from the police, I hear, but I hadn't seen it. Time is precious. I telephoned to New York. Eleven dollars and sixty cents. You were under suspicion until I hung up the receiver, I may say."

"Jones has been talking to you," said Barnes. "But you said a moment ago that you were up at Green Fancy last night. Not by invitation, I take it."

"I invited myself," said Sprouse succinctly. "Are you inclined to favour my proposition?"

"You haven't made one."

"By suggestion, Mr. Barnes. It is quite impossible for me to get inside that house. You appear to have the entree. You are working in the dark, guessing at everything. I am guessing at nothing. By combining forces we should bring this thing to a head, and—"

"Just a moment. You expect me to abuse the hospitality of—"

"I shall have to speak plainly, I see." He leaned forward, fixing Barnes with a pair of steady, earnest eyes. "Six months ago a certain royal house in Europe was despoiled of its jewels, its privy seal, its most precious state documents and its charter. They have been traced to the United States. I am here to recover them. That is the foundation of my story, Mr. Barnes. Shall I go on?"

"Can you not start at the beginning, Mr. Sprouse? What was it that led up to this amazing theft?"

"Without divulging the name of the house, I will say that its sympathies have been from the outset friendly to the Entente Allies,—especially with France. There are two branches of the ruling family, one in power, the other practically in exile. The state is a small one, but its integrity is of the highest. Its sons and daughters have married into the royal families of nearly all of the great nations of the continent. The present—or I should say—the late ruler, for he died on a field of battle not many months ago, had no direct heir. He was young and unmarried. I am not permitted to state with what army he was fighting, nor on which front he was killed. It is only necessary to say that his little state was gobbled up by the Teutonic Allies. The branch of the family mentioned as being in exile lent its support to the cause of Germany, not for moral reasons but in the hope and with the understanding, I am to believe, that the crown-lands would be the reward. The direct heir to the crown is a cousin of the late prince. He is now a prisoner of war in Austria. Other members of the family are held by the Bulgarians as prisoners of war. It is not stretching the imagination very far to picture them as already dead and out of the way. At the close of the war, if Germany is victorious, the crown will be placed upon the head of the pretender branch. Are you following me?"

"Yes," said Barnes, his nerves tingling. He was beginning to see a great light.

"Almost under the noses of the forces left by the Teutonic Allies to hold the invaded territory, the crown-jewels, charter and so forth, heretofore mentioned as they say in legal parlance, were surreptitiously removed from the palace and spirited away by persons loyal to the ruling branch of the family. As I have stated, I am engaged in the effort to recover them."

"It requires but little intelligence on my part to reach the conclusion that you are employed by either the German or Austrian government, Mr. Sprouse. You are working in the interests of the usurping branch of the family."

"Wrong again, Mr. Barnes,—but naturally. I am in the service of a country violently opposed to the German cause. My country's interest in the case is—well, you might say benevolent. The missing property belongs to the State from which it was taken. It represents a great deal in the shape of treasure, to say nothing of its importance along other lines. To restore the legitimate branch of the family to power after the war, the Entente Allies must be in possession of the papers and crown-rights that these misguided enthusiasts made away with. Of course, it would be possible to do it without considering the demands of the opposing

claimants, arbitrarily kicking them out, but that isn't the way my government does business. The persons who removed this treasure from the state vaults believed that they were acting for the best interests of their superiors. In a sense, they were. The only fault we have to find with them is that they failed to do the sensible thing by delivering their booty into the hands of one of the governments friendly to their cause. Instead of doing so, they succeeded in crossing the ocean, conscientiously believing that America was the safest place to keep the treasure pending developments on the other side.

"Now we come to the present situation. Some months ago a member of the aforesaid royal house arrived in this country by way of Japan. He is a distant cousin of the crown and, in a way, remotely looked upon as the heir-apparent. Later on he sequestered himself in Canada. Our agents in Europe learned but recently that while he pretends to be loyal to the ruling house, he is actually scheming against it. I have been ordered to run him to earth, for there is every reason to believe that the men who secured the treasure have been duped into regarding him as an avowed champion of the crown. We believe that if we find this man we will, sooner or later, be able to put our hands on the missing treasure. I have never seen the man, nor a portrait of him. A fairly adequate description has been sent to me, however. Now, Mr. Barnes, without telling you how I have arrived at the conclusion, I am prepared to state that I believe this man to be at Green Fancy, and that in time the loot,—to use a harsh word,—will be delivered to him there. I am here to get it, one way or another, when that comes to pass."

Barnes had not taken his eyes from the face of the little man during this recital. He was rapidly changing his opinion of Sprouse. There was sincerity in the voice and eyes of the secret agent.

"What led you to suspect that he is at Green Fancy, Mr. Sprouse?"

"History. It is known that this Mr. Curtis has spent a great deal of time in the country alluded to. As a matter of fact, his son, who lived in London, had rather extensive business interests there. This son was killed in the Balkan War several years ago. It is said that the man I am looking for was a friend of young Curtis, who married a Miss O'Dowd in London,—the Honourable Miss O'Dowd, daughter of an Irish peer, and sister of the chap you have met at Green Fancy. The elder Curtis was a close and intimate friend of more than one member of the royal family. Indeed, he is known to have been a welcome visitor in the home of a prominent nobleman, once high in the counsels of State. This man O'Dowd is also a friend of the man I am looking for. He went through the Balkan War with him. After that war, O'Dowd drifted to China, hoping no doubt to take a hand in the revolution. He is that sort. Some months ago he came to the United States. I forgot to mention that he has long considered this country his home, although born in Ireland. About six weeks ago a former equerry in the royal household arrived in New York. Through him I learned that the daughter of the gentleman in whose house the senior Mr. Curtis was a frequent guest had been in the United States since some time prior to the beginning of the war. She was visiting friends in the States and has been unable to return to her own land, for reasons that must be obvious. I may as well confess that her father was, by marriage, an uncle of the late ruler.

"Since the invasion and overthrow of her country by the Teutonic Allies, she has been endeavouring to raise money here for the purpose of equipping and supporting the remnants of the small army that fought so valiantly in defence of the crown. These men, a few thousand only, are at present interned in a neutral country. I leave you to guess what will happen if she succeeds in supplying them with arms and ammunition. Her work is being carried on with the greatest secrecy. Word of it came to the ears of her country's minister in Paris, however, and he at once jumped to a quick but very natural conclusion. She has been looked upon in court circles as the prospective bride of the adventurous cousin I am hunting for. The embassy has conceived the notion that she may know a great deal about the present whereabouts of the missing treasure. No one accuses her of duplicity, however. On the other hand, the man in the case is known to have pro-German sympathies. She may be loyal to the crown, but there is a decided doubt as to his loyalty. Of course, we have no means of knowing to what extent she has confided her plans to him. We do not even know that she is aware of his presence in this country. To bring the story to a close, I was instructed to keep close watch on the man O'Dowd. The ex-attache of the court to whom I referred a moment ago set out to find the young lady in question. I traced O'Dowd to this place. I was on the point of reporting to my superiors that he was in no way associated with the much-sought-after crown-cousin, and that Green Fancy was as free from taint as the village chapel, when out of a clear sky and almost under my very nose two men were mysteriously done away with at the very gates of the place. In fact, so positive was I that O'Dowd was all right, that I had started for Washington to send my report back home and wait for instructions. The killing of those two men changed the aspect completely. You will certainly agree with me after I have explained to you that the one known as Andrew Roon was no other than the equerry who had undertaken to find the—young woman."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Barnes.

"He came up here because he had reason to believe that the—er—girl was either at Green Fancy or was headed this way. I was back here in thirty-six hours, selling Dickens. I saw the bodies of the two men at the county-seat, and recognised both of them, despite the fact that they had cut off their beards. Now, they could not have been recognised, Mr. Barnes, except by some one who had known them all his life. And that is why I am positive that the man I am looking for is up at Green Fancy."

Barnes drew a long breath. His mind was made up. He had decided to pool issues with the secret agent, but not until he was convinced that the result of their co-operation would in no way inflict a hardship upon the young woman who had appealed to him for help. He was certain that she was the fair propagandist described by Sprouse.

"Is it your intention to lodge him in jail if you succeed in capturing your man, Mr. Sprouse, and to apply for extradition papers?" he asked.

"I can't land him in jail unless I can prove that he has the stolen goods, can I?"

"You could implicate him in the general conspiracy."

"That is for others to say, sir. I am only instructed to recover the treasure."

"And the young woman, what of her? She would, in any case, be held for examination and—"

"My dear sir, I may as well tell you now that she is a loyal subject and, far from being in bad grace at court, is an object of extreme solicitude to the ambassador. Up to two months ago she was in touch with him. From what I can gather, she has disappeared completely. Roon was sent over here for the sole purpose of finding her and inducing her to return with him to Paris."

"And to take the treasure with her, I suppose," said Barnes drily.

"Naturally."

"Well," began Barnes, introducing a harsh note into his voice, "I should say that if she is guilty of receiving this stolen property she ought to be punished. Jail is the place for her, Mr. Sprouse."

Sprouse put down his coffee cup rather suddenly. A queer pallor came into his face. His voice was low and a trifle husky when he made reply.

"I am sorry to hear you say that, sir."

"Why, may I ask?"

"Because it puts an obstacle in the way of our working together in this matter."

"You mean that my attitude toward her is—er—not in keeping with your ideas?"

"You do not understand the situation. Haven't I made it plain to you that she is innocent of any intent to do wrong?"

"You have said so, Mr. Sprouse, but your idea of wrong and mine may not jibe."

"There cannot be two ways of looking at it, sir," said Sprouse, after a moment. "She could do no wrong."

Whereupon Barnes reached his hand across the table and laid it on Sprouse's. His eyes were dancing.

"That's just what I want to be sure about," he said. "It was my way of finding out your intentions concerning her."

"What do you mean?" demanded Sprouse, staring.

"Come with me to my room," said Barnes, suppressing his excitement. "I think I can tell you where she is,—and a great deal more that you ought to know."

In the little room upstairs, he told the whole story to Sprouse. The little man listened without so much as a single word of interruption or interrogation. His sharp eyes began to glisten as the story progressed, but in no other way did he reveal the slightest sign of emotion. Somewhat breathlessly Barnes came to the end.

"And now, Mr. Sprouse, what do you make of it all?" he inquired.

Sprouse leaned back in his chair, suddenly relaxing. "I am completely at sea," he said, and Barnes looked at him in surprise.

"By Jove, I thought it would all be as clear as day to you. Here is your man and also your woman, and the travelling bag full of—"

"Right you are," interrupted Sprouse. "That is all simple enough. But, my dear Barnes, can you tell me what Mr. Secretary Loeb's real game is? Why has he established himself so close to the Canadian line, and why the mobilisation? I refer to his army of huskies."

"Heirs-apparent usually have some sort of a bodyguard, don't they?"

Sprouse was staring thoughtfully at the ceiling. He either did not hear the remark or considered it unworthy of notice. When he finally lowered his eyes, it was to favour Barnes with a deep, inscrutable smile.

"I dare say the first thing for me to do is to advise the Canadian authorities to keep a sharp lookout along the border."

CHAPTER XII — THE FIRST WAYFARER ACCEPTS AN INVITATION, AND MR. DILLINGFORD BELABOURS A PROXY

Barnes insisted that the first thing to be considered was the release of Miss Cameron. He held forth at

some length on the urgency of immediate action.

"If we can't think of any other way to get her out of this devilish predicament, Sprouse, I shall apply to Washington for help."

"And be laughed at, my friend," said the secret agent. "In the first place, you couldn't give a substantial reason for government investigation; in the second place the government wouldn't act until it had looked very thoroughly into the case; in the third place, it would be too late by the time the government felt satisfied to act, and in the fourth place, it is not a matter for the government to meddle in at all."

"Well, something has to be done at once," said Barnes doggedly. "I gave her my promise. She is depending on me. If you could have seen the light that leaped into her glorious eyes when I—"

"Yes, I know. I've heard she is quite a pretty girl. You needn't—"

"Quite a pretty girl!" exclaimed Barnes. "Why, she is the loveliest thing that God ever created. She has the face of—"

"I am beginning to understand O'Dowd's interest in her, Mr. Barnes. Your enthusiasm conveys a great deal to me. Apparently you are not alone in your ecstasies."

"You mean that he is—er—What the dickens do you mean?"

"He has probably fallen in love with her with as little difficulty as you have experienced, Mr. Barnes, and almost as expeditiously. He has seen a little more of her than you, but—"

"Don't talk nonsense. I'm not in love with her."

"Can you speak with equal authority for Mr. O'Dowd? He is a very susceptible Irishman, I am told. Sweethearts in a great many ports,—and still going strong, as we say of the illustrious Johnny Walker. From all that I have heard of her amazing beauty, I can't blame him for losing his heart to her. I only hope he loses his head as well."

"I don't believe he will get much encouragement from her, Mr. Sprouse," said Barnes stiffly.

"If she is as clever as I think she is, she will encourage him tremendously. I would if I were in her place."

"Umph!" was Barnes's only retort to that.

"Is it possible that you have never had the pleasure of being transformed into a perfect ass by the magic of a perfect woman, Mr. Barnes? You've missed a great deal. It happened to me once, and came near to upsetting the destinies of two great nations. Mr. O'Dowd is only human. He isn't immune."

"I catch the point, Mr. Sprouse," said Barnes, rather gloomily. He did not like to think of the methods that might have to be employed in the subjugation of Mr. O'Dowd. "There is a rather important question I'd like to ask. Is she even remotely eligible to her country's throne?"

"Remotely, yes," said Sprouse without hesitation.

Barnes waited, but nothing further was volunteered.

"So remotely that she could marry a chap like O'Dowd without giving much thought to future complications?" he ventured.

"She'd be just as safe in marrying O'Dowd as she would be in marrying you," was Sprouse's unsatisfactory response. The man's brow was wrinkled in thought. "See here, Mr. Barnes, I am planning a visit to Green Fancy to-night. How would you like to accompany me?"

"I'd like nothing better," said Barnes, with enthusiasm.

"Ever been shot at?"

"No."

"Well, you are likely to experience the novelty if you go with me. Better think it over."

"Don't worry about me. I'll go."

"Will you agree to obey instructions? I can't have you muddling things up, you know."

Barnes thought for a moment. "Of course, if the opportunity offers for me to communicate with Miss Cameron, I don't see how I—"

Sprouse cut him off sharply. He made it quite plain to the would-be cavalier that it was not a sentimental enterprise they were to undertake, and that he would have to govern himself accordingly.

"The grounds are carefully guarded," said Barnes, after they had discussed the project for some time. "Miss Cameron is constantly under the watchful eye of one or more of the crowd."

"I know. I passed a couple of them last night," said Sprouse calmly. "By the way, don't you think it would be very polite of you to invite the Green Fancy party over here to have an old-fashioned country dinner with you to-night?"

"Good Lord! What are you talking about? They wouldn't dream of accepting. Besides, I thought you wanted me to go with you."

"You could offer them diversion in the shape of a theatrical entertainment. Your friends, the Thespians, would be only too happy to disport themselves in return for all your—"

"It would be useless, Mr. Sprouse. They will not come."

"I am perfectly aware of that, but it won't do any harm to ask them, will it?"

Barnes chuckled. "I see. Establishing myself as an innocent bystander, eh?"

"Get O'Dowd on the telephone and ask him if they can come," said Sprouse. "Incidentally, you might test his love for Miss Cameron while you are about it."

"How?" demanded Barnes.

"By asking him to call her to the telephone. Would you be sure to recognise her voice?"

"I'd know it in Babel," said the other with some fervour.

"Well, if she comes to the 'phone and speaks to you without restraint, we may be reasonably certain of two things: that O'Dowd is friendly and that he is able to fix it so that she can talk to you without being overheard or suspected by the others. It's worth trying, in any event."

"But there is Jones to consider. The telephone is in his office. What will he think—"

"Jones is all right," said Sprouse briefly. "Come along. You can call up from my room." He grinned slyly. "Such a thing as tapping the wire, you know."

Sprouse had installed a telephone in his room, carrying a wire upstairs from an attachment made in the cellar of the Tavern. He closed the door to his little room on the top floor.

"With the landlord's approval," he explained, pointing to the instrument, "but unknown to the telephone company, you may be sure. Call him up about half-past ten. O'Dowd may be up at this unholy hour, but not she. Now, I must be off to discuss literature with Mrs. Jim Conley. I've been working on her for two weeks. The hardest part of my job is to keep her from subscribing for a set of Dickens. She has been on the point of signing the contract at least a half dozen times, and I've been fearfully hard put to head her off. Conley's house is not far from Green Fancy. Savvy?"

Barnes, left to his own devices, wandered from tap-room to porch, from porch to forge, from forge to tap-room, his brain far more active than his legs, his heart as heavy as lead and as light as air by turns. More than once he felt like resorting to a well-known expedient to determine whether he was awake or dreaming. Could all this be real?

The sky was overcast. A cold, damp wind blew out of the north. There was a feel of rain in the air, an ugly greyness in the road that stretched its sharply defined course through the green fields that stole timorously up to the barren forest and stopped short, as if afraid to venture farther.

The ring of the hammer on the anvil lent cheer to the otherwise harsh and unlovely mood that had fallen upon Nature over night. It sang a song of defiance that even the mournful chant of sheep on the distant slopes failed to subdue. The crowing of a belated and no doubt mortified rooster, the barking of faraway dogs, the sighing of journeying winds, the lugubrious whistle of Mr. Clarence Dillingford,—all of these added something to the dreariness of the morning.

Mr. Dillingford was engaged in lustily beating a rug suspended on a clothes line in the area back of the stables. His tune was punctuated by stifled lapses followed almost immediately by dull, flat whacks upon the carpet. From the end of the porch he was visible to the abstracted Barnes.

"Hi!" he shouted, brandishing his flail at the New Yorker. "Want a job?"

Barnes looked at his watch. He still had an hour and a half to wait before he could call up O'Dowd. He strolled across the lot and joined the perspiring comedian.

"You seem to have a personal grudge against that carpet," he said, moving back a few yards as Dillingford laid on so manfully that the dust arose in clouds.

"Every time I land I say: 'Take that, darn you!' And it pleases me to imagine that with every crack Mr. Putnam Jones lets out a mighty 'Ouch!' Now listen! Didn't that sound a little like an ouch?" Mr. Dillingford rubbed a spot clean on the handle of the flail and pressed his lips to it. "Good dog!" he murmured tenderly. "Bite him! (Whack!) Now, bite him again! (Whack!) Once more! (Whack!) Good dog! Now, go lie down awhile and rest." He tossed the flail to the ground and, mopping his brow, turned to Barnes. "If you want a real treat, go into the cellar and take a look at Bacon. He is churning for butter. Got a gingham apron on and thinks he's disguised. He can't cuss because old Miss Tilly is reading the first act of a play she wrote for Julia Marlowe seven or eight years ago. Oh, it's a great life!"

Barnes sat down on the edge of a watering-trough and began filling his pipe.

"You are not obliged to do this sort of work, Dillingford," he said. "It would give me pleasure to stake—"

"Nix," said Mr. Dillingford cheerily. "Some other time I may need help more than I do now. I'm getting three square meals and plenty of fresh air to sleep in at present, and work doesn't hurt me physically. It DOES hurt my pride, but that's soon mended. Have you seen the old man this morning?"

"Rushcroft? No."

"Well, we're to be on our way next week, completely reorganised, rejuvenated and resplendent. Fixed it all

up last night. Tommy Gray was down here with two weeks' salary as chauffeur and a little extra he picked up playing poker in the garage with the rubes. Thirty-seven dollars in real money. He has decided to buy a quarter interest in the company and act as manager. Everything looks rosy. You are to have a half interest and the old man the remaining quarter. He telegraphed last night for four top-notch people to join us at Crowndale on Tuesday the twenty-third. We open that night in 'The Duke's Revenge,' our best piece. It's the only play we've got that provides me with a part in which I have a chance to show what I can really do. As soon as I get through spanking this carpet I'll run upstairs and get a lot of clippings to show you how big a hit I've made in the part. In one town I got better notices than the star himself, and seldom did I—"

"Where is Crowndale?" interrupted Barnes, a slight frown appearing on his brow. He had a distinct feeling that there was handwriting on the wall and that it was put there purposely for him to read.

"About five hours' walk from Hornville," said Dillingford, grinning. "Twenty-five cents by train. We merely resume a tour interrupted by the serious illness of Mr. Rushcroft. Rather than impose upon our audiences by inflicting them with an understudy, the popular star temporarily abandons his tour. We ought to sell out in Crowndale, top to bottom."

The amazing optimism of Mr. Dillingford had its effect on Barnes. Somehow the day grew brighter, the skies less drear, a subtle warmth crept into the air.

"You may count on me, Dillingford, to put up my half interest in the show. I will have a fling at it a couple of weeks anyhow. If it doesn't pan out in that time,—well, we can always close, can't we?"

"We certainly can," said the other, with conviction. "It wouldn't surprise me in the least, however, to see you clean up a very tidy bit of money, Mr. Barnes. Our season ordinarily closes toward the end of June, but the chances are we'll stay out all summer if things go right. Congratulations! Glad to see you in the profession." He shook hands with the new partner. "Keep your seat! Don't move. I'll shift a little so's the wind won't blow the dust in your eyes." He obligingly did so and fell upon the carpet with renewed vigour.

Barnes was restless. He chatted with the rug-beater for a few minutes and then sauntered away. Miss Thackeray was starting off for a walk as he came around to the front of the Tavern. She wore a rather shabby tailor-suit of blue serge, several seasons out of fashion, and a black sailor hat. Her smile was bright and friendly as she turned in response to his call. As he drew near he discovered that her lips were a vivid, startling red, her eyes elaborately made up, and her cheeks the colour of bismuth. She was returning to form, thought he, in some dismay.

"Where away?" he inquired.

"Seeking solitude," she replied. "I've got to learn a new part in an old play." She flourished the script airily. "I have just accepted an engagement as leading lady."

"Splendid! I am delighted. With John Drew, I hope."

"Nothing like that," she said loftily. Then her wide mouth spread into a good-natured grin, revealing the even rows of teeth that were her particular charm. "I am going out with the great Lyndon Rushcroft."

"Good! As one of the proprietors, I am glad to see you on our—er—programme, Miss Thackeray."

"Programme is good," she mused. "I've been on a whole lot of programmes during my brief career. What I want to get on some time, if possible, is a pay-roll. Wait! Don't say it! I was only trying to be funny; I didn't know how it would sound or I wouldn't have said anything so stupid. You've done more than enough for us, Mr. Barnes. Don't let yourself in for anything more. This thing will turn out like all the rest of our efforts. We'll collapse again with a loud report, but we're used to it and you're not."

"But I'm only letting myself in for a couple of hundred," he protested. "I can stand that much of a loss without squirming."

"You know your own business," she said shortly, almost ungraciously. "I'm only giving you a little advice."

"Advice is something I always ignore," he said, smiling. "Experience is my teacher."

"Advice is cheaper than experience, and a whole lot easier to forget," she said. "My grandfather advised my father to stay in the hardware business out in Indiana. That was thirty years ago. And here we are to-day," she concluded, with a wide sweep of her hand that took in the forlorn landscape. She said more in that expressive gesture than the most accomplished orator could have put into words in a week.

"But there is always a to-morrow, you know."

"There may be a to-morrow for me, but there are nothing but yesterdays left for dad. All of his to-morrows will be just like his yesterdays. They will be just as empty of success, just as full of failure. There's no use mincing matters. We never have had a chance to go broke for the simple reason that we've never been anything else. He has been starring for fifteen years, hitting the tanks from one end of the country to the other. And for just that length of time he has been mooning. There's a lot of difference between starring and mooning."

"He may go down somewhat regularly, Miss Thackeray, but he always comes up again. That's what I admire in him. He will not stay down."

Her eyes brightened. "He is rather a brick, isn't he?"

"Rather! And so are you, if I may say so. You have stuck to him through all—"

"Nothing bricky about me," she scoffed. "I am doing it because I can't, for the life of me, get rid of the

notion that I can act. God knows I can't, and so does father, and the critics, and every one in the profession, but I think I can,—so what does it all amount to? Now, that will be enough about me. As for you, Mr. Barnes, if you have made up your mind to be foolish, far be it from me to head you off. You will drop considerably more than a couple of hundred, let me tell you, and—but, as I said before, that is your business. I must be off now. It's a long part and I'm slow study. So long,—and thanks!"

He sat down on the Tavern steps and watched her as she swung off down the road. To his utter amazement, when she reached a point several hundred yards below the Tavern, she left the highway and, gathering up her skirts, climbed over the fence into the narrow meadow-land that formed a frontage at the bottom of the Curtis estate. A few minutes later she disappeared among the trees at the base of the mountain, going in the direction of Green Fancy. He had followed her with his gaze all the way across that narrow strip of pasture. When she came to the edge of the forest, she stopped and looked back at the Tavern. Seeing him still on the steps, she waved her hand at him. Then she was gone.

"Where ignorance is bliss," he muttered to himself, and then looked at his watch. Ten minutes later he was in Sprouse's room, calling for Green Fancy over an extension wire that had cost the company nothing and yielded nothing in return. After some delay, O'Dowd's mellow voice sang out:

"Hello! How are you this morning?"

"Grievously lonesome," replied Barnes, and wound up a doleful account of himself by imploring O'Dowd to save his life by bringing the entire Green Fancy party over to dinner that night.

O'Dowd was heart-broken. Personally he would go to any extreme to save so valuable a life, but as for the rest of the party, they begged him to say they were sorry to hear of the expected death of so promising a chap and that, while they couldn't come to his party, they would be delighted to come to his funeral. In short, it would be impossible for them to accept his kind invitation. The Irishman was so gay and good-humoured that Barnes took hope.

"By the way, O'Dowd, I'd like to speak with Miss Cameron if she can come to the telephone."

There was a moment of silence. Then: "Call up at twelve o'clock and ask for me. Good-bye."

Promptly on the stroke of twelve Barnes took down the receiver and called for Green Fancy. O'Dowd answered almost immediately.

"I warned you last night, Barnes," he said without preamble. "I told you to keep out of this. You may not understand the situation and I cannot enlighten you, but I will say this much: no harm can come to her while I'm here and alive."

"Can't she come to the telephone?"

"Won't ye take my word for it? I swear by all that's holy that she'll be safe while I've—"

Barnes was cautious. This might be the clever O'Dowd's way of trapping him into serious admissions.

"I don't know what the deuce you are talking about, O'Dowd," he interrupted.

"You lie, Barnes," said the other promptly. "Miss Cameron is here at my elbow. Will you have her tell you that you lie?"

"Let her say anything she likes," said Barnes quickly.

"Don't be surprised if you are cut off suddenly. The coast is clear for the moment, but—Here, Miss Cameron. Careful, now."

Her voice, soft and clear and trembling with eagerness caressed Barnes's eager ear.

"Mr. O'Dowd will see that no evil befalls me here, but he refuses to help me to get away. I quite understand and appreciate his position. I cannot ask him to go so far as that. Help will have to come from the outside. It will be dangerous—terribly dangerous, I fear. I have no right to ask you to take the risk—"

"Wait! Is O'Dowd there?"

"He has left the room. He does not want to hear what I say to you. Don't you understand?"

"Keeping his conscience clear, bless his soul," said Barnes. "It is safe for you to speak freely?"

"I think so. O'Dowd suspected us last night. He came to me this morning and spoke very frankly about it. I feel quite safe with him. You see, I've known him for a long, long time. He did not know that I was to be led into a trap like this. It was not until I had been here for several hours that he realised the true state of affairs. I cannot tell you any more at present, Mr. Barnes. So great are the other issues at stake that my own misfortunes are as nothing."

"You say O'Dowd will not assist you to escape?"

"He urges me to stay here and take my chances. He believes that everything will turn out well for me in the end, but I am frightened. I must get away from this place."

"I'll manage it, never fear. Keep a stiff upper lip."

"Wha—keep a what?"

He laughed. "I forgot that you don't understand our language, Miss Cameron. Have courage, is what I should have said. Are you prepared to fly at a moment's notice?"

"Yes."

"Then, keep your eyes and ears open for the next night or two. Can you tell me where your room is located?"

"It is one flight up; the first of the two windows in my room is the third to the right of the entrance. I am confident that some one is stationed below my windows all night long."

"Are you alone in that room?"

"Yes. Mr. and Mrs. Van Dyke occupy the rooms on my left, Mr. De Soto is on my right."

"Where does Loeb sleep?"

"I do not know." He detected a new note in her voice, and at once put it down to fear.

"You still insist that I am not to call on the authorities for help?"

"Yes, yes! That must not even be considered. I have not only myself to consider, Mr. Barnes. I am a very small atom in—"

"All right! We'll get along without them," he said cheerily. "Afterwards we will discuss the importance of atoms."

"And your reward as well, Mr. Barnes," she said. Her voice trailed off into an indistinct murmur. He heard the receiver click on the hook, and, after calling "hello" twice, hung up his own with a sigh. Evidently O'Dowd had warned her of the approach of a less considerate person than himself.

CHAPTER XIII — THE SECOND WAYFARER RECEIVES TWO VISITORS AT MIDNIGHT

The hour for the midday dinner approached and there was no sign of Miss Thackeray's return from the woods. Barnes sat for two exasperating hours on the porch and listened to the confident, flamboyant oratory of Mr. Lyndon Rushcroft. His gaze constantly swept the line of trees, and there were times when he failed to hear a word in whole sentences that rolled from the lips of the actor. He was beginning to feel acutely uneasy, when suddenly her figure issued from the woods at a point just above the Tavern. Instead of striking out at once across the meadow, she stopped and for as long as three or four minutes appeared to be carrying on a conversation with some invisible person among the trees she had just left behind. Then she waved her hand and turned her steps homeward. A bent old man came out of the woods and stood watching her progress across the open stretch. She had less than two hundred yards to traverse between the woods and the fence opposite the Tavern. The old man remained where he was until she reached the fence and prepared to mount it. Then, as Barnes ran down from the porch and across the road to assist her over the fence, he whirled about and disappeared.

"Aha," said Barnes chidingly: "politely escorted from the grounds, I see. If you had asked me I could have told you that trespassers are not welcome."

"He is a nice old man. I chatted with him for nearly an hour. His business is to shoo gipsy moths away from the trees, or something like that, and not to shoo nice, tender young ladies off the place."

"Does he speak English?"

"Not a word. He speaks nothing but the most awful American I've ever heard. He has lived up there on the mountain for sixty-nine years, and he has eleven grown children, nineteen grandchildren and one wife. I'm hungry."

The coroner's inquest over the bodies of Roon and Paul was held that afternoon at St. Elizabeth. Witnesses from Hart's Tavern were among those to testify. The verdict was "Murder at the hands of parties unknown."

Sprouse did not appear at the Tavern until long after nightfall. His protracted absence was the source of grave uneasiness to Barnes, who, having been summoned to St. Elizabeth, returned at six o'clock primed and eager for the night's adventure.

The secret agent listened somewhat indifferently to the latter's account of his telephonic experiences. At nine o'clock he yawned prodigiously and announced that he was going to bed, much to the disgust of Mr. Rushcroft and greatly to the surprise of Mr. Barnes, who followed him from the tap-room and demanded an explanation.

"People usually go to bed at night, don't they?" said Sprouse patiently. "It is expected, I believe."

"But, my dear man, we are to undertake—"

"There is no reason why we shouldn't go to bed like sensible beings, Mr. Barnes, and get up again when we

feel like it, is there? I have some cause for believing that one of those chaps in there is from Green Fancy. Go to bed at ten o'clock, my friend, and put out your light. I don't insist on your taking off your clothes, however. I will rap on your door at eleven o'clock. By the way, don't forget to stick your revolver in your pocket."

A few minutes before eleven there came a gentle tapping on Barnes's door. He sprang to his feet and opened it, presenting himself before Sprouse fully dressed and, as the secret agent said later on, "fit to kill."

They went quietly down a back stairway and let themselves out into the stable-yard. A light, cold drizzle greeted them as they left the lee of the building.

"A fine night for treason, stratagems and spoils," said Sprouse, speaking barely above a whisper. "Follow me and don't ask questions. You will have to talk if you do, and talking is barred for the present."

He stopped at the corner of the inn and listened for a moment. Then he darted across the road and turned to the left in the ditch that bordered it. The night was as black as pitch. Barnes, trusting to the little man's eyes, and hanging close upon his coat-tails, followed blindly but gallantly in the tracks of the leader. It seemed to him that they stumbled along parallel to the road for miles before Sprouse came to a halt.

"Climb over the fence here, and stick close to me. Are you getting your cats'-eyes?"

"Yes, I can see pretty well now. But, great scot, why should we walk half way to the North Pole, Sprouse, before—"

"We haven't come more than half a mile. The Curtis land ends here. We stay close to this fence till we reach the woods. I was in here to-day taking observations."

"You were?"

"Yes. Didn't that actress friend of yours mention meeting me?"

"No."

"I told her distinctly that I had eleven children, nineteen—"

"By Jove, was that you?" gasped Barnes, falling in beside him.

"If it were light enough you could see a sign on my back which says in large type, 'Silence,'" said the other, and after that not a word passed between them for half an hour or more. Then it was Sprouse who spoke. "This is the short cut to Green Fancy," he whispered, laying his hand on Barnes's arm. "We save four or five miles, coming this way. Do you know where we are?"

"I haven't the remotest idea."

"About a quarter of a mile below Curtis's house. Are you all right?"

"Fine as a fiddle, except for a barked knee, a skinned elbow, a couple of more or less busted ribs, something on my cheek that runs hot,—yes, I'm all right."

"Pretty tough going," said Sprouse, sympathetically.

"I've banged into more trees than—"

"Sh!" After a moment of silence, intensified by the mournful squawk of night-birds and the chorus of katydids, Sprouse whispered: "Did you hear that?"

Barnes thrilled. This was real melodrama. "Hear what?" he whispered shrilly.

"Listen!" After a second or two: "There!"

"It's a woodpecker hammering on the limb of a—"

"Woodpeckers don't hammer at midnight, my lad. Don't stir! Keep your ears open."

"You bet they're open all right," whispered Barnes, his nerves aquiver.

Suddenly the sharp tattoo sounded so close to the spot where they were standing that Barnes caught his breath and with difficulty suppressed an exclamation. It was like the irregular rattle of sticks on the rim of a snare-drum. The tapping ceased and a moment later a similar sound, barely audible, came out of the distance.

Sprouse clutched his companion's arm and, dropping to his knees in the thick underbrush, pulled the other down after him.

Presently heavy footsteps approached. An unseen pedestrian passed within ten yards of them. They scarcely breathed until the sounds passed entirely out of hearing. Sprouse put his lips close to Barnes's ear.

"Telegraph," he whispered. "It's a system they have of reporting to each other. There are two men patrolling the grounds near the house. You see what we're up against, Barnes. Do you still want to go on with it? If you are going to funk it, say so, and I'll go alone."

"I'll stay by you," replied Barnes sturdily.

"In about ten minutes that fellow will come back this way. He follows the little path that winds down—but never mind. Stay where you are, and don't make a sound, no matter what happens. Understand? No matter what happens!" He arose and swiftly, noiselessly, stole away from his companion's side. Barnes, his eyes accustomed to the night, either saw or imagined that he saw, the shadowy hulk press forward for a dozen paces and then apparently dissolve in black air.

Several minutes went by. There was not a sound save the restless patter of rain in the tree tops. At last the faraway thud of footsteps came to the ears of the tense listener. They drew nearer, louder, and once more seemed to be approaching the very spot where he crouched. He had the uncanny feeling that in a moment or two more the foot of the sentinel would come in contact with his rigid body, and that he would not have the power to suppress the yell of dismay that—

Then came the sound of a dull, heavy blow, a hoarse gasp, a momentary commotion in the shrubbery, and—again silence. Barnes's blood ran cold. He waited for the next footfall of the passing man. It never came.

A sharp whisper reached his ears. "Come here—quick!"

He floundered through the brush and almost fell prostrate over the kneeling figure of a man.

"Take care! Lend a hand," whispered Sprouse.

Dropping to his knees, Barnes felt for and touched wet, coarse garments, and gasped:

"My God! Have you—killed him?"

"Temporarily," said Sprouse, between his teeth. "Here, unwind the rope I've got around my waist. Take the end—here. Got a knife? Cut off a section about three feet long. I'll get the gag in his mouth while you're doing it. Hangmen always carry their own ropes," he concluded, with grewsome humour. "Got it cut? Well, cut two more sections, same length."

With incredible swiftness the two of them bound the feet, knees and arms of the inert victim.

"I came prepared," said Sprouse, so calmly that Barnes marvelled at the iron nerve of the man.

"Thirty feet of hemp clothes-line for a belt, properly prepared gags,—and a sound silencer."

"By heaven, Sprouse, I—I believe he's dead," groaned Barnes. "We—we haven't any right to kill a—"

"He'll be as much alive but not as lively as a cricket in ten minutes," said the other. "Grab his heels. We'll chuck him over into the bushes where he'll be out of harm's way. We may have to run like hell down this path, partner, and I'd—I'd hate to step on his face."

"'Gad, you're a cold-blooded—"

"Don't be finicky," snapped Sprouse. "It wasn't much of a crack, and it was necessary. There! You're safe for the time being," he grunted as they laid the limp body down in the brush at the side of the narrow trail. Straightening up, with a sigh of satisfaction, he laid his hand on Barnes's shoulder. "We've just got to go through with it now, Barnes. We'll never get another chance. Putting that fellow out of business queers us forever afterward." He dropped to his knees and began searching over the ground with his hands. "Here it is. You can't see it, of course, so I'll tell you what it is. A nice little block of sandal-wood. I've already got his nice little hammer, so we'll see what we can raise in the way of wireless chit-chat."

Without the slightest hesitation, he struck a succession of quick, confident blows upon the block of wood.

"He always signals at this spot going out and again coming in," he said softly.

"How the deuce did you find out—"

"There! Hear that? He says, 'All's well,'—same as I said, or something equivalent to it. I've been up here quite a bit, Barnes, making a study of night-hawks, their habits and their language."

"By gad, you are a wonder!"

"Wait till to-morrow before you say that," replied Sprouse, sententiously. "Come along now. Stick to the trail. We've got to land the other one." For five or six minutes they moved forward. Barnes, following instructions, trod heavily and without any attempt at caution. His companion, on the other hand, moved with incredible stealthiness. A listener would have said that but one man walked on that lonely trail.

Turning sharply to the right, Sprouse guided his companion through the brush for some distance, and once more came to a halt. Again he stole on ahead, and, as before, the slow, confident, even careless progress of a man ceased as abruptly as that of the comrade who lay helpless in the thicket below.

"There are others, no doubt, but they patrol the outposts, so to speak," panted Sprouse as they bound and trussed the second victim. "We haven't much to fear from them. Come on. We are within a hundred feet of the house. Softly now, or—"

Barnes laid a firm, detaining hand on the man's shoulder.

"See here, Sprouse," he whispered, "it's all very well for you, knocking men over like this, but just what is your object? What does all this lead up to? We can't go on forever slugging and binding these fellows. There is a house full of them up there. What do we gain by putting a few men out of business?"

Sprouse broke in, and there was not the slightest trace of emotion in his whisper.

"Quite right. You ought to know. I suppose you thought I was bringing you up here for a Romeo and Juliet tete-a-tete with the beautiful Miss Cameron,—and for nothing else. Well, in a way, you are right. But, first of all, my business is to recover the crown jewels and parchments. I am going into that house and take them away from the man you know as Loeb,—if he has them. If he hasn't them, my work here is a failure."

"Going into the house?" gasped Barnes. "Why, my God, man, that is impossible. You cannot get into the house, and if you did, you'd never come out alive. You would be shot down as an ordinary burglar and—the

law would justify them for killing you. I must insist—"

"I am not asking you to go into the house, my friend. I shall go alone," said Sprouse coolly.

"On the other hand, I came up here to rescue a helpless,—"

"Oh, we will attend to that also," said Sprouse. "The treasure comes first, however. Has it not occurred to you that she will refuse to be rescued unless the jewels can be brought away with her? She would die before she would leave them behind. No, Barnes, I must get the booty first, then the beauty."

"But you can do nothing without her advice and assistance," protested Barnes.

"That is just why I brought you along with me. She does not know me. She would not trust me. You are to introduce me."

"Well, by gad, you've got a nerve!"

"Keep cool! It's the only way. Now, listen. She has designated her room and the windows that are hers. She is lying awake up there now, take it from me, hoping that you will come to-night. Do you understand? If not to-night, to-morrow night. I shall lead you directly to her window. And then comes the only chance we take,—the only instance where we gamble. There will not be a light in her window, but that won't make any difference. This nobby cane I'm carrying is in reality a collapsible fishing-rod. Bought it to-day in anticipation of some good fishing. First, we use it to tap gently on her window ledge, or shade, or whatever we find. Then, you pass up a little note to her. Here is paper and pencil. Say that you are below her window and—all ready to take her away. Say that the guards have been disposed of, and that the coast is clear. Tell her to lower her valuables, some clothes, et cetera, from the window by means of the rope we'll pass up on the pole. There is a remote possibility that she may have the jewels in her room. For certain reasons they may have permitted her to retain them. If such is the case, our work is easy. If they have taken them away from her, she'll say so, some way or another,—and she will not leave! Now, I've had a good look at the front of that house. It is covered with a lattice work and huge vines. I can shin up like a squirrel and go through her room to the—"

"Are you crazy, Sprouse?"

"I am the sanest person you've ever met, Mr. Barnes. The chance we take is that she may not be alone in the room. But, nothing risked, nothing gained."

"You take your life in your hands and—"

"Don't worry about that, my lad."

"—and you also place Miss Cameron in even graver peril than—"

"See here," said Sprouse shortly, "I am not risking my life for the fun of the thing. I am risking it for her, bear that in mind,—for her and her people. And if I am killed, they won't even say 'Well-done, good and faithful servant.' So, let's not argue the point. Are you going to stand by me or—back out?"

Barnes was shamed. "I'll stand by you," he said, and they stole forward.

The utmost caution was observed in the approach to the house through the thin, winding paths that Barnes remembered from an earlier visit. They crept on all fours over the last fifty feet that intervened, and each held a revolver in readiness for a surprise attack.

There were no lights visible. The house was even darker than the night itself; it was vaguely outlined by a deeper shade of black. The ground being wet, the carpet of dead leaves gave out no rustling sound as the two men crept nearer and nearer to the top-heavy shadow that seemed ready to lurch forward and swallow them whole.

At last they were within a few yards of the entrance and at the edge of a small space that had been cleared of shrubbery. Here Sprouse stopped and began to adjust the sections of his fishing-rod.

"Write," he whispered. "There is a faint glow of light up there to the right. The third window, did you say? Well, that's about where I should locate it. She has opened the window shutters. The light comes into the room through the transom over the door, I would say. There is probably a light in the hall outside."

A few minutes later, they crept across the open space and huddled against the vine-covered facade of Green Fancy. Barnes was singularly composed and free from nervousness, despite the fact that his whole being tingled with excitement. What was to transpire within the next few minutes? What was to be the end of this daring exploit? Was he to see her, to touch her hand, to carry her off into that dungeon-like forest,—and what was this new, exquisite thrill that ran through his veins?

The tiny, metallic tip of the rod, held in the upstretched hand of Barnes, much the taller of the two men, barely reached the window ledge. He tapped gently, persistently on the hard surface. Obeying the hand-pressure of his companion he desisted at intervals, resuming the operation after a moment of waiting. Just as they were beginning to think that she was asleep and that their efforts were in vain, their straining eyes made out a shadowy object projecting slightly beyond the sill. Barnes felt Sprouse's grip on his shoulder tighten, and the quick intake of his breath was evidence of the little secret agent's relief.

After a moment or two of suspense, Barnes experienced a peculiar, almost electric shock. Some one had seized the tip of the rod; it stiffened suddenly, the vibrations due to its flexibility ceasing. He felt a gentle tugging and wrenching; down the slender rod ran a delicate shiver that seemed almost magnetic as it was communicated to his hand. He knew what was happening. Some one was untying the bit of paper he had fastened to the rod, and with fingers that shook and were clumsy with eagerness.

The tension relaxed a moment later; the rod was free, and the shadowy object was gone from the window above. She had withdrawn to the far side of the room for the purpose of reading the message so marvellously delivered out of the night. He fancied her mounting a chair so that she could read by the dim light from the transom.

He had written: "I am outside with a trusted friend, ready to do your bidding. Two of the guards are safely bound and out of the way. Now is our chance. We will never have another. If you are prepared to come with me now, write me a word or two and drop it to the ground. I will pass up a rope to you and you may lower anything you wish to carry away with you. But be exceedingly careful. Take time. Don't hurry a single one of your movements." He signed it with a large B.

It seemed an hour before their eyes distinguished the shadowy head above. As a matter of fact, but a few minutes had passed. During the wait, Sprouse had noiselessly removed his coat, a proceeding that puzzled Barnes. Something light fell to the ground. It was Sprouse who stooped and searched for it in the grass. When he resumed an upright posture, he put his lips close to Barnes's ear and whispered:

"I will put my coat over your head. Here is a little electric torch. Don't flash it until I am sure the coat is arranged so that you can do so without a gleam of light getting out from under." He pressed the torch and a bit of closely folded paper in the other's hand, and carefully draped the coat over his head. Barnes was once more filled with admiration for the little man's amazing resourcefulness.

He read: "Thank God! I was afraid you would wait until to-morrow night. Then it would have been too late. I must get away to-night but I cannot leave—I dare not leave without something that is concealed in another part of the house. I do not know how to secure it. My door is locked from the outside. What am I to do? I would rather die than to go away without it."

Barnes whispered in Sprouse's ear. The latter replied at once: "Write her that I will climb up to her window, and, with God's help and her directions, manage to find the thing she wants."

Barnes wrote as directed and passed the missive aloft. In a little while a reply came down. Resorting to the previous expedient, he read:

"It is impossible. The study is under bolt and key and no one can enter. I do not know what I am to do. I dare not stay here and I dare not go. Leave me to my fate. Do not run any further risk. I cannot allow you to endanger your life for me. I shall never forget you, and I shall always be grateful. You are a noble gentleman and I a foolish, stupid—oh, such a stupid!—girl."

That was enough for Barnes. It needed but that discouraging cry to rouse his fighting spirit to a pitch that bordered on recklessness. His courage took fire, and blazed up in one mighty flame. Nothing,—nothing could stop him now.

Hastily he wrote: "If you do not come at once, we will force our way into the house and fight it out with them all. My friend is coming up the vines. Let him enter the window. Tell him where to go and he will do the rest. He is a miracle man. Nothing is impossible to him. If he does not return in ten minutes, I shall follow."

There was no response to this. The head reappeared in the window, but no word came down.

Sprouse whispered: "I am going up. She will not commit you to anything. We have to take the matter into our own hands. Stay here. If you hear a commotion in the house, run for it. Don't wait for me. I'll probably be done for."

"I'll do just as I damn please about running," said Barnes, and there was a deep thrill in his whisper. "Good luck. God help you if they catch you."

"Not even He could help me then. Good-bye. I'll do what I can to induce her to drop out of the window if anything goes wrong with me down stairs."

He searched among the leaves and found the thick vine. A moment later he was silently scaling the wall of the house, feeling his way carefully, testing every precarious foothold, dragging himself painfully upwards by means of the most uncanny, animal-like strength and stealth.

Barnes could not recall drawing a single breath from the instant the man left his side until the faintly luminous square above his head was obliterated by the black of his body as it wriggled over the ledge.

He was never to forget the almost interminable age that he spent, flattened against the vines, waiting for a signal from aloft. He recalled, with dire uneasiness, Miss Cameron's statement that a guard was stationed beneath her window throughout the night. Evidently she was mistaken. Sprouse would not have overlooked a peril like that, and yet as he crouched there, scarcely breathing, he wondered how long it would be before the missing guard returned to his post and he would be compelled to fight for his life. The fine, cold rain fell gently about him; moist tendrils and leaves caressed his face; owls hooted with ghastly vehemence, as if determined to awaken all the sleepers for miles around; and frogs chattered loudly in gleeful anticipation of the frenzied dash he would have to make through the black maze.

We will follow Sprouse. When he crawled through the window and stood erect inside the room, he found himself confronted by a tall, shadowy figure, standing half way between him and the door.

He advanced a step or two and uttered a soft hiss of warning.

"Not a sound," he whispered, drawing still nearer. "I have come four thousand miles to help you, Countess. This is not the time or place to explain. We haven't a moment to waste. I need only say that I have been sent from Paris by persons you know to aid you in delivering the crown jewels into the custody of your country's minister in Paris. Nothing more need be said now. We must act swiftly. Tell me where they are. I will get

them."

"Who are you?" she whispered tensely.

"My name is Theodore Sprouse. I have been loaned to your embassy by my own government."

"How did you learn that I was here?"

"I beg of you do not ask questions now. Tell me where the Prince sleeps, how I may get to his room—"

"You know that he is the Prince?"

"For a certainty. And that you are his cousin."

She laid her hand upon his arm. "And you know that he plans evil to—to his people? That he is in sympathy with the—with the country that has despoiled us?"

"Yes."

She was silent for a moment. "Not only is it impossible for you to enter his room but it is equally impossible for you to get out of this one except by the way you entered. If I thought there was the slightest chance for you to—"

"Let me be the judge of that, Countess. Where is his room?"

"The last to the right as you leave this door,—at the extreme end of the corridor. There are four doors between mine and his. Across the hall from his room you will see an open door. A man sits in there all night long, keeping watch. You could not approach Prince Ugo's door without being seen by that watcher."

"You said in your note to Barnes that the—er—something was in Curtis's study."

"The Prince sleeps in Mr. Curtis's room. The study adjoins it, and can only be entered from the bed-room. There is no other door. What are you doing?"

"I am going to take a peep over the transom, first of all. If the coast is clear, I shall take a little stroll down the hall. Do not be alarmed. I will come back,—with the things we both want. Pardon me." He sat down on the edge of the bed and removed his shoes. She watched him as if fascinated while he opened the bosom of his soft shirt and stuffed the wet shoes inside.

"How did you dispose of the man who watches below my window?" she inquired, drawing near. "He has been there for the past three nights. I missed him to-night."

"Wasn't he there earlier in the evening?" demanded Sprouse quickly.

"I have been in my room since eleven. He seldom comes on duty before that hour."

"I had it figured out that he was one of the men we got down in the woods. If I have miscalculated—well, poor Barnes may be in for a bad time. We are quite safe up here for the time being. The fellow will assume that Barnes is alone and that he comes to pay his respects to you in a rather romantic manner."

"You must warn Mr. Barnes. He—"

"May I not leave that to you, Countess? I shall be very busy for the next few minutes, and if you will—Be careful! A slip now would be fatal. Don't be hasty." His whispering was sharp and imperative. It was a command that he uttered, and she shrank back in surprise.

"Pray do not presume to address me in—"

"I crave your pardon, my lady," he murmured abjectly. "You are not dressed for flight. May I suggest that while I am outside you slip on a dark skirt and coat? You cannot go far in that dressing-gown. It would be in shreds before you had gone a hundred feet through the brush. If I do not return to this room inside of fifteen minutes, or if you hear sounds of a struggle, crawl through the window and go down the vines. Barnes will look out for you."

"You must not fail, Theodore Sprouse," she whispered. "I must regain the jewels and the state papers. I cannot go without—"

"I shall do my best," he said simply. Silently he drew a chair to the door, mounted it and, drawing himself up by his hands, poked his head through the open transom. An instant later he was on the floor again. She heard him inserting a key in the lock. Almost before she could realise that it had actually happened, the door opened slowly, cautiously, and his thin wiry figure slid through what seemed to her no more than a crack. As softly the door was closed.

For a long time she stood, dazed and unbelieving, in the centre of the room, staring at the door. She held her breath, listening for the shout that was so sure to come—and the shot, perhaps! A prayer formed on her lips and went voicelessly up to God.

Suddenly she roused herself from the stupefaction that held her, and threw off the slinky peignoir. With feverish haste she snatched up garments from the chair on which she had carefully placed them in anticipation of the emergency that now presented itself. A blouse (which she neglected to button), a short skirt of some dark material, a jacket, and a pair of stout walking shoes (which she failed to lace), completed the swift transformation. She felt the pockets of skirt and jacket, assuring herself that her purse and her own personal jewelry were where she had forehandedly placed them. As she glided to the window, she jammed the pins into a small black hat of felt. Then she peered over the ledge. She started back, stifling a cry with her

hand. A man's head had almost come in contact with her own as she leaned out. A man's hand reached over and grasped the inner ledge of the casement, and then a man's face was dimly revealed to her startled gaze.

CHAPTER XIV — A FLIGHT, A STONE-CUTTER'S SHED, AND A VOICE OUTSIDE

He saw her standing in the middle of the room, her clenched hands pressed to her lips. At the angle from which he peered into the room, her head was in line with the lighted transom.

His grip on the ledge was firm but his foothold on the lattice precarious. He felt himself slipping. Exerting all of his strength he drew himself upward, free of the vines that had begun to yield to his weight.

An almost inaudible "Whew!" escaped his lips as he straddled the sill. An instant later he was in the room.

"Why have you come up here?" She came swiftly to his side.

"Thank the Lord, I made it," he whispered, breathlessly. "I came up because there was nowhere else to go. I thought I heard voices—a man and a woman speaking. They seemed to be quite close to me. Don't be alarmed, Miss Cameron. I am confident that I can—"

"And now that you are here, trapped as I am, what do you purpose to do? You cannot escape. Go back before it is too late. Go—"

"Is Sprouse—where is he?"

"He is somewhere in the house. I have heard no sound. I was to wait until he—Oh, Mr. Barnes, I—I am terrified. You will never know the—"

"Trust him," he said. "He is a marvel. We'll be safely out of here in a little while, and then it will all look simple to you. You are ready to go? Good! We will wait a few minutes and if he doesn't show up we'll—Why, you are trembling like a leaf! Sit down, do! If he doesn't return in a minute or two, I'll take a look about the house myself. I don't intend to desert him. I know this floor pretty well, and the lower one. The stairs are—"

"But the stairway is closed at the bottom by a solid steel curtain. It is made to look like a panel in the wall. Mr. Curtis had it put in to protect himself from burglars. You are not to venture outside this room, Mr. Barnes. I forbid it. You—"

"How did Sprouse get out? You said your door was locked."

He sat down on the edge of the bed beside her. She was still trembling violently. He took her hand in his and held it tightly.

"He had a key. I do not know where he obtained—"

"Skeleton key, such as burglars use. By Jove, what a wonderful burglar he would make! Courage, Miss Cameron! He will be here soon. Then comes the real adventure,—my part of it. I didn't come here to-night to get any flashy old crown jewels. I came to take you out of—"

"You—you know about the crown jewels?" she murmured. Her body seemed to stiffen.

"Very little. They are nothing to me."

"Then you know who I am?"

"No. You will tell me to-morrow."

"Yes, yes,—to-morrow," she whispered, and fell to shivering again.

For some time there was silence. Both were listening intently for sounds in the hall; both were watching the door with unblinking eyes. She leaned closer to whisper in his ear. Their shoulders touched. He wondered if she experienced the same delightful thrill that ran through his body. She told him of the man who watched across the hall from the room supposed to be occupied by Loeb the secretary, and of Sprouse's incomprehensible daring.

"Where is Mr. Curtis?" he asked.

Her breath fanned his cheek, her lips were close to his ear. "There is no Mr. Curtis here. He died four months ago in Florida."

"I suspected as much." He did not press her for further revelations. "Sprouse should be here by this time. It isn't likely that he has met with a mishap. You would have heard the commotion. I must go out there and see if he requires any—"

She clutched his arm frantically. "You shall do nothing of the kind. You shall not—"

"Sh! What do you take me for, Miss Cameron? He may be sorely in need of help. Do you think that I would leave him to God knows what sort of fate? Not much! We undertook this job together and—"

"But he said positively that I was to go in case he did not return in—in fifteen minutes," she begged. "He may have been cut off and was compelled to escape from another—"

"Just the same, I've got to see what has become of—"

"No! No!" She arose with him, dragging at his arm. "Do not be foolhardy. You are not skilled at—"

"There is only one way to stop me, Miss Cameron. If you will come with me now—"

"But I must know whether he secured the—"

"Then let me go. I will find out whether he has succeeded. Stand over there by the window, ready to go if I have to make a run for it."

He was rougher than he realised in wrenching his arm free. She uttered a low moan and covered her face with her hands. Undeterred, he crossed to the door. His hand was on the knob when a door slammed violently somewhere in a distant part of the house.

A hoarse shout of alarm rang out, and then the rush of heavy feet over thickly carpeted floors.

Barnes acted with lightning swiftness. He sprang to the open window, half-carrying, half-dragging the girl with him.

"Now for it!" he whispered. "Not a second to lose. Climb upon my back, quick, and hang on for dear life." He had scrambled through the window and was lying flat across the sill. "Hurry! Don't be afraid. I am strong enough to carry you if the vines do their part."

With surprising alacrity and sureness she crawled out beside him and then over upon his broad back, clasping her arms around his neck. Holding to the ledge with one hand he felt for and clutched the thick vine with the other. Slowly he slid his body off of the sill and swung free by one arm. An instant later he found the lattice with the other hand and the hurried descent began. His only fear was that the vine would not hold. If it broke loose they would drop fifteen feet or more to the ground. A broken leg, an arm, or even worse,—But her hair was brushing his ear and neck, her arms were about him, her heart beat against his straining back, and—Why be a pessimist?

His feet touched the ground. In the twinkling of an eye he picked her up in his arms and bolted across the little grass plot into the shrubbery. She did not utter a sound. Her arms tightened, and now her cheek was against his.

Presently he set her down. His breath was gone, his strength exhausted.

"Can you—manage to—walk a little way?" he gasped. "Give me your hand, and follow as close to my heels as you can. Better that I should bump into things than you."

Shouts were now heard, and shrill blasts on a police whistle split the air.

Her breathing was like sobs,—short and choking,—but he knew she was not crying. Apprehension, alarm, excitement,—anything but hysteria. The fortitude of generations was hers; a hundred forebears had passed courage down to her.

On they stumbled, blindly, recklessly. He spared her many an injury by taking it himself. More than once she murmured sympathy when he crashed into a tree or floundered over a log. The soft, long-drawn "o-ohs!" that came to his ears were full of a music that made him impervious to pain. They had the effect of martial music on him, as the drum and fife exalts the faltering soldier in his march to death.

Utterly at sea, he was now guessing at the course they were taking. Whether their frantic dash was leading them toward the Tavern, or whether they were circling back to Green Fancy, he knew not. Panting, he forged onward, his ears alert not only for the sound of pursuit but for the shot that would end the career of the spectacular Sprouse.

At last she cried out, quaveringly:

"Oh, I—I can go no farther! Can't we—is it not safe to stop for a moment? My breath is—"

"God bless you, yes," he exclaimed, and came to an abrupt stop. She leaned heavily against him, gasping for breath. "I haven't the faintest idea where we are, but we must be some distance from the house. We will rest a few minutes and then take it easier, more cautiously. I am sorry, but it was the only thing to do, rough as it was."

"I know, I understand. I am not complaining, Mr. Barnes. You will find me ready and strong and—"

"Let me think. I must try to get my bearings. Good Lord, I wish Sprouse were here. He has eyes like a cat. He can see in the dark. We are off the path, that's sure."

"I hope he is safe. Do you think he escaped?"

"I am sure of it. Those whistles were sounding the alarm. There would have been no object in blowing them unless he had succeeded in getting out of the house. He may come this way. The chances are that your flight has not been discovered. They are too busy with him to think of you,—at least for the time being. Do you feel like going on? We must beat them to the Tavern. They—"

"I am all right now," she said, and they were off again. Barnes now picked his way carefully and with the greatest caution. If at times he was urged to increased speed through comparatively open spaces it was because he realised the peril that lay at the very end of their journey: the likelihood of being cut off by the pursuers before he could lodge her safely inside of the walls. He could only pray that he was going in the right direction.

An hour,—but what seemed thrice as long,—passed and they had not come to the edge of the forest. Her feet were beginning to drag; he could tell that by the effort she made to keep up with him. From time to time he paused to allow her to rest. Always she leaned heavily against him, seldom speaking; when she did it was to assure him that she would be all right in a moment or two. There was no sentimental motive behind his action when he finally found it necessary to support her with an encircling arm, nor was she loath to accept this tribute of strength.

"You are plucky," he once said to her.

"I am afraid I could not be so plucky if you were not so strong," she sighed, and he loved the tired, whimsical little twist she put into her reply. It revived the delightful memory of another day.

To his dismay they came abruptly upon a region abounding in huge rocks. This was new territory to him. His heart sank.

"By Jove, I—I believe we are farther away from the road than when we started. We must have been going up the slope instead of down."

"In any case, Mr. Barnes," she murmured, "we have found something to sit down upon."

He chuckled. "If you can be as cheerful as all that, we sha'n't miss the cushions," he said, and, for the first time, risked a flash of the electric torch. The survey was brief. He led her forward a few paces to a flat boulder, and there they seated themselves.

"I wonder where we are," she said.

"I give it up," he replied dismally. "There isn't much sense in wandering over the whole confounded mountain, Miss Cameron, and not getting anywhere. I am inclined to suspect that we are above Green Fancy, but a long way off to the right of it. My bump of direction tells me that we have been going to the right all of the time. Admitting that to be the case, I am afraid to retrace our steps. The Lord only knows what we might blunder into."

"I think the only sensible thing to do, Mr. Barnes, is to make ourselves as snug and comfortable as we can and wait for the first signs of daybreak."

He scowled,—and was glad that it was too dark for her to see his face. He wondered if she fully appreciated what would happen to him if the pursuers came upon him in this forbidding spot. He could almost picture his own body lying there among the rocks and rotting, while she—well, she would merely go back to Green Fancy.

"I fear you do not realise the extreme gravity of the situation."

"I do, but I also realise the folly of thrashing about in this brush without in the least knowing where our steps are leading us. Besides, I am so exhausted that I must be a burden to you. You cannot go on supporting me—"

"We must get out of these woods," he broke in doggedly, "if I have to carry you in my arms."

"I shall try to keep going," she said quickly. "Forgive me if I seemed to falter a little. I—I—am ready to go on when you say the word."

"You poor girl! Hang it all, perhaps you are right and not I. Sit still and I will reconnoitre a bit. If I can find a place where we can hide among these rocks, we'll stay here till the sky begins to lighten. Sit—"

"No! I shall not let you leave me for a second. Where you go, I go." She struggled to her feet, suppressing a groan, and thrust a determined arm through his.

"That's worth remembering," said he, and whether it was a muscular necessity or an emotional exaction that caused his arm to tighten on hers, none save he would ever know.

After a few minutes prowling among the rocks they came to the face of what subsequently proved to be a sheer wall of stone. He flashed the light, and, with an exclamation, started back. Not six feet ahead of them the earth seemed to end; a yawning black gulf lay beyond. Apparently they were on the very edge of a cliff.

"Good Lord, that was a close call," he gasped. He explained in a few words and then, commanding her to stand perfectly still, dropped to the ground and carefully felt his way forward. Again he flashed the light. In an instant he understood. They were on the brink of a shallow quarry, from which, no doubt, the stone used in building the foundations at Green Fancy had been taken.

Lying there, he made swift calculations. There would be a road leading from this pit up to the house itself. The quarry, no longer of use to the builder, was reasonably sure to be abandoned. In all probability some sort of a stone-cutter's shed would be found nearby. It would provide shelter from the fine rain that was falling and from the chill night air. He remembered that O'Dowd, in discussing the erection of Green Fancy the night before, had said that the stone came from a pit two miles away, where a fine quality of granite had been found. The quarry belonged to Mr. Curtis, who had refused to consider any offer from would-be purchasers. Two miles, according to Barnes's quick calculations, would bring the pit close to the northern boundary of the

Curtis property and almost directly on a line with the point where he and Sprouse entered the meadow at the beginning of their advance upon Green Fancy. That being the case, they were now quite close to the stake and rider fence separating the Curtis land from that of the farmer on the north. Sprouse and Barnes had hugged this fence during their progress across the meadow.

"Good," he said, more to himself than to her. "I begin to see light."

"Oh, dear! Is there some one down in that hole, Mr.—"

"Are you afraid to remain here while I go down there for a look around? I sha'n't be gone more than a couple of minutes."

"The way I feel at present," she said, jerkily, "I shall never, never from this instant till the hour in which I die, let go of your coat-tails, Mr. Barnes." Suiting the action to the word, her fingers resolutely fastened, not upon the tail of his coat but upon his sturdy arm. "I wouldn't stay here alone for anything in the world."

"Heaven bless you," he exclaimed, suddenly exalted. "And, since you put it that way, I shall always contrive to be within arm's length."

And so, together, they ventured along the edge of the pit until they reached the wagon road at the bottom. As he had expected, there was a ramshackle shed hard by. It was not much of a place, but it was deserted and a safe shelter for the moment.

A workman's bench lay on its side in the middle of the earthen floor. He righted it and drew it over to the boarding.... She laid her head against his shoulder and sighed deeply.... He kept his eyes glued on the door and listened for the first ominous sound outside. A long time afterward she stirred.

"Don't move," he said softly. "Go to sleep again if you can. I will—"

"Sleep? I haven't been asleep. I've been thinking all the time, Mr. Barnes. I've been wondering how I can ever repay you for all the pain, and trouble, and—"

"I am paid in full up to date," he said. "I take my pay as I go and am satisfied." He did not give her time to puzzle it out, but went on hurriedly: "You were so still I thought you were asleep."

"As if I could go to sleep with so many things to keep me awake!" She shivered.

"Are you cold? You are wet—"

"It was the excitement, the nervousness, Mr. Barnes," she said, drawing slightly away from him. He reconsidered the disposition of his arm. "Isn't it nearly daybreak?"

He looked at his watch. "Three o'clock," he said, and turned the light upon her face. "God, you are—" He checked the riotous words that were driven to his lips by the glimpse of her lovely face. "I-I beg your pardon!"

"For what?" she asked, after a moment.

"For—for blinding you with the light," he floundered.

"Oh, I can forgive you for that," she said composedly.

There ensued another period of silence. She remained slightly aloof.

"You'd better lean against me," he said at last. "I am softer than the beastly boards, you know, and quite as harmless."

"Thank you," she said, and promptly settled herself against his shoulder. "It IS better," she sighed.

"Would you mind telling me something about yourself, Miss Cameron? What is the true story of the crown jewels?"

She did not reply at once. When she spoke it was to ask a question of him.

"Do you know who he really is,—I mean the man known to you as Mr. Loeb?"

"Not positively. I am led to believe that he is indirectly in line to succeed to the throne of your country."

"Tell me something about Sprouse. How did you meet him and what induced him to take you into his confidence? It is not the usual way with government agents."

He told her the story of his encounter and connection with the secret agent, and part but not all of the man's revelations concerning herself and the crown jewels.

"I knew that you were not a native American," he said. "I arrived at that conclusion after our meeting at the cross-roads. When O'Dowd said you were from New Orleans, I decided that you belonged to one of the French or Spanish families there. Either that or you were a fairy princess such as one reads about in books."

"And you now believe that I am a royal—or at the very worst—a noble lady with designs on the crown?" There was a faint ripple in her low voice.

"I should like to know whether I am to address you as Princess, Duchess, or—just plain Miss."

"I am more accustomed to plain Miss, Mr. Barnes, than to either of the titles you would give me."

"Don't you feel that I am deserving of a little enlightenment?" he asked. "I am working literally as well as figuratively in the dark. Who are you? Why were you a prisoner at Green Fancy? Where and what is your

native land?"

"Sprouse did not tell you any of these things?"

"No. I think he was in some doubt himself. I don't blame him for holding back until he was certain."

"Mr. Barnes, I cannot answer any one of your questions without jeopardising a cause that is dearer to me than anything else in all the world. I am sorry. I pray God a day may soon come when I can reveal everything to you—and to the world. I am of a stricken country; I am trying to serve the unhappy house that has ruled it for centuries and is now in the direst peril. The man you know as Loeb is a prince of that house. I may say this to you, and it will serve to explain my position at Green Fancy: he is not the Prince I was led to believe awaited me there. He is the cousin of the man I expected to meet, and he is the enemy of the branch of the house that I would serve. Do not ask me to say more. Trust me as I am trusting you,—as Sprouse trusted you."

"May I ask the cause of O'Dowd's apparent defection?"

"He is not in sympathy with all of the plans advanced by his leader," she said, after a moment's reflection.

"Your sympathies are with the Entente Allies, the prince's are opposed? Is that part of Sprouse's story true?"

"Yes."

"And O'Dowd?"

"O'Dowd is anti-English, Mr. Barnes, if that conveys anything to you. He is not pro-German. Perhaps you will understand."

"Wasn't it pretty risky for you to carry the crown jewels around in a travelling bag, Miss Cameron?"

"I suppose so. It turned out, however, that it was the safest, surest way. I had them in my possession for three days before coming to Green Fancy. No one suspected. They were given into my custody by the committee to whom they were delivered in New York by the men who brought them to this country."

"And why did you bring them to Green Fancy?"

"I was to deliver them to one of their rightful owners, Mr. Barnes,—a loyal prince of the blood."

"But why HERE?" he insisted.

"He was to take them into Canada, and thence, in good time, to the palace of his ancestors."

"I am to understand, then, that not only you but the committee you speak of, fell into a carefully prepared trap."

"Yes."

"You did not know the man who picked you up in the automobile, Miss Cameron. Why did you take the chance with—"

"He gave the password, or whatever you may call it, and it could have been known only to persons devoted to our—our cause."

"I see. The treachery, therefore, had its inception in the loyal nest. You were betrayed by a friend."

"I am sure of it," she said bitterly. "If this man Sprouse does not succeed in restoring the—oh, I believe I shall kill myself, Mr. Barnes."

The wail of anguish in her voice went straight to his heart.

"He has succeeded, take my word for it. They will be in your hands before many hours have passed."

"Is he to come to the Tavern with them? Or am I to meet him—"

"Good Lord!" he gulped. Here was a contingency he had not considered. Where and when would Sprouse appear with his booty? "I—I fancy we'll find him waiting for us at the Tavern."

"But had you no understanding?"

"Er—tentatively." The perspiration started on his brow.

"They will guard the Tavern so closely that we will never be able to get away from the place," she said, and he detected a querulous note in her voice.

"Now don't you worry about that," he said stoutly.

"I love the comforting way you have of saying things," she murmured, and he felt her body relax.

For reasons best known to himself, he failed to respond to this interesting confession. He was thinking of something else: his amazing stupidity in not foreseeing the very situation that now presented itself. Why had he neglected to settle upon a meeting place with Sprouse in the event that circumstances forced them to part company in flight? Fearing that she would pursue the subject, he made haste to branch off onto another line.

"What is the real object of the conspiracy up there, Miss Cameron?"

"You must bear with me a little longer, Mr. Barnes," she said, appealingly. "I cannot say anything now. I am

in a very perplexing position. You see, I am not quite sure that I am right in my conclusions, and it would be dreadful if I were to make a mistake."

"If they are up to any game that may work harm to the Allies, they must not be allowed to go on with it," he said sternly. "Don't wait too long before exposing them, Miss Cameron."

"I—I cannot speak now," she said, painfully.

"You said that to-morrow night would be too late. What did you mean by that?"

"Do you insist on pinning me down to—"

"No. You may tell me to mind my own business, if you like."

"That is not a nice way to put it, Mr. Barnes. I could never say such a thing to you."

He was silent. She waited a few seconds and then removed her head from his shoulder. He heard the sharp intake of her breath and felt the convulsive movement of the arm that rested against his. There was no mistaking her sudden agitation.

"I will tell you," she said, and he was surprised by the harshness that came into her voice. "To-morrow morning was the time set for my marriage to that wretch up there. I could have avoided it only by destroying myself. If you had come to-morrow night instead of to-night you would have found me dead, that is all. Now you understand."

"Good God! You—you were to be forced into a marriage with—why, it is the most damnable—"

"O'Dowd,—God bless him!—was my only champion. He knew my father. He—"

"Listen!" he hissed, starting to his feet.

"Don't move!" came from the darkness outside. "I have me gun leveled. I heard me name taken in vain. Thanks for the blessing. I was wondering whether you would say something pleasant about me,—and, thank the good Lord, I was patient. But I'd advise you both to sit still, just the same."

A chuckle rounded out the gentle admonition of the invisible Irishman.

CHAPTER XV — LARGE BODIES MOVE SLOWLY,—BUT MR. SPROUSE WAS SMALLER THAN THE AVERAGE

There was not a sound for many seconds. The trapped couple in the stone-cutter's shed scarcely breathed. She was the first to speak.

"I am ready to return with you, Mr. O'Dowd," she said, distinctly. "There must be no struggle, no blood-shed. Anything but that."

She felt Barnes's body stiffen and caught the muttered execration that fell from his lips.

O'Dowd spoke out of the darkness: "You forget that I have your own word for it that ye'll be a dead woman before the day is over. Wouldn't it be better for me to begin shooting at once and spare your soul the everlasting torture that would begin immediately after your self-produced decease?"

A little cry of relief greeted this quaint sally. "You have my word that I will return with you quietly if—"

"Thunderation!" exclaimed Barnes wrathfully. "What do you think I am? A worm that—"

"Easy, easy, me dear man," cautioned O'Dowd. "Keep your seat. Don't be deceived by my infernal Irish humour. It is my way to be always polite, agreeable and—prompt. I'll shoot in a second if ye move one step outside that cabin."

"O'Dowd, you haven't the heart to drag her back to that beast of a—"

"Hold hard! We'll come to the point without further palavering. Where are ye dragging her yourself, ye rascal?"

"To a place where she will be safe from insult, injury, degradation—"

"Well, I have no fault to find with ye for that," said O'Dowd. "Bedad, I didn't believe you had the nerve to tackle the job. To be honest with you, I hadn't the remotest idea who the divvil you were, either of you, until I heard your voices. You may be interested to know that up to the moment I left the house your absence had not been noticed, my dear Miss Cameron. And as for you, my dear Barnes, your visit is not even suspected. By this time, of course, the list of the missing at Green Fancy is headed by an honourable and imperishable name,—which isn't Cameron,—and there is an increased wailing and gnashing of teeth. How the divvil did ye

do it, Barnes?"

"Are you disposed to be friendly, O'Dowd?" demanded Barnes. "If you are not, we may just as well fight it out now as later on. I do not mean to submit without a—"

"You are not to fight!" she cried in great agitation. "What are you doing? Put it away! Don't shoot!"

"Is it a gun he is pulling" inquired O'Dowd calmly. "And what the deuce are you going to aim at, me hearty?"

"It may sound cowardly to you, O'Dowd, but I have an advantage over you in the presence of Miss Cameron. You don't dare shoot into this shed. You—"

"Lord love ye, Barnes, haven't you my word that I will not shoot unless ye try to come out? And I know you wouldn't use her for a shield. Besides, I have a bull's-eye lantern with me. From the luxurious seat behind this rock I could spot ye in a second. Confound you, man, you ought to thank me for being so considerate as not to flash it on you before. I ask ye now, isn't that proof that I'm a gentleman and not a bounder? Having said as much, I now propose arbitration. What have ye to offer in the shape of concessions?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I'll be explicit. Would you mind handing over that tin box in exchange for my polite thanks and a courteous good-by to both of ye?"

"Tin box?" cried Barnes.

"We have no box of any description, Mr. O'Dowd," cried she, triumphantly. "Thank heaven, he got safely away!"

"Do you mean to tell me you came away without the—your belongings, Miss Cameron?" exclaimed O'Dowd.

"They are not with me," she replied. Her grasp on Barnes's arm tightened. "Oh, isn't it splendid? They did not catch him. He—"

"Catch him? Catch who?" cried O'Dowd.

"Ah, that is for you to find out, my dear O'Dowd," said Barnes, assuming a satisfaction he did not feel.

"Well, I'll be—jiggered," came in low, puzzled tones from the rocks outside. "Did you have a—a confederate, Barnes? Didn't you do the whole job yourself?"

"I did my part of the job, as you call it, O'Dowd, and nothing more."

"Will you both swear on your sacred honour that ye haven't the jewels in your possession?"

"Unhesitatingly," said Barnes.

"I swear, Mr. O'Dowd."

"Then," said he, "I have no time to waste here. I am looking for a tin box. I beg your pardon for disturbing you."

"Oh, Mr. O'Dowd, I shall never forget all that you have—"

"Whist, now! There is one thing I must insist on your forgetting completely: all that has happened in the last five minutes. I shall put no obstacles in your way. You may go with my blessings. The only favour I ask in return is that you never mention having seen me to-night."

"We can do that with a perfectly clear conscience," said Barnes. "You are absolutely invisible."

"What I am doing now, Mr. Barnes," said O'Dowd seriously, "would be my death sentence if it ever became known."

"It shall never be known through me, O'Dowd. I'd like to shake your hand, old man."

"God bless you, Mr. O'Dowd," said the girl in a low, small voice, singularly suggestive of tears. "Some day I may be in a position to—"

"Don't say it! You'll spoil everything if you let me think you are in my debt. Bedad, don't be so sure I sha'n't see you again, and soon. You are not out of the woods yet."

"Tell me how to find Hart's Tavern, old man. I'll—"

"No, I'm dashed if I do. I leave you to your own devices. You ought to be grateful to me for not stopping you entirely, without asking me to give you a helping hand. Good-bye, and God bless you. I'm praying that ye get away safely, Miss Cameron. So long, Barnes. If you were a crow and wanted to roost on that big tree in front of Hart's Tavern, I dare say you'd take the shortest way there by flying as straight as a bullet from the mouth of this pit, following your extremely good-looking nose."

They heard him rattle off among the loose stones and into the brush. A long time afterward, when the sounds had ceased, Barnes said, from the bottom of a full heart:

"I shall always feel something warm stirring within me when I think of that man."

"He is a gallant gentleman," said she simply.

They did not wait for the break of day. Taking O'Dowd's hint, Barnes directed his steps straight out from the mouth of the quarry and pressed confidently onward. Their progress was swifter than before and less cautious. The thought had come to him that the men from Green Fancy would rush to the outer edges of the Curtis land and seek to intercept, rather than to overtake, the fugitive. In answer to a question she informed him that there were no fewer than twenty-five men on the place, all of them shrewd, resolute and formidable.

"The women, who are they, and what part do they play in this enterprise?" he inquired, during a short pause for rest.

"Mrs. Collier is the widow of a spy executed in France at the beginning of the war. She is an American and was married to a—to a foreigner. The Van Dykes are very rich Americans,—at least she has a great deal of money. Her husband was in the diplomatic service some years ago but was dismissed. There was a huge gambling scandal and he was involved. His wife is determined to force her way into court circles in Europe. She has money, she is clever and unprincipled, and—I am convinced that she is paying in advance for future favours and position at a certain court. She—"

"In other words, she is financing the game up at Green Fancy."

"I suppose so. She has millions, I am told. Mr. De Soto is a Spaniard, born and reared in England. All of them are known in my country."

"I can't understand a decent chap like O'Dowd being mixed up in a rotten—"

"Ah, but you do not understand. He is a soldier of fortune, an adventurer. His heart is better than his reputation. It is the love of intrigue, the joy of turmoil that commands him. He has been mixed up, as you say, in any number of secret enterprises, both good and bad. His sister's children are the owners of Green Fancy. I know her well. It was through Mr. O'Dowd that I came to Green Fancy. Too late he realised that it was a mistake. He was deceived. He has known me for years and he would not have exposed me to——But come! As he has said, we are not yet out of the woods."

"I cannot, for the life of me, see why they took chances on inviting me to the house, Miss Cameron. They must have known that—"

"It was a desperate chance but it was carefully considered, you may be sure. They are clever, all of them. They were afraid of you. It was necessary to deal openly, boldly, with you if your suspicions were to be removed."

"But they must have known that you would appeal to me."

She was silent for a moment, and when she spoke it was with great intensity. "Mr. Barnes, I had your life in my hands all the time you were at Green Fancy. It was I who took the desperate chance. I shudder now when I think of what might have happened. Before you were asked to the house, I was coolly informed that you would not leave it alive if I so much as breathed a word to you concerning my unhappy plight. The first word of an appeal to you would have been the signal for—for your death. That is what they held over me. They made it very clear to me that nothing was to be gained by an appeal to you. You would die, and I would be no better off than before. It was I who took the chance. When I spoke to you on the couch that night, I—oh, don't you see? Don't you see that I wantonly, cruelly, selfishly risked YOUR life,—not my own,—when I—"

"There, there, now!" he cried, consolingly, as she put her hands to her face and gave way to sobs. "Don't let THAT worry you. I am here and alive, and so are you, and—for Heaven's sake don't do that! I—I simply go all to pieces when I hear a woman crying. I—"

"Forgive me," she murmured. "I didn't mean to be so silly."

"It helps, to cry sometimes," he said lamely.

The first faint signs of day were struggling out of the night when they stole across the road above Hart's Tavern and made their way through the stable-yard to the rear of the house. His one thought was to get her safely inside the Tavern. There he could defy the legions of Green Fancy, and from there he could notify her real friends, deliver her into their keeping,—and then regret the loss of her!

The door was locked. He delivered a series of resounding kicks upon its stout face. Revolver in hand, he faced about and waited for the assault of the men who, he was sure, would come plunging around the corner of the building in response to the racket. He was confident that the approach to the Tavern was watched by desperate men from Green Fancy, and that an encounter with them was inevitable. But there was no attack. Save for his repeated pounding on the door, there was no sign of life about the place.

At last there were sounds from within. A key grated in the lock and a bolt was shot. The door flew open. Mr. Clarence Dillingford appeared in the opening, partially dressed, his hair sadly tumbled, his eyes blinking in the light of the lantern he held aloft.

"Well, what the—" Then his gaze alighted on the lady. "My God," he gulped, and instantly put all of his body except the head and one arm behind the door.

Barnes crowded past him with his faltering charge, and slammed the door. Moreover, he quickly shot the bolt.

"For the love of—" began the embarrassed Dillingford. "What the dev—I say, can't you see that I'm not dressed? What the—"

"Give me that lantern," said Barnes, and snatched the article out of the unresisting hand. "Show me the way to Miss Thackeray's room, Dillingford. No time for explanations. This lady is a friend of mine."

"Well, for the love of—"

"I will take you to Miss Thackeray's room," said Barnes, leading her swiftly through the narrow passage. "She will make you comfortable for the—that is until I am able to secure a room for you. Come on, Dillingford."

"My God, Barnes, have you been in an automobile smash-up? You—"

"Don't wake the house! Where is her room?"

"You know just as well as I do. All right,—all right! Don't bite me! I'm coming."

Miss Thackeray was awake. She had heard the pounding. Through the closed door she asked what on earth was the matter.

"I have a friend here,—a lady. Will you dress as quickly as possible and take her in with you for a little while?" He spoke as softly as possible.

There was no immediate response from the inside. Then Miss Thackeray observed, quite coldly: "I think I'd like to hear the lady's voice, if you don't mind. I recognise yours perfectly, Mr. Barnes, but I am not in the habit of opening my—"

"Mr. Barnes speaks the truth," said Miss Cameron. "But pray do not disturb—"

"I guess I don't need to dress," said Miss Thackeray, and opened her door. "Come in, please. I don't know who you are or what you've been up to, but there are times when women ought to stand together. And what's more, I sha'n't ask any questions."

She closed the door behind the unexpected guest, and Barnes gave a great sigh of relief.

"Say, Mr. Barnes," said Miss Thackeray, several hours later, coming upon him in the hall; "I guess I'll have to ask you to explain a little. She's a nice, pretty girl, and all that, but she won't open her lips about anything. She says you will do the talking. I'm a good sport, you know, and not especially finicky, but I'd like to—"

"How is she? Is she resting? Does she seem—"

"Well, she's stretched out in my bed, with my best nightie on, and she seems to be doing as well as could be expected," said Miss Thackeray dryly.

"Has she had coffee and—"

"I am going after it now. It seems that she is in the habit of having it in bed. I wish I had her imagination. It would be great to imagine that all you have to do is to say 'I think I'll have coffee and rolls and one egg' sent up, and then go on believing your wish would come true. Still, I don't mind. She seems so nice and pathetic, and in trouble, and I—"

"Thank you, Miss Thackeray. If you will see that she has her coffee, I'll—I'll wait for you here in the hall and try to explain. I can't tell you everything at present,—not without her consent,—but what I do tell will be sufficient to make you think you are listening to a chapter out of a dime novel."

He had already taken Putnam Jones into his confidence. He saw no other way out of the new and somewhat extraordinary situation.

His uneasiness increased to consternation when he discovered that Sprouse had not yet put in an appearance. What had become of the man? He could not help feeling, however, that somehow the little agent would suddenly pop out of the chimney in his room, or sneak in through a crack under the door,—and laugh at his fears.

His lovely companion, falling asleep, blocked all hope of a council of war, so to speak. Miss Thackeray refused to allow her to be disturbed. She listened with sparkling eyes to Barnes's curtailed account of the exploit of the night before. He failed to mention Mr. Sprouse. It was not an oversight.

"Sort of white slavery game, eh?" she said, with bated breath. "Good gracious, Mr. Barnes, if this story ever gets into the newspapers you'll be the grandest little hero in—"

"But it must never get into the newspapers," he cried.

"It ought to," she proclaimed stoutly. "When a gang of white slavers kidnap a girl like that and—"

"I'm not saying it was that," he protested, uncomfortably.

"Well, I guess I'll talk to her about that part of the story," said Miss Thackeray sagely. "And as you say, mum's the word. We don't want them to get onto the fact that she's here. That's the idea, isn't it?"

"Absolutely."

"Then," she said, wrinkling her brow, "I wouldn't repeat this story to Mr. Lyndon Rushcroft, father of yours truly. He would blab it all over the county. The greatest press stuff in the world. Listen to it: 'Lyndon Rushcroft, the celebrated actor, takes part in the rescue of a beautiful heiress who falls into the hands of So and So, the king of kidnappers.' That's only a starter. So we'd better let him think she just happened in. You fix it with old Jones, and I'll see that Dilly keeps his mouth shut. I fear I shall have to tell Mr. Bacon." She blushed. "I have always sworn I'd never marry any one in the profession, but—Mr. Bacon is not like other actors, Mr. Barnes. You will say so yourself when you know him better. He is more like a—a—well, you might say a poet. His soul is—but, you'll think I'm nutty if I go on about him. As soon as she awakes, I'll take her up

to the room you've engaged for her, and I'll lend her some of my duds, bless her heart. What an escape she's had! Oh, my God!"

She uttered the exclamation in a voice so full of horror that Barnes was startled.

"What is it, Miss Thack—"

"Why, they might have nabbed me yesterday when I was up there in the woods! And I don't know what kind of heroism goes with a poetic nature. I'm afraid Mr. Bacon—"

He laughed. "I am sure he would have acted like a man."

"If you were to ask father, he'd say that Mr. Bacon can't act like a man to save his soul. He says he acts like a fence-post."

Shortly before the noon hour, Peter Ames halted the old automobile from Green Fancy in front of the Tavern and out stepped O'Dowd, followed by no less a personage than the pseudo Mr. Loeb. There were a number of travelling bags in the tonneau of the car.

Catching sight of Barnes, the Irishman shouted a genial greeting.

"The top of the morning to ye. You remember Mr. Loeb, don't you? Mr. Curtis's secretary."

He shook hands with Barnes. Loeb bowed stiffly and did not extend his hand.

"Mr. Loeb is leaving us for a few days on business. Will you be moving on yourself soon, Mr. Barnes?"

"I shall hang around here a few days longer," said Barnes, considerably puzzled but equal to the occasion. "Still interested in our murder mystery, you know."

"Any new developments?"

"Not to my knowledge." He ventured a crafty "feeler." "I hear, however, that the state authorities have asked assistance of the secret service people in Washington. That would seem to indicate that there is more behind the affair than—"

"Have I not maintained from the first, Mr. O'Dowd, that it is a case for the government to handle?" interrupted Loeb. He spoke rapidly and with unmistakable nervousness. Barnes remarked the extraordinary pallor in the man's face and the shifty, uneasy look in his dark eyes. "It has been my contention, Mr. Barnes, that those men were trying to carry out their part of a plan to inflict—"

"Lord love ye, Loeb, you are not alone in that theory," broke in O'Dowd hastily. "I think we're all agreed on that. Good morning, Mr. Boneface," he called out to Putnam Jones who approached at that juncture. "We are sadly in want of gasoline."

Peter had backed the car up to the gasoline hydrant at the corner of the building and was waiting for some one to replenish his tank. Barnes caught the queer, perplexed look that the Irishman shot at him out of the corner of his eye.

"Perhaps you'd better see that the scoundrels don't give us short measure, Mr. Loeb," said O'Dowd. Loeb hesitated for a second, and then, evidently in obedience to a command from the speaker's eye, moved off to where Peter was opening the intake. Jones followed, bawling to some one in the stable-yard.

O'Dowd lowered his voice. "Bedad, your friend made a smart job of it last night. He opened the tank back of the house and let every damn' bit of our gas run out. Is she safe inside?"

"Yes, thanks to you, old man. You didn't catch him?"

"Not even a whiff of him," said the other lugubriously. "The devil's to pay. In the name of God, how many were in your gang last night?"

"That is for Mr. Loeb to find out," said Barnes shrewdly.

"Barnes, I let you off last night, and I let her off as well. In return, I ask you to hold your tongue until the man down there gets a fair start." O'Dowd was serious, even imploring.

"What would she say to that, O'Dowd? I have to consider her interests, you know."

"She'd give him a chance for his white alley, I'm sure, in spite of the way he treated her. There is a great deal at stake, Barnes. A day's start and—"

"Are you in danger too, O'Dowd?"

"To be sure,—but I love it. I can always squirm out of tight places. You see, I am putting myself in your hands, old man."

"I would not deliberately put you in jeopardy, O'Dowd."

"See here, I am going back to that house up yonder. There is still work for me there. What I'm after now is to get him on the train at Hornville. I'll be here again at four o'clock, on me word of honour. Trust me, Barnes. When I explain to her, she'll agree that I'm doing the right thing. Bedad, the whole bally game is busted. Another week and we'd have—but, there ye are! It's all up in the air, thanks to you and your will-o'-the-wisp rascals. You played the deuce with everything."

"Do you mean to say that you are coming back here to run the risk of being—"

"We've had word that the government has men on the way. They'll be here to-night or to-morrow, working in cahoots with the fellows across the border. Why, damn it all, Barnes, don't you know who it was that engineered that whole business last night?" He blurted it out angrily, casting off all reserve.

Barnes smiled. "I do. He is a secret agent from the embassy—"

"Secret granny!" almost shouted O'Dowd. "He is the slickest, cleverest crook that ever drew the breath of life. And he's got away with the jewels, for which you can whistle in vain, I'm thinking."

"For Heaven's sake, O'Dowd—" began Barnes, his blood like ice in his veins.

"But don't take my word for it. Ask her,—upstairs there, God bless her!—ask her if she knows Chester Naismith. She'll tell ye, my bucko. He's been standing guard outside her window for the past three nights. He's—"

"Now, I know you are mistaken," cried Barnes, a wave of relief surging over him. "He has been in this Tavern every night—"

"Sure he has. But he never was here after eleven o'clock, was he? Answer me, did ye ever see him here after eleven in the evening? You did not,—not until last night, anyhow. In the struggle he had with Nicholas last night his whiskers came off and he was recognised. That's why poor old Nicholas is lying dead up there at the house now,—and will have a decent burial unbeknownst to anybody but his friends."

"Whiskers? Dead?" jerked from Barnes's lips.

"Didn't you know he had false ones on?"

"He did not have them on when he left me," declared Barnes. "Good God, O'Dowd, you can't mean that he—he killed—"

"He stuck a knife in his neck. The poor devil died while I was out skirmishing, but not before he whispered in the chief's ear the name of the man who did for him. The dirty snake! And the chief trusted him as no crook ever was trusted before. He knew him for what he was, but he thought he was loyal. And this is what he gets in return for saving the dog's life in Buda Pesth three years ago. In the name of God, Barnes, how did you happen to fall in with the villain?"

Barnes passed his hand over his brow, dazed beyond the power of speech. His gaze rested on Putnam Jones. Suddenly something seemed to have struck him between the eyes. He almost staggered under the imaginary impact. Jones! Was Jones a party to this—He started forward, an oath on his lips, prepared to leap upon the man and throttle the truth out of him. As abruptly he checked himself. The cunning that inspired the actions of every one of these people had communicated itself to him. A false move now would ruin everything. Putnam Jones would have to be handled with gloves, and gently at that.

"He—he represented himself as a book-agent," he mumbled, striving to collect himself. "Jones knew him. Said he had been around here for weeks. I—I—

"That's the man," said O'Dowd, scowling. "He trotted all over the county, selling books. For the love of it, do ye think? Not much. He had other fish to fry, you may be sure. I talked with him the night you dined at Green Fancy. He beat you to the Tavern, I dare say. It was his second night on guard below the—below her window. He told me how he shinned up and down one of these porch posts, so as not to let old Jones get onto the fact he was out of his room. He had old Jones fooled as badly—What are you glaring at HIM for? I was about to say he had old Jones as badly fooled as you—or worse, damn him. Barnes, if we ever lay hands on that friend of yours,—well, he won't have to fry in hell. He'll be burnt alive. Thank God, my mind's at rest on one score. SHE didn't skip out with him. They all think she did. Not one of them suspects that she came away with you. There is plenty of evidence that she let him in through her window—"

"All ready, O'Dowd," called Loeb. "Come along, please."

"Coming," said the Irishman. To Barnes: "Don't blame yourself, old man. You are not the only one who has been hoodwinked. He fooled men a long shot keener than you are, so—All right! Coming. See you later, Barnes. So long!"

CHAPTER XVI — THE FIRST WAYFARER VISITS A SHRINE, CONFESSES, AND TAKES AN OATH

How was he to find the courage to impart the appalling news to her? He was now convinced beyond all doubt that the so-called Sprouse had made off with the priceless treasure and that only a miracle could bring about its recovery. O'Dowd's estimate of the man's cleverness was amply supported by what Barnes knew of him. He knew him to be the personification of craftiness, and of daring. It was not surprising that he had been tricked by this devil's own genius. He recalled his admiration, his wonder over the man's artfulness; he

groaned as he thought of the pride he had felt in being accorded the privilege of helping him!

Sitting glumly in a corner of the tap-room, watching but not listening to the spouting Mr. Rushcroft, (who was regaling the cellarer and two vastly impressed countrymen with the story of his appearance before Queen Victoria and the Royal Family), Barnes went over the events of the past twenty-four hours, deriving from his reflections a few fairly reasonable deductions as to his place in the plans of the dauntless Mr. Sprouse.

In the first place, Sprouse, being aware of his somewhat ardent interest in the fair captive, took a long and desperate chance on his susceptibility. With incomprehensible boldness he decided to make an accomplice of the eager and unsuspecting knight-errant! His cunningly devised tale,—in which there was more than a little of the truth,—served to excite the interest and ultimately to win the co-operation of the New Yorker. His object in enlisting this support was now perfectly clear to the victim of his duplicity. Barnes had admitted that he was bound by a promise to aid the prisoner in an effort to escape from the house; even a slow-witted person would have reached the conclusion that a partial understanding at least existed between captive and champion. Sprouse staked everything on that conviction. Through Barnes he counted on effecting an entrance to the almost hermetically sealed house.

Evidently the simplest, and perhaps the only, means of gaining admission was through the very window he was supposed to guard. Once inside her room, with the aid and connivance of one in whom the occupant placed the utmost confidence, he would be in a position to employ his marvellous talents in accomplishing his own peculiar ends.

Barnes recalled all of the elaborate details preliminary to the actual performance of that amazing feat, and realised to what extent he had been shaped into a tool to be used by the master craftsman. He saw through the whole Machiavellian scheme, and he was now morally certain that Sprouse would have sacrificed him without the slightest hesitation.

In the event that anything went wrong with their enterprise, the man would have shot him dead and earned the gratitude and commendation of his associates! There would be no one to question him, no one to say that he had failed in the duty set upon him by the master of the house. He would have been glorified and not crucified by his friends.

Up to the point when he actually passed through the window Sprouse could have justified himself by shooting the would-be rescuer. Up to that point, Barnes was of inestimable value to him; after that,—well, he had proved that he was capable of taking care of himself.

Mr. Dillingford came and pronounced sentence. He informed the rueful thinker that the young lady wanted to see him at once in Miss Thackeray's room.

With a heavy heart he mounted the stairs. At the top he paused to deliberate. Would it not be better to keep her in ignorance? What was to be gained by revealing to her the—But Miss Thackeray was luring him on to destruction. She stood outside the door and beckoned. That in itself was ominous. Why should she wriggle a forefinger at him instead of calling out in her usual free-and-easy manner? There was foreboding—

"Is Mr. Barnes coming?" His heart bounded perceptibly at the sound of that soft, eager voice from the interior of the room.

"By fits and starts," said Miss Thackeray critically. "Yes, he has started again."

She closed the door from the outside, and Barnes was alone with the cousin of kings and queens and princes.

"I feared you had deserted me," she said, holding out her hand to him as he strode across the room. S he did not rise from the chair in which she was seated by the window. The lower wings of the old-fashioned shutters were closed except for a narrow strip; light streamed down upon her wavy golden hair from the upper half of the casement. She was attired in a gorgeously flowered dressing-gown; he had seen it once before, draping the matutinal figure of Miss Thackeray as she glided through the hall with a breakfast tray which Miss Tilly had flatly refused to carry to her room: being no servant, she declared with heat.

"I saw no occasion to disturb your rest," he mumbled. "Nothing—nothing new has turned up."

"I have been peeping," she said, looking at him searchingly. A little line of anxiety lay between her eyes. "Where is Mr. Loeb going, Mr. Barnes?"

He noted the omission of Mr. O'Dowd. "To Hornville, I believe. They stopped for gasoline."

"Is he running away?" was her disconcerting question.

"O'Dowd says he is to be gone for a few days on business," he equivocated.

"He will not return," she said quietly. "He is a coward at heart. Oh, I know him well," she went on, scorn in her voice.

"Was I wrong in not trying to stop him?" he asked.

She pondered this for a moment. "No," she said, but he caught the dubious note in her voice. "It is just as well, perhaps, that he should disappear. Nothing is to be gained now by his seizure. Next week, yes; but to-day, no. His flight to-day spares—but we are more interested in the man Sprouse. Has he returned?"

"No, Miss Cameron," said he ruefully. And then, without a single reservation, he laid bare the story of Sprouse's defection. When he inquired if she had heard of the man known as Chester Naismith, she

confirmed his worst fears by describing him as the guard who watched beneath her window. He was known to her as a thief of international fame. The light died out of her lovely eyes as the truth dawned upon her; her lips trembled, her shoulders drooped.

"What a fool I've been," she mourned. "What a fool I was to accept the responsibility of—"

"Don't blame yourself," he implored. "Blame me. I am the fool, the stupidest fool that ever lived. He played with me as if I were the simplest child."

"Ah, my friend, why do you say that? Played with you? He has tricked some of the shrewdest men in the world. There are no simple children at Green Fancy. They are men with the brains of foxes and the hearts of wolves. To deceive you was child's play. You are an honest man. It is always the honest man who is the victim; he is never the culprit. If honest men were as smart as the corrupt ones, Mr. Barnes, there would be no such thing as crime. If the honest man kept one hand on his purse and the other on his revolver, he would be more than a match for the thief. You were no match for Chester Naismith. Do not look so glum. The shrewdest police officers in Europe have never been able to cope with him. Why should you despair?"

He sprang to his feet. "By gad, he hasn't got away with it yet," he grated. "He is only one man against a million. I will set every cog in the entire police and detective machinery of the United States going. He cannot escape. They will run him to earth before—"

"Mr. Barnes, I have no words to express my gratitude to you for all that you have done and all that you still would do," she interrupted. "I may prove it to you, however, by advising you to abandon all efforts to help me from now on. You did all that you set out to do, and I must ask no more of you. You risked your life to save a woman who, for all you know, may be deceiving you with—"

"I have not lost all of my senses, Miss Cameron," he said bluntly. "The few that I retain make me your slave. I shall abandon neither you nor the effort to recover what my stupidity has cost you. I will run this scoundrel down if I have to devote the remainder of my life to the task."

She sighed. "Alas, I fear that I shall have to tell you a little more about this wonderful man you know as Sprouse. Six months ago the friends and supporters of the legitimate successor to my country's throne, consummated a plan whereby the crown jewels and certain documents of state were surreptitiously removed from the palace vaults. The act, though meant to be a loyal and worthy one, was nevertheless nullified by the most stupendous folly. Instead of depositing the treasure in Paris, it was sent to this country in charge of a group of men whose fealty could not be questioned. I am not at liberty to tell you how this treasure was brought into the United States without detection by the Customs authorities. Suffice it to say, it was delivered safely to a committee of my countrymen in New York. There are two contenders for the throne in my land. One is a prisoner in Austria, the other is at liberty somewhere in—in the world. The Teutonic Allies are now in possession of my country. It has been ravished and despoiled."

"So far Sprouse's story jibes," said he, as she paused.

"My countrymen conceived the notion that Germany would one day conquer France and over-run England. It was this notion that urged them to put the treasure beyond all possible chance of its being seized by the conquerors and turned over to the usurping prince who would be placed on our throne.

"As for my part in this unhappy project, it is quite simple. I was not the only one to be deceived by plotters who far outstripped the original conspirators in cleverness and guile. The man you know as Loeb is in reality my cousin. I have known him all my life. He is the youngest brother of the pretender to the throne, and a cousin of the prince who is held prisoner by the Austrians. This prince has a brother also, and it was to him that I was supposed to deliver the jewels. He came to Canada a month ago, sent by the embassy in Paris. I travelled from New York, but not alone as you may suspect. I was carefully protected from the time I left my hotel there until—well, until I arrived in Boston.

"While there I received a secret message from friends in Canada directing me to go to Spanish Falls, where I would be met and conducted to Green Fancy by Prince Sebastian himself. I was on my way to Halifax when this message changed my plans. Moreover, the reason given for this change was an excellent one. It had been discovered that the two men who acted secretly as my escort were traitors. They were to lead me into a trap prepared at Portland, where I was to be robbed and detained long enough for the wretches to make off in safety with their booty. I need not describe my feelings. I obeyed the directions and stole away at night, eluding my protectors, and came by devious ways to the place mentioned in the message.

"As you may have guessed by this time, the whole thing was a carefully planned ruse. The company at Green Fancy,—you may some day know why they were there,—learned through the man Naismith that the treasure had been entrusted to me for delivery to Prince Sebastian and his friends in Halifax. Let me interrupt myself to explain why the Prince did not come to New York in person, instead of arranging to have the jewels taken to him at Halifax. He is an officer of high rank in the army. His trip across the ocean was known to the German secret service. The instant he landed on American soil, a demand would have been made by the German Embassy for his detention here for the duration of the war.

"I was informed in the message that Prince Sebastian would take me to the place called Green Fancy, which was near the Canadian border. A safe escort would be provided for us, and we would be on British soil within a few hours after our meeting. It is only necessary to add that when I arrived at Green Fancy I met Prince Ugo,—and understood! I had carefully covered my tracks after leaving Boston. My real friends were, and still are, completely in the dark as to my movements, so skilfully was the trick managed. I shall ask you directly, Mr. Barnes, to wire my friends in New York and in Halifax, acquainting them with my present whereabouts and safety. Now, that we know the jewels have been stolen again, that message need not be delayed.

"And now for Chester Naismith. It was he who, acting for the misguided loyalists and recommended by

certain young aristocrats who by virtue of their own dissipations had come to know him as a man of infinite resourcefulness and daring, planned and carried out the pillaging of the palace vaults. Almost under the noses of the foreign guards he succeeded in obtaining the jewels. No doubt he could have made off with them at that time, but he shrewdly preferred to have them brought to America by some one else. It would have been impossible for him to dispose of them in Europe. The United States was the only place in the world where he could have sold them. You see how cunning he is?

"This much I know: he came to New York with the men who carried the jewels. He tried to rob them in New York but failed. Then he disappeared. So carefully guarded were the jewels that he knew there was no chance of securing them without assistance. For nearly six months they remained in a safety vault on Fifth Avenue. Evidently he gave up hope and, falling in with Prince Ugo, joined his party. I do not know this to be the case, but I am now convinced that he learned of the plan to send the jewels to Halifax. It was he, I am sure, who conveyed this news to Prince Ugo, who at once invented the scheme to divert me to this place.

"And now comes the remarkable part of the story. When I arrived at Spanish Falls, there was no one to meet me. The agent, seeing me on the platform and evidently at a loss which way to turn, accosted me. He offered to secure a conveyance for me, and was very considerate, but I decided to call up Green Fancy on the telephone. I wanted to be sure that there was no trick. To my surprise, O'Dowd came to the telephone. I was greatly relieved when I actually heard his voice. I have known him for years, and the belief that he had at last allied himself with Prince Sebastian,—after being on the opposite side, you see,—was cause for rejoicing.

"He was amazed. It seems that I was not expected until the next afternoon. The car was out on an errand to some little village in the mountains, he said, but he would telephone at once to see if it could be located. Afterwards it turned out that the message announcing my arrival a day ahead of the time agreed upon was never delivered."

"Sprouse's fine work, I suppose," put in Barnes.

"I haven't the remotest doubt. Nor do I doubt that he intended to waylay me at some point along the road. O'Dowd failed to catch the car at the village and was on the point of starting off on horseback to meet me, when it returned. He sent it ahead and followed on horseback. You know how I was picked up at the cross-roads. It is all so like one of those picture puzzles. By putting the meaningless pieces together one obtains a complete design. The last piece to go into this puzzle is the mishap that befell Naismith on that very afternoon. He was no doubt thwarted in his design to waylay me on the road from Spanish Falls by a singular occurrence in this tavern. He was attacked in his room here shortly after the noon hour, overpowered, bound and gagged by two men. They carried him to another room, where he remained until late in the night when he managed to extricate himself. I have reason to believe that this part of his story is true. He knew the men. They were thieves as clever and as merciless as himself. They too were watching for me. I may say to you now, Mr. Barnes, that he has never posed as an honest man among his associates at Green Fancy. He glories in his fame as a thief, but until now no one would have questioned his loyalty to his friends. I do not know how these men learned of my intention to come to Green Fancy. They—"

"They came to this tavern four or five days in advance of your arrival at Green Fancy," he interrupted.

"Are you sure?" she asked in surprise.

"Absolutely."

"In that case, they could not have known," she said, deeply perplexed.

"Sprouse told me that they were secret service men from abroad and that he was working with them. Putnam Jones, I am sure, believes that they were detectives. He also believes the same to be true of Sprouse. My theory is this, and I think it is justified by events. The men were really secret agents, sent here to watch the movements of the gang up there. They came upon Sprouse and recognised him. On the day mentioned they overpowered him and forced him to reveal certain facts connected with affairs at Green Fancy. Possibly he led them to believe that you were one of the conspirators. They waited for your arrival and then risked the hazardous trip to Green Fancy. They were discovered and shot."

She could hardly wait for him to finish. "I believe you are right," she cried. "A little while before the shooting occurred, the house was roused by a telephone call. I was in my room, but not asleep. I had just realised my own dreadful predicament. There was a great commotion downstairs, and I distinctly heard some one say, in my own language, that they were not to get away alive. It must have been Naismith who telephoned. One of the men, I have been told, was killed not far from our gates. He was shot, I am sure, by the man called Nicholas, noted as one of the most marvellous marksmen in our little army. The other was accounted for by Naismith himself, who had managed to reach the cross-roads in time to head him off. Naismith openly boasted of the feat. The greatest consternation prevailed at Green Fancy because the men succeeded in reaching the highway before they were shot. Prince Ugo was distracted. He said that the attention of the public would be directed to Green Fancy and curious investigators were certain to interfere with the great project he was carrying on."

"I believe we have accounted for Mr. Sprouse, and I am no longer interested in the unravelling of the mystery surrounding the deaths of Roon and Paul," said he. "There is nothing to keep me here any longer, Miss Cameron. I suggest that you allow me to escort you at once to your friends, wherever they—"

She was opposed to this plan. While there was still a chance that Sprouse might be apprehended in the neighbourhood, or the possibility of his being caught by the relentless pursuers, she declined to leave.

"Then, I shall also stay," said he promptly, and was repaid by the tremulous smile she gave him. His heart was beating like mad, and he knew, in that instant, just what had happened to him. He was helplessly in love with this beautiful cousin of kings and queens. And when he thought of kings and queens he realised that

beyond all question his love was hopeless.

"You are very good to me," she said softly.

He got up suddenly and walked away. After a moment, in which he regained control of himself, he returned to her side.

"What effect will Mr. Loeb's flight have on the scheme up there, Miss Cameron?" he inquired, quite steadily.

"They will scatter to the four winds, those people," she said. "He would not have fled unless disaster was staring him in the face. Something has transpired to defeat his ugly plan. They will all run to cover like so many rats."

"The government of the United States is a good rat-catcher," he said.

"The United States would do well to keep the rats out, Mr. Barnes, instead of allowing them to come here and thrive and multiply and gnaw into its very vitals."

CHAPTER XVII — THE SECOND WAYFARER IS TRANSFORMED, AND MARRIAGE IS FLOUTED

Mr. Rushcroft sent for Barnes at three o'clock. "Come to my room as soon as possible," was the message delivered by Mr. Bacon. Barnes was taking a nap. More than that, he was pleasantly dreaming when the pounding fell upon his door. Awakened suddenly from this elysian dream he leaped from his bed and rushed to the door, his heart in his mouth. Something sinister was back of this imperative summons! She was in fresh peril. The gang from Green Fancy had descended upon the Tavern in force and—

"Sorry to disturb you," said Mr. Bacon, as the door flew open, "but he says it's important. He says—"

"I wish you would tell him to go to the devil," said Barnes wrathfully.

"Superfluous, I assure you, sir. He says that everything and everybody is going to the devil, so—"

"If he wants to see me why doesn't he come to my room? Why should I go to his?"

"Lord bless you, don't you know that it's one of the prerogatives of a star to insist on people coming to him instead of the other way about? What's the use of being a star if you can't—"

"Tell him I will come when I get good and ready."

"Quite so," said Mr. Bacon absently. He did not retire, but stood in the door, evidently weighing something that was on his mind and considering the best means of relieving himself of the mental burden. "Ahem!" he coughed. "Miss Thackeray advises me that you have expressed a generous interest in our personal"—(He stepped inside the room and closed the door)—"er—in our private future, so to speak, and I take this opportunity to thank you, Mr. Barnes. If it isn't asking too much of you, I'd like you to say a word or two in my behalf to the old man. You might tell him that you believe I have a splendid future before me,—and you wouldn't be lying, let me assure you,—and that there is no doubt in your mind that a Broadway engagement is quite imminent. A word from you to one of the Broadway managers, by the way, would—"

"You want me to intercede for you in the matter of two engagements instead of one, is that it?"

"I am already engaged to Miss Thackeray,—in a way. The better way to put it would be for you to intercede in the matter of one marriage and one engagement. I think he would understand the situation much better if you put it in that way."

"Have you spoken to Mr. Rushcroft about it?"

"Only in a roundabout way. I told him I'd beat his head off if he ever spoke to Miss Thackeray again as he did last night."

"Well, that's a fair sort of start," said Barnes, who was brushing his hair. "What did he say to that?"

"I don't know. I had to close the door rather hastily. If he said anything at all it was after the chair hit the door. Ahem! That was last night. He is as nice as pie this afternoon, so I have an idea that he busted the chair and doesn't want old Jones to find out about it."

"I will say a good word for you," said Barnes, grinning.

He found Mr. Rushcroft in a greatly perturbed state of mind.

"I've had telegrams from the three people I mentioned to you, Barnes, and the damned ingrates refuse to join us unless they get their railroad fares to Crowndale. Moreover, they had the insolence to send the

telegrams collect. The more you do for the confounded bums, the more they ask. I once had a leading woman who—"

Barnes was in no humour to listen to the long-winded reminiscences of the "star," so he cut him short at once. He ascertained that the "ingrates" were in New York, on their "uppers," and that they could not accomplish the trip to Crowndale unless railroad tickets were provided. The difficulty was bridged in short order by telegrams requesting the distant players to apply the next day at his office in New York where tickets to Crowndale would be given them. He telegraphed his office to buy the tickets and hold them for Miss Milkens, Mr. Hatcher and Mr. Fling.

"That completes one of the finest companies, Mr. Barnes, that ever took the road," said Mr. Rushcroft warmly, forgetting his animosity. "You will never be associated with a more evenly balanced company of players, sir. I congratulate you upon your wonderful good fortune in having such a cast for 'The Duke's Revenge.' If you can maintain a similar standard of excellence in all of your future productions, you will go down in history as the most astute theatrical manager of the day."

Barnes winced, but was game. "When do you start rehearsals, Rushcroft?"

"It is my plan to go to Crowndale to-morrow or the next day, where I shall meet my company. Rehearsals will undoubtedly start at once. That would give us—let me see—Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday—four days. We open on Tuesday night. Oh, by the way, I have engaged a young woman of most unusual talent to take the minor part of Hortense. You may have noticed her in the dining-room. Miss Rosamond—er—where did I put that card?—ah, yes, Miss Floribel Blivens. The poor idiot insists on Blivens, desiring to perpetuate the family monicker. I have gotten rid of her spectacles, however, and the name that the prehistoric Blivenses gave her at the christening."

"You—you don't mean Miss Tilly?"

"I do. She is to give notice to Jones to-day. There are more ways than one of getting even with a scurvy caitiff. In this case, I take old Jones's best waitress away from him, and, praise God, he'll never find another that will stick to him for eighteen years as she has done."

O'Dowd returned late in the afternoon. He was in a hurry to get back to Green Fancy; there was no mistaking his uneasiness. He drew Barnes aside.

"For the love of Heaven, Barnes, get her away from here as soon as possible, and do it as secretly as you can," he said. "I may as well tell you that she is in more danger from the government secret service than from any one up yonder. Understand, I'm not pleading guilty to anything, but I shall be far, far away from here meself before another sunrise. That ought to mean something to you."

"But she has done no wrong. She has not laid herself liable to—"

"That isn't the point. She has been up there with us, and you don't want to put her in the position of having to answer a lot of nasty questions they'll be after asking her if they get their hands on her. She might be weeks or months clearing herself, innocent though she be. Mind you, she is as square as anything; she is in no way mixed up with our affairs up there. But I'm giving you the tip. Sneak her out as soon as you can, and don't leave any trail."

"She may prefer to face the music, O'Dowd. If I know her at all, she will refuse to run away."

"Then ye'll have to kidnap her," said the Irishman earnestly. "There will be men swarming here from both sides of the border by to-morrow night or next day. I've had direct information. The matter is in the hands of the people at Washington and they are in communication with Ottawa this afternoon. Never mind how I found it out. It's the gospel truth, and—it's going to be bad for all of us if we're here when they come."

"Who is she, O'Dowd? Man to man, tell me the truth. I want to know just where I stand."

O'Dowd hesitated, looked around the tap-room, and then leaned across the table.

"She is the daughter of Andreas Mara-Dafanda, former minister of war in the cabinet of Prince Bolaroz the Sixth. Her mother was first cousin to the Prince. Both father and mother are dead. And for that matter, so is Bolaroz the Sixth. He was killed early in this war. His brother, a prisoner in Austria, as you may already know, is the next in line for the throne,—if the poor devil lives to get it back from the Huns. Miss Cameron is in reality the Countess Therese Mara-Dafanda—familiarly and lovingly known in her own land as the Countess Ted. She was visiting in this country when the war broke out. If it is of any use to you, I'll add that she would be rich if Aladdin could only come to life and restore the splendours of the demolished castle, refill the chests of gold that have been emptied by the conquerors, and restock the farms that have been pillaged and devastated. In the absence of Aladdin, however, she is almost as poor as the ancient church-mouse. But she has a fortune of her own. Two of the most glorious rubies in the world represent her lips; her eyes are sapphires that put to shame the rocks of all the Sultans; when she smiles, you may look upon pearls that would make the Queen of Sheba's trinkets look like chinaware; her skin is of the rarest and richest velvet; her hair is all silk and a yard wide; and, best of all, she has a heart of pure gold. So there you are, me man. Half the royal progeny of Europe have been suitors for her hand, and the other half would be if they didn't happen to be of the same sex."

"Is she likely to—er—marry any one of them, O'Dowd?"

"Do you mean, is she betrothed to one of the royal nuts? If I were her worst enemy I couldn't wish her anything as bad as that. The world is full of regular men,—like meself, for example,—and 'twould be a pity to see her wasted upon anything so cheap as a king."

"Then, she isn't?"

"Isn't what?"

"Betrothed."

"Oh!" He squinted his eyes drolly. "Bedad, if she is, she's kept it a secret from me. Have you aspirations, me friend?"

"Certainly not," said Barnes sharply. "By the way, you have mentioned Prince Bolaroz the Sixth, but you haven't given a name to the country he ruled."

O'Dowd stared. "The Saints preserve us! Is the man a numbskull? Are you saying that you don't know who and what—My God, such ignorance bewilders me!"

"Painful as it may be to you, O'Dowd, I don't seem able to place Bolaroz in his proper realm."

"Whist, then!" He put his hand to his mouth and whispered a name.

An incredulous expression came into Barnes's eyes. "Are you jesting with me, O'Dowd?"

"I am not."

"But I thought it was nothing more than a make-believe, imaginary land, cooked up by some hair-brained novelist for the purpose of—"

"Well, ye know better now," said O'Dowd crisply. "Good-bye. I must be on my way. Deliver my best wishes to her, Barnes, and say that if she ever needs a friend Billy O'Dowd is the boy to respond to any call she sends out. God willing, I may see her again some day,—and I'll say the same to you, old man." He arose and held out his hand. "I'm trusting to you to get her away from these parts before the rat-catchers come. Don't let 'em bother her. Good-bye and good luck forever."

"You are a brick, O'Dowd. I want to see you again. You will always find me—"

"Thanks. Don't issue any rash invitations. I might take you up." He strode to the door, followed by Barnes.

"Is there anything to be feared from this Prince Ugo or the crowd up there?"

"There would be if they knew where they could lay their hands on her inside of the next ten hours. She could a tale unfold, and they wouldn't like that. Keep her under cover here till—well, till THAT danger is past and then keep her out of the danger that is to come."

Barnes started upstairs as soon as O'Dowd was off, urged by an eagerness that put wings on his feet and a thrill of excitement in his blood. Half way up he stopped short. A new condition confronted him. What was the proper way to approach a person of royal blood? Certainly it wasn't right to go galumping upstairs and bang on her door, and saunter in as if she were just like any one else. He would have to think.

When he resumed his upward progress it was with a chastened and deferential mien. Pausing at her door, he was at once aware of voices inside the room. He stood there for some time before he realised that Miss Thackeray was repeating, with theatric fervour, though haltingly, as much of her "part" as she could remember, evidently to the satisfaction of the cousin of princes, for there were frequent interruptions which had all the symptoms of applause.

He rapped on the door, but so timorously that nothing came of it. His second effort was productive. He heard Miss Thackeray say "good gracious," and, after a moment, Miss Cameron's subdued: "What is it?"

"May I come in?" he inquired, rather ashamed of his vigour. "It's only Barnes."

"Come in," was her lively response. "It was awfully good of you, Miss Thackeray, to let me hear your lines. I think you will be a great success in the part."

"Thanks," said Miss Thackeray drily. "I'll come in again and let you hear me in the third act." She went out, mumbling her lines as she passed Barnes without seeing him.

"Forgive me for not arising, Mr. Barnes," said Royalty, a wry little smile on her lips. "I fear I twisted it more severely than I thought at first. It is really quite painful."

"Your ankle?" he cried in surprise. "When and how did it happen? I'm sorry, awfully sorry."

"It happened last night, just as we were crossing the ditch in front—"

"Last night? Why didn't you tell me? Don't you know that it's wrong to walk with a sprained ankle? Don't—"

"Don't be angry with me," she pleaded. "You could not have done anything."

"Couldn't I, though? I certainly could have carried you the rest of the way,—and upstairs." He was conscious of a strange exasperation. He felt as though he had been deliberately cheated out of something.

"You poor man! I am quite heavy."

"Pooh! A hundred and twenty-five at the outside. Do you think I'm a weakling?"

"Please, please!" she cried. "You look so—so furious. I know you are very, very strong,—but so am I. Why should I expect you to carry me all that distance when—"

"But, good Lord," he blurted out, "I would have loved to do it. I can't imagine anything more—I—I—" He

broke off in confusion.

She smiled divinely. "Alas, it is too late now. But—" she went on gaily, "you may yet have the pleasure of carrying me downstairs, Mr. Barnes. Will that appease your wrath?"

He flushed. "I'm sorry I—"

"See," she said, "it is nicely bandaged,—and if you could see through the bandages you would find it dreadfully swollen. That nice Miss Thackeray doctored me. What a quaint person she is."

His brow clouded once more. "I hope you will feel able to leave this place to-morrow, Countess. We must get away almost immediately."

"Ah, you have been listening to O'Dowd, I see."

"Yes. He tells me it will be dangerous to—"

"I was thinking of something else that he must have told you. You forgot to address me as Miss Cameron."

"I might have gone even farther and called you the Countess Ted," he said.

She sighed. "It was rather nice being Miss Cameron to you, Mr. Barnes. You will not let it make any difference, will you? I mean to say, you will be just the same as if I were still Miss Cameron and not—some one else?"

"I will be just the same," he said, leaning a little closer. "I am not so easily frightened as all that, you know."

She looked into his eyes for a moment, and then turned her own swiftly away. Entranced, he watched the delicate colour steal into her cheek.

"You are just like other women," he said thickly, "and I am like other men. We can't help being what we are, Countess. Flesh and blood mortals, that's all. If a cat may look at a king, why may not I look at a countess?"

She met his gaze, but not steadily. Her deep blue eyes were filled with a vague wonder; she seemed to be searching for something in his to explain the sudden embarrassment that had come over her.

"Ah, I do not understand you American men," she murmured, shaking her head. "A king would have found as much pleasure in looking at Miss Cameron as at a countess. Why shouldn't YOU?" A radiant smile lighted her face. "The king would not think of reproving the cat. I see no reason why you should not look at a poor little countess with impunity."

"Do you think it would be possible for you to understand me any better as Miss Cameron?" he asked bluntly.

"I think perhaps it would," she said, the smile fading.

"Then, I shall continue to look upon you as Miss Cameron, Countess. It will make it easier for both of us."

"Yes," she said, a little sadly, "I am sure Miss Cameron would not be half so dense as the Countess. She would understand perfectly. She has grown to be a very discerning person, Mr. Barnes, notwithstanding her extreme youth. Miss Cameron is only four days old, you see."

He bowed very low and said: "My proudest boast is that I have known her since the day she was born. If I had the tongue and the courage of O'Dowd I might add a great deal to that statement."

"A great deal that you would not say to a countess?" she asked, playing with fire.

"A great deal that a child four days old could hardly be expected to grasp, Miss Cameron," he replied, pointedly. "Having lived to a great age myself, and acquired wisdom, I appreciate the futility of uttering profound truths to an infant in arms."

She beamed. "O'Dowd could not have done any better than that," she cried. Then quickly, even nervously, as he was about to speak again: "Now, tell me all that Mr. O'Dowd had to say."

He seated himself and repeated the Irishman's warning. Her eyes clouded as he went on; utter dejection came into them.

"He is right. It would be difficult for me to clear myself. My own people would be against me. No one would believe that I did not deliberately make off with the jewels. They would say that I—oh, it is too dreadful!"

"Don't worry about that," he exclaimed. "You have me to testify that—"

"How little you know of intrigue," she cried. "They would laugh at you and say that you were merely another fool who had lost his head over a woman. They would say that I duped you—"

"No!" he cried vehemently. "Your people know better than you think. You are disheartened, discouraged. Things will look brighter to-morrow. Good heavens, think how much worse it might have been. That—that infernal brute was going to force you into a vile, unholy marriage. He—By the way," he broke off abruptly, "I have been thinking a lot about what you told me. He couldn't have married you without your consent. Such a marriage would never hold in a court of—"

"You are wrong," she said quietly. "He could have married me without my consent, and it would have held,—not in one of your law courts, I dare say, but in the court to which he and I belong by laws that were made centuries before America was discovered. A prince of the royal house may wed whom and when he chooses, provided he does not look too far beneath his station. He may not wed a commoner. The state would not

recognise such a union. My consent was not necessary."

"But you are in my country now, not in yours," he argued. "Our laws would have protected you."

"You do not understand. Marriages such as he contemplated are made every year in Europe. Do you suppose that the royal marriages you read about in the newspapers are made with the consent of the poor little princes and princesses? Your laws are one thing, Mr. Barnes; our courts are another. Need I be more explicit?"

"I think I understand," he said slowly. "Poor wretches!"

"Prince Ugo is of royal blood. I am not too far beneath him. In my country his word is the law. The marriage that was to have been celebrated to-day at Green Fancy would have bound me to him forever. It would have been recognised in my country as legal. I have not the right of appeal. I would not even be permitted to question his right to make me his wife against my will. He is a prince. His will is law."

"Isn't love allowed to enter into a—"

"Love?" she scorned. "What has love to do with it? There isn't a queen in all the world who loves—or loved, I would better say,—the man she married. Some of them may have grown afterwards to love their kings, because all kings are not alike. You may be quite sure, however, that the wives of kings and princes did not marry their ideals; they did not marry the men they loved. So, you see, it wouldn't have mattered in the least to Prince Ugo whether I loved him or hated him. It was all the same to him. It was enough that he loved me and wanted me. And besides, laying sentiment aside, it wouldn't have been a bad stroke of business on his part. He has a fair chance to sit on the throne of our country. By placing me beside him on the throne he would be taking a long step toward uniting the factions that are now bitterly opposing each other. I am able to discuss all this very calmly with you now, Mr. Barnes, for the nightmare is ended. I am here with you, alive and well. If you had not come for me last night, I would now be sleeping the long sleep at Green Fancy."

"You—you would have taken your own life?" he said, in a shocked voice.

"I would have spared myself the horror of letting him destroy it in a slower, more painful fashion," she said, compressing her lips.

He did not speak at once. Looking into her troubled eyes, he said, after a soulful moment: "I am glad that I came in time. You were made to love and be loved. The man you love,—if there ever be one so fortunate,—will be my debtor to the end of his days. I glorify myself for having been instrumental in saving you for him."

"If there ever be one so fortunate," she mused. Suddenly her mood changed. A new kind of despair came into her lovely eyes, a plaintive note into her voice. (I may be pardoned for declaring that she became, in the twinkling of an eye, a real flesh and blood woman.) "I don't know what I shall do unless I can get something to wear, Mr. Barnes. I haven't a thing, you see. This suit is—well, you can see what it is. I—"

"I've never seen a more attractive suit," he pronounced. "I said as much to myself the first time I saw it, the other evening at the cross-roads. It fits—"

"But I cannot LIVE in it, you know. My boxes are up at Green Fancy,—two small ones for steamer use. Everything I have in the world is in them. Pray do not look so forlorn. You really couldn't have carried them, Mr. Barnes, and I shudder when I think of what would have happened to you if I had tumbled them out of the window upon your head. You would have been squashed, and it isn't unlikely that you would have aroused every one in the house with your groans and curses."

"I dropped a trunk on my toes one time," he said, grinning with a delight that had nothing to do with the reminiscence. She was quaintly humorous once more, and he was happy. "I think one swears more prodigiously when a trunk falls on his toes than he does when it drops on his head. There is something wonderfully quieting and soothing about a trunk lighting on one's head from a great height. Don't worry about your boxes. I have a feeling it will be perfectly safe to call for them with a wagon to-morrow."

"I don't know what I should do without you," she said.

That evening at supper, Barnes and Mr. Rushcroft, to say nothing of three or four "transients," had great cause for complaint about the service. Miss Tilly was wholly pre-occupied. She was memorising her "part." Instead of asking Mr. Rushcroft whether he would have bean soup or noodles, she wanted to know whether she should speak the line this way or that. She had a faraway, strained look in her eyes, and she mumbled so incessantly that one of the guests got up and went out to see Mr. Jones about it. Being assured that she was just a plain damn' fool and not crazy, he returned and said a great many unpleasant things in the presence of Miss Tilly, who fortunately did not hear them.

"You've spoiled a very good waitress, Rushcroft," said Barnes.

"And a very good appetite as well," growled the Star.

Late in the night, Barnes, sitting at his window dreaming dreams, saw two big touring cars whiz past the tavern. The next morning Peter Ames, the chauffeur, called him up on the telephone to inquire whether he had heard anything more about the job on his sister's place. He was anxious to know, he said, because everybody had cleared out of Green Fancy during the night and he had received instructions to lock up the house and look for another situation.

CHAPTER XVIII — MR. SPROUSE CONTINUES TO BE PERPLEXING, BUT PUTS HIS NOSE TO THE GROUND

The morning air was soft with the first real touch of spring. A quiet haze lay over the valley; the lofty hills were enjoying a peaceful smoke, and the sky was as blue as the turquoise. Birds shrilled a fresh, gay carol; the song of the anvil had a new thrill of joy in every inspiring note; the cawing of crows travelled melodiously across the fields, roosters split their throats in vociferous acclaim to the distant sun, and hens clucked a complacent chorus. The rattle of kitchen pans was melody to the ear instead of torture; the squeaking of pigs in the sty beyond the stable yard took on the dignity of music; and the blue smoke that rose from chimneys near and far went dancing up to wed the smiling sky.

Barnes was abroad early. Very greatly to his annoyance, he had slept long and soundly throughout the night. He was annoyed because he had made up his mind that as her protector he would be most negligent if he went to sleep at all, with all those frightened varlets hovering around ready to go to any extreme in order to save their skins.

Indeed, he left his door slightly ajar and laid his revolver on a chair beside the bed, in which, with the aid of a lantern, he promised himself to keep the vigil, stretched out in his daytime garb, prepared for instant action, the while he enriched his mind by reading "The Man of Property." But he fell to dreaming with his eyes wide open, and few were the pages he turned.

Suddenly it was broad daylight and the wick in the lantern smelled horribly. He popped from the bed, rubbed his eyes, and then dashed out in the hall, expecting to come upon sanguinary evidence of a raid during the night. To his amazement, there were no visible signs of an attack upon the house. It seemed incredible that his defection had not been attended by results too horrible to contemplate. By all the laws of fate, she should now be either dead or at the very least, frightfully mutilated. Something like that invariably happens when a sentinel sleeps at his post, or an engineer drowses in his cab. But nothing of the sort had happened.

Mr. Bacon, sweeping the front stairs, assured him between yawns that he hadn't heard a sound in the Tavern after half-past ten,—at which hour he went to bed and to sleep.

Barnes was at breakfast when Peter Ames called up. An inspiration seized him when the chauffeur mentioned the wholesale exodus: he hired Peter forthwith and ordered him to report immediately,—with the car. He was going up to Green Fancy for Miss Cameron's "boxes."

Whether it was the fresh, sweet smell of the earth that caused him to saunter forth from the Tavern, and to adventure across the road to the foot of the great old oak, or the ripening of spring in his blood, is of no immediate consequence here. He had no reason for going over there to lean against the tree and light his after-breakfast pipe,—unless, of course, it be argued that the position afforded a fair and excellent view of the window in Miss Cameron's room. The shutters were open and the low sash was raised.

Presently she appeared at the window, and smiled down upon him. The spell was at its height; the charm that had clothed the morning with enchantment was now complete.

He waved his hand. "The top o' the morning," he cried.

"I detect coffee," she returned, "and, oh, how good it smells. Have you had yours?"

"Ages ago," he replied, ecstatically.

She placed her elbows on the sill and her chin in the palms of her hands. The loose sleeves of Miss Thackeray's bizarre dressing gown fell away, revealing two round, smooth, white arms. The sun shot its mellow light into the ripples of her tousled hair, and it shone like burnished gold. Her white teeth gleamed against the red of her smiling lips. He was fascinated.

The automobile driven by Peter Ames too soon came roaring and rattling up the pike. She withdrew her head, after twice being warned by Barnes not to reveal herself to the view of skulkers who might infest the wood beyond,—and each time his reward was a delightfully stubborn shake of the head and the ruthless assertion that on such a heavenly morning as this she didn't mind in the least if all the spies in the world were gazing at her.

Two minutes after Peter drove up to the Tavern he was on the way back to Green Fancy again, and seated beside him was Thomas Kingsbury Barnes, his new master.

"Needn't be afraid of trespassin'," said Peter when Barnes advised him to go slow as they turned off the road into the forest. "Nobody's going to object. You c'n yell, and shoot, and raise all the thunder you want, an' there won't be nobody runnin' out to tell you to shut up. Might as well try to disturb a graveyard."

There was not a sign of human life about the place. Peter, without compunction, admitted his employer through the back door of the house, and accompanied him upstairs to the room recently occupied by Miss Cameron.

"Course," he said, but not uneasily, "I'm not supposed to let anybody remove anything from the house as long as I'm employed as caretaker."

"But you are no longer employed as caretaker. You were discharged and you are now working for me, Peter."

"That's so," said Peter, scratching his head. "Makes all the difference in the world. I never thought of that. Come to think of it, I guess Miss Cameron needs clothes as much as anybody. The rest of 'em took all their duds away with 'em, you c'n bet. Would you know Miss Cameron's clothes if you was to see 'em?"

"Perfectly," said Barnes.

"That's good," said Peter, relieved. "Clothes seem to look purty much alike to me, specially women's."

They found the two small leather trunks, thickly belabelled, in the room upstairs. Both were locked.

"I don't see how you're going to identify 'em without seein' 'em," said Peter dubiously.

Barnes looked at him sternly. "Peter, be good enough to remember that you are working for a man of the most highly developed powers of divination. Do you get that?"

"No, sir," said Peter honestly; "I don't."

"Well, if I were to say to you that I possess the singular ability to see a thing without actually seeing it, what would you say?"

"I wouldn't say anything, because I don't think it helps a man any to call his boss a liar."

"You take this one," said Barnes, without further parley, "and I will manage the other." He was in a hurry to get away from the house. There was no telling when the government agents would descend upon the place. He was at a loss to understand O'Dowd's failure to remove the trunks which would so surely draw the attention of the authorities to the girl he seemed so eager to shield. "And, by the way," he added, as they descended the stairs with the trunks on their backs, "you may as well get your own things together, Peter. We start on a long motor trip to-night. I am afraid we shall have to steal the automobile, if you don't mind."

"It belongs to me, sir," said Peter. "Mr. O'Dowd gave it to me yesterday, with his compliments. It seems that he had word from his sister to reward me for long and faithful service. Special cablegram from London or England, I forget which."

"Did Mr. Curtis leave with the others last night?" inquired Barnes, setting the trunk down on the brick pavement outside the door.

"'Pears that he left a couple of days ago," said Peter, vastly perplexed. "By gosh, I don't see how he done it, 'thout me knowin' anything about it. Derned queer, that's all I got to say, man as sick as he is."

Barnes did not enlighten him. He helped Peter to lift the trunks into the car and then ordered him to start at once for Hart's Tavern.

"You can return later on for your things," he said.

"I got 'em tied up in a bundle in the garage, Mr. Burns," he said. "Won't take a second to get 'em out." He hurried around the corner of the house, leaving Barnes alone with the car.

A dry, quiet chuckle fell upon Barnes's ears. He glanced about in surprise and alarm. No one was in sight.

"Look up, young man," and the startled young man obeyed. His gaze halted at a window on the second story, almost directly over his head.

Mr. Sprouse was looking down upon him, his sharp features fixed in a sardonic grin.

"Well, I'll be damned!" burst from Barnes's lips. He could not believe his eyes.

"Surprised to see me, eh? If you're not in a hurry, I'd certainly appreciate a lift as far as the Tavern, old man. I'll be down in a jiffy."

"Hold on! What the deuce does all this mean? How do you happen to be here, and where are the—"

"Sh! Not so loud! Don't get excited. I dare say you know all there is to know about me by this time, so we needn't waste time over trifles. Stand aside! I'm going to drop." A moment later he swung over the sill, and dropped lightly to the ground eight feet below. Dusting his hands, he advanced and extended one of them to the bewildered Barnes. "Oh, you won't shake, eh? Well, it doesn't matter. I don't blame you."

"See here, Sprouse or whatever your name is,—"

"Cool off! I'll explain in ten words. I didn't get the stuff. I came back this morning to have a quiet, undisturbed look around. My only reason for revealing myself to you now, Barnes, is to ask your assistance in —"

"Ask my assistance, you infernal rogue!" roared Barnes. "Why, I'll—I'll—"

"Better hear me out," broke in Sprouse calmly.

"I could drill a hole through you so quickly you'd never know what did it," he went on. His hand was in his coat pocket, and a quick glance revealed to Barnes a singularly impressive angle in the cloth, the point of which seemed to be directed squarely at his chest. "But I'm not going to do it. I just want to set myself

straight with you. In a word, I never got anywhere near the room in which the jewels were hidden. This is God's truth, Barnes. I didn't stick a knife into that poor devil up there the other night. Here's what actually happened. I—"

"Wait a moment. You intended to steal the jewels, didn't you? You were not playing fair with me then, so why should I put any faith in you now?"

"Honest confession is good for the soul," said Sprouse easily. "I wasn't the only one who was trying to get the baubles, my friend. It was a game in which only the best man could win."

"I know the truth now about Roon and Paul," said Barnes significantly.

"You do?" sneered Sprouse. "I'll bet you a thousand to one you do not. If the girl told you what she believes to be true, she didn't have it straight at all. She was led to believe that they were a couple of crooks and that they fixed me in that Tavern down there. Isn't that what she told you? Well, that story was cooked up for her special benefit. I don't mind telling you the truth about them, and you can tell it to her. Roon was the Baron Hedlund—But all this can wait. Now—"

"Did you shoot either of those men?"

"I did not. Baron Hedlund was shot, I firmly believe, by Prince Ugo. I might as well go on with the story now and have it over with. Tell that chauffeur to take a little stroll. He doesn't have to hear the story, you know. Hedlund came up here a week or so ago to keep a look-out for his wife. The Baroness is supposed to be deeply enamoured of Prince Ugo. He found letters which seemed to indicate that she was planning to join the Prince up here. In any event, he came to watch. Well, she didn't come. She had been headed off, but he didn't know that. When he heard of the arrival of a lady at Green Fancy the other afternoon, he got busy. He went right up there with blood in his eye. I admit that I am the gentleman who telephoned the warning up to the Prince. They tried to head the Baron and his man off at the cross-roads, but he beat them to it. If there was to be a fight, they didn't want it to happen anywhere near the house. Part of them, led by Ugo himself, took a short cut up through the woods and met the two men in the road.

"There is only one man in the world to-day who is a better shot at night than Prince Ugo, and modesty keeps me from mentioning his illustrious name. That's why I believe Ugo is the one who got the Baron,—or Roon, as you know him. The other fellow was halted at the cross-roads when he made a run for it. A couple of men had been sent there for just such an emergency. Hedlund was a curiously chivalrous chap. He went to extreme measures to protect his wife's good name by wiping out all means of identification. His wife's good name! It is to laugh! Now, that is the true story of the little affair, and if you are as much of a gentleman as I take you to be, Barnes, you will respect Hedlund's desire to shield the woman he loved, and let him lie up yonder in an unmarked grave. That is what he figured on, you know, in case things went against him, and I'll stake my head that if you put it up to the Countess Therese, she will feel as I do about it. She will beg you to keep the secret. Hedlund was a lifelong friend of her family. He was beloved by all of them. He married an actress in Vienna three or four years ago. On second thoughts, if I were you I'd spare the Countess. I'd let her go on thinking that the story she has heard is true,—at least for the time being. She's a nice girl and there's no sense in giving her any unnecessary pain. But that's up to you. You can do as you please about it.

"Now to go back to my own troubles. When I got out into the hall night before last, after leaving her room, I heard voices whispering in Prince Ugo's room. Naturally I thought that some one had lamped us on the outside, and that I was likely to be in a devil of a mess if I wasn't careful. The last place for me to go was back into her room. They would cut me off from the outside. So I beat it up the stairway into the attic. Nothing happened, so I sneaked down to have a peep around. The door to Ugo's room was open, but there was no light on the inside. He came to the door and looked up and down the hall. Then some one else came out and started to sneak away. I leave you to guess the sex.

"Nicholas butted in at this unfortunate juncture. He made the mistake of his life. I could see him as plain as day, standing in the hall grinning like an ape. Ugo jumped back into his room. In less than a second he was out again. He landed squarely on Nicholas's back as the fellow turned to escape. I saw the steel flash. Poor old Nick went down in a heap, letting out a horrible yell. Ugo dragged him into the room and dashed back into his own. A moment later he came out again, yelling for help. I heard him shouting that the house had been robbed,—and in two seconds there was an uproar all over the place. I thought I was done for. But he had them all rushing downstairs, yelling that the thief had gone that way. There was only one thing left for me to do and that was to get out on the roof if possible, and wait for things to quiet down. I got out through a trap door and stayed there for an hour or so. They were beating the forest for the thief, and I give you my word, believe it or not, I actually sent up a prayer, Barnes, that you had got off safely with the girl. I prayed harder than I ever dreamed a man could pray.

"Well, to shorten the story, I finally took a chance and slid down to the eaves where I managed to find the limb of a tree big enough to support me,—just as if the Lord had ordered it put there for my special benefit. I was soon on the ground, and that meant safety for me. I had heard Ugo tell the others that Nicholas said the man who stabbed him was yours truly. Can you beat it? And then every mother's son of them declared it was a feat that no one else in the world could have pulled off but me, and as I was nowhere to be found, it was only natural that all of them should believe the lie that Ugo told.

"And now comes the maddening part of the whole business. He said that the crown jewels were gone! I heard him telling how he was awakened out of a sound sleep by a man with a gun, who forced him to open the safe and hand over the treasure. Then he said he was put to sleep again by a crack over the head with a slung-shot. He was only partially stunned,—Lord, what a liar!—and came to in time to hear the struggle across the hall. The thief was running downstairs when he staggered to the door. It seems that the door at the bottom of the steps had not been closed that night.

"Now, my dear Mr. Barnes, when I asked you to lend your assistance awhile ago, it was only to have you tell me when it was that Mr. Loeb left this place, which way he went, and who accompanied him. If we are to find the crown jewels, my friend, we will first have to find Prince Ugo. He has them."

Barnes had not taken his eyes from the face of this amazing rascal during the whole of the recital. He had been deceived in him before; he was determined not to be fooled again.

"I don't believe a word of this yarn," he said flatly. "You have the jewels and—"

"Don't be an ass," snapped Sprouse. "If I had them do you suppose I'd be fiddling around here to-day? Not much. I saw the gang making their getaway last night, and I saw Peter depart this morning. I concluded to have a look about the place. Hope springs eternal, you know. There was a bare possibility that he might have forgotten them!" He scowled as he grinned, and never had Barnes looked upon a countenance so evil.

"Why should I tell YOU anything about Prince Ugo? It would only be helping you to carry out the game—"

"Look here, Mr. Barnes, I'm not going to double-cross you again. That's all over. I want to get that scurvy dog who knifed poor old Nick. Nick was a decent, square man. He wasn't a crook. He was a patriot, if such a thing exists in this world to-day. If you can give me a lead, I'll try to run Prince Ugo down. And if I do, we'll get the jewels."

"We? You amuse me, Sprouse."

"Well, I can't do any more than give my promise, my solemn oath, or something like that. I can't give a bond, you know. I swear to you that if I lay hands on that stuff, I will deliver it to you. Might just as well trust me as Ugo. You won't get them from him, that's sure; and you may get them from me."

"Is it revenge you're after?"

"My God," almost shouted Sprouse in his exasperation, "didn't he give me a black eye among my friends up here? Didn't he put me in wrong with all of them? Do you think I'm going to stand for that? Think I'm going to let him get away with it? You don't know me, my friend. I've got a reputation at stake. No one has ever double-crossed me and got away with it. I want to prove to the world that I didn't take those jewels. I—"

"Just what do you mean by 'the world,' Sprouse?"

"My world," he replied succinctly. "I'm not a piker, you know," he went on, cocking one eye in a somewhat supercilious manner. "The stakes are always high in my game. I don't play for pennies."

"Get in the car," said Barnes suddenly. He had decided to take a chance with the resourceful, indefatigable rascal. There was nothing to be lost by setting him on the track of Prince Ugo, who, if the man's story was true, had betrayed his best friends. There was something convincing about Sprouse's version of the affair at Green Fancy. He called out to Peter.

"I suppose you know that the whole game is up, Naismith," he said, lowering his voice. Peter was wrathfully cranking the car. "The government is going to take a hand in this business up here."

"If you mean that as a hint to me, it's unnecessary. I'll be on my way inside of an hour. This is no place for me. And that Tavern is no place for—er—for her, Barnes. Just mention that you saw me and that I'm going after Mr. Loeb. If I get the stuff, I'll do the square thing by her. Not for sentimental reasons, bless you, but just because I like to do things that make people wonder what the hell I'll do next. Tell her the whole story if you feel like it, but if I were you I'd wait till she is safe among her friends, where she won't be nervous. Hit it up a bit, Peter, old boy. I'm in a hurry."

Peter eyed him in an unfriendly manner. "Where did you come from, Mr. Perkins? Mighty queer you—"

Sprouse spoke softly out of the corner of his mouth. "Nice old New England name, isn't it, Barnes?" To Peter: "It's a long story. I'll write it to you. Speed up."

Barnes told all that he knew of Prince Ugo's flight. Sprouse looked thoughtful for a long time.

"So O'Dowd knows that I really was after the swag, eh? He believes I got it?"

"I suppose so."

"The only one who thinks I'm absolutely innocent is Ugo, of course,—and Mrs. Van Dyke. That's good." Sprouse smacked his lips. "Just send me on to Hornville in the car, and don't give me another thought till you hear from me. I've got a pretty fair idea where I can find Mr. Loeb. It will take a little time,—a couple of days, perhaps,—but sooner or later he'll turn up in close proximity to the beautiful baroness."

CHAPTER XIX — A TRIP BY NIGHT, A SUPPER, AND A LATE ARRIVAL

Shortly after sundown that evening, the Rushcroft Company evacuated Hart's Tavern. They were delayed by the irritating and, to Mr. Rushcroft, unpardonable behaviour of two officious gentlemen, lately arrived, who insisted politely but firmly on prying into the past, present and future history of the several members of the organisation, including the new "backer" or "angel," as one of the operatives slyly observed to the other on beholding Miss Thackeray.

Barnes easily established his own identity and position, and was not long in convincing the investigators that his connection with the stranded company was of a purely philanthropic nature,—yes, even platonic, he asseverated with some heat when the question was put to him.

They examined him closely concerning his solitary visit to Green Fancy, and he described to the best of his ability all but one of the inmates. He neglected to mention Miss Cameron. Realising that he would be storing up trouble for himself if he failed to mention his trip to the house that morning,—they were sure to hear of it in time,—he set his mind to the task of constructing a satisfactory explanation. He concluded to sacrifice Peter Ames, temporarily at least. Taking Peter aside, he explained the situation to him, impressing upon him the importance of leaving Miss Cameron and her luggage out of the interview, and to say nothing about the return of "Mr. Perkins."

Fortified by Barnes's promise to protect him if he followed these instructions, Peter consented to tell all that he knew about the people at Green Fancy. Whereupon his new employer informed the secret service men that he had gone up to Green Fancy that morning in response to an appeal from Peter Ames, who had applied to him for a position a day or two before. On his arrival there he confirmed the bewildered chauffeur's story that the whole crowd had stolen away during the night. He guaranteed to produce Peter at any time he was needed, and was perfectly willing to discommode himself to the extent of leaving the man behind if they insisted on holding him.

The officers, after putting him through a rather rigid examination, held private consultation over Peter. To Barnes's surprise and subsequent dismay, they announced that there was nothing to be gained by holding the man; he was at liberty to depart with his employer, provided he would report when necessary.

Barnes was some time in fathoming the motive behind this seeming indifference on the part of the secret service men. It came to him like a flash, and its significance stunned him. They had decided that there was more to be gained by letting Peter Ames think he was above suspicion than by keeping him on the anxious seat. Peter unrestrained was of more value to them than Peter in durance vile. And from that moment forward there would not be an hour of the day or night when he was far ahead of the shadower who followed his trail. There would be a sly, invisible pursuer at his heels, and an eye ever ready to detect the first false move that he made. They were counting on Peter to lead them, in his own good time, to the haunts of his comrades. He could not escape. And he could make the fatal mistake of considering them a pack of fools!

Barnes, perceiving all this, was in a state of perturbation. He had devised a very clever plan for getting Miss Cameron away from the Tavern without attracting undue attention. She was to leave in one of the automobiles that he had engaged to convey the players to Crowndale. It should go without saying that she was to travel with him in Peter's ramshackle car. In case of detention or inquiry, she was to pose as a stage-struck young woman who had obtained a place with the company at the last moment through his influence.

Mr. Rushcroft was not in the secret. Barnes merely announced that he wanted to give a charming young friend of the family a chance to see what she could do on the stage, and that he had taken the liberty of sending for her. The star was magnanimous. He slapped Barnes on the back and declared that nothing could give him greater joy than to transform any friend of his into an actress, and he didn't give a hang whether she had talent or not.

"We'll write in a part for her to-night," he said, "and we'll make it a small one at first, so that she won't have any difficulty in learning it. From night to night we'll build it up, Barnes, so that by the end of our first month your protegee practically will be a co-star with me. There's nothing mean about me, old chap. Any friend of yours can have—"

Barnes made haste to explain that he did not want any one to know that this friend of the family was going on the stage, and that he would be greatly indebted to Rushcroft if he would keep "mum" about it for the time being.

"Certainly. Not a word. I understand," said Mr. Rushcroft amiably. "I've had it happen before," he went on, a perfectly meaningless remark that brought a flush to Barnes's cheek.

It had been Barnes's intention to spirit his charge away from Hart's Tavern under cover of darkness, in company with his other "responsibilities," but the fresh turn of affairs now presented difficulties that were likely to upset his hastily conceived strategy. He had but one purpose in view, and that was to spare her an unpleasant encounter with the government officials,—an encounter that conceivably might result in very distressing complications. He had revealed his plan to her and she apparently was very much taken with it,—indeed, she was quite enthusiastic over the prospect of being whisked unceremoniously to Crowndale, and thence to the home of his sister in New York City, where she could at once put herself in communication with friends and supporters.

He was looking forward with dubious hopes to a possible extension of his guardianship, involving a voyage across the Atlantic and the triumphant delivery of the Countess, so to speak, into the eager arms of her country's ambassador at Paris. He was now in a state of mind that inspired him with the belief that it would be a joy to die for her. If he died for her, she would always remember him as a brave, devoted champion; she would exalt him; in her tender, grateful heart there would always be a corner for him, even to the end of her days,—even to the end of her days on the throne of her country's ruler. Far better that he should die for her,—and have it all over with,—than that he should live to see her the wife of—But invariably he ceased

dreaming at this point and admitted that it would be infinitely more satisfying to live. It was his matter-of-fact contention that while there is life there is hope.

When the hour came for the departure from Hart's Tavern he deliberately engaged the two secret service men in conversation in the tap-room. Miss Cameron left the house by the rear door and was safely ensconced in Peter's automobile long before he shook hands with the "rat-catchers" and dashed out to join her. Tommy Gray's car, occupied by the four players, was moving away from the door as he sprang in beside her and slammed the door. The interior of the car was as black as pitch.

"Are you there?" he whispered.

"Yes. Isn't it jolly, running away like this? It must be wonderfully exciting to be a criminal, always dodging and—"

"Sh! Even a limousine may have ears!"

But if the limousine had possessed a thousand ears they would have been rendered useless in the stormy racket made by Peter's muffler and the thunderous roar of the exhaust as the car got under way.

Sixty miles lay between them and Crowndale. Tommy Gray guaranteed that the distance could be covered in three hours, even over the vile mountain roads. Ten o'clock would find them at the Grand Palace Hotel, none the worse for wear, provided (he always put it parenthetically) they lived to tell the tale! The luggage had gone on ahead of them earlier in the day.

Peter's efforts to stay behind Tommy's venerable but surprisingly energetic Buick were the cause of many a gasp and shudder from the couple who sat behind him in the bounding car. He had orders to keep back of Tommy but never to lose sight of his tail light.

Peter was like the celebrated Tam O' Shanter. He was pursued by spectres. The instant that he discovered that he was lagging a trifle, he shot the car up to top speed, with the result that he had to jam on the brakes violently in order to avoid crashing into Tommy's tail light, and at such times Miss Cameron and Barnes sustained unpleasant jars. Something seemed to be telling Peter that the law was stretching out its cruel hand to clutch him from behind; he was determined to keep out of its reach.

There was small opportunity for conversation. The trip was not at all as Barnes had imagined it would be. After the car had raced through Hornville he decided that it was not necessary to keep Tommy's tail light in view, and so directed Peter. After that conversation was possible, but the gain was counterbalanced by a distinct sense of loss. She relinquished her rather frenzied grasp upon his arm, and sank back into the corner of the seat.

"Oh, dear, what a relief!" she gasped.

"What arrant stupidity," he growled, and she never knew that the remark bore no relation whatsoever to Peter.

He confessed his fears to her, and was immeasurably consoled by her enthusiastic scorn for the consequences of his mistake.

"Let them follow poor old Peter," she said. "We will outwit them, never fear. If necessary, Mr. Barnes, we can travel with the company for days and days. I think I should rather enjoy it. If you can manage to get word to my friends in New York, to relieve their anxiety, I shall be more than grateful. I am sure they will decide that you are acting for the best in every particular. It would grieve them,—yes, it would distress them greatly,—if I were to be subjected to an inquiry at the hands of the authorities. The notoriety would be—harrowing, to say the least. Moreover, the disclosures would certainly bring disaster upon those who are working so loyally to right a grave wrong. They will understand, and they will thank you not only for all that you have done for me but for the cause I support."

"The first time I ever saw you, I said to myself that you were a brave, indomitable little soldier," he said warmly. "I am more than ever convinced of it now."

"The men of my family have been soldiers for ten generations," she said simply, as if that covered everything. "They haven't all been heroes but none of them has been a coward."

"I can believe that," he said. "Blood will tell."

"If God gives back my country to my people, Mr. Barnes," she said, after a long silence, "will you not one day make your way out there to us, so that we may present some fitting expression of the gratitude—"

"Don't speak of gratitude," he exclaimed. "I don't want to be thanked. Good Lord, do you suppose I—"

"There, there! Don't be angry," she cried. "But you must come to my country. You must see it. You will love it."

"But suppose that God does not see fit to restore it to you. Suppose that he leaves it in the hands of the vandals. What then? Will you go back to—that?"

She was still for a long time. "I shall not return to my country until it is free again, Mr. Barnes," she said, and there was a break in her voice.

"You—you will remain in MY country?" he asked, leaning closer to her ear.

"The world is large," she replied. "I shall have to live somewhere. It may be here, it may be France, or England or Switzerland."

"Why not here? You could go far and do worse."

"Beggars may not be choosers. The homeless cannot be very particular, you know. If the Germans remain in my country, I shall be without a home."

His voice was tense and vibrant when he spoke again, after a moment's reflection. "I know what O'Dowd would say if he were in my place."

"O'Dowd has known me a great many years," she said. "When you have known me as many months as he has years, you will thank your lucky star that you do not possess the affability that the gods have bestowed upon O'Dowd."

"Don't be too sure of that," he said, and heard the little catch in her breath. He found her hand and clasped it firmly. His lips were close to her ear. "I have known you long enough to—"

"Don't!" she cried out sharply. "Don't say it now,—please. I could listen to O'Dowd, but—but you are different. He would forget by to-morrow, and I would forget even sooner than he. But it would not be so easy to forget if you were to say it,—it would not be easy for either of us."

"You are not offended?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Why should I be offended? Are you not my protector?"

The subtle implication in those words brought him to his senses. Was he not her protector? And was he not abusing the confidence she placed in him?

"I shall try to remember that,—always," he said abjectly.

"Some day I shall tell you why I am glad you did not say it to me to-night," she said, a trifle unsteadily. She squeezed his hand. "You are very good to me. I shall not forget that either."

And she meant that some day she would confess to him that she was so tired, and lonely, and disconsolate on this journey to Crowndale, and so in need of the strength he could give, that she would have surrendered herself gladly to the comfort of his arms, to the passion that his touch aroused in her quickening blood!

Soon after ten o'clock they entered the town of Crowndale and drew up before the unattractive portals of the Grand Palace Hotel. An arc lamp swinging above the entrance shed a pitiless light upon the dreary, God-forsaken hostelry with the ironic name.

Mr. Rushcroft was already at the desk, complaining bitterly of everything seen and unseen. As a matter of habit he was roaring about his room and, while he hadn't put so much as his nose inside of it, he insisted on knowing what they meant by giving it to him. Mr. Bacon and Mr. Dillingford were growling because there was no elevator to hoist them two flights up, and Miss Thackeray was wanting to know WHY she couldn't have a bit of supper served in her room.

"They're all alike," announced Mr. Rushcroft despairingly, addressing the rafters. He meant hotels in general.

"They're all alike," vouchsafed the clerk in an aside to the "drummer" who leaned against the counter, meaning stage-folk in general.

"You're both right," said the travelling salesman, who knew.

"Is there a cafe in the neighbourhood?" inquired Barnes, with authority.

"There's a rest'rant in the next block," replied the clerk, instantly impressed. Here was one who obviously was not "alike." "A two-minutes' walk, Mr.—" (looking at the register)—"Mr. Barnes."

"That's good. We will have supper in Miss Thackeray's room. Let me have your pencil, please. Send over and have them fill this order inside of twenty minutes." He handed what he had written to the blinking clerk. "For eight persons. Tell 'em to hurry it along."

"Maybe they're closed for the night," said the clerk. "And besides—"

"My God! He even hesitates to get food for us when—" began Mr. Rushcroft.

"Besides there's only one waiter on at night and he couldn't get off, I guess. And besides it's against the rules of this house to serve drinks in a lady's—"

"You tell that waiter to close up when he comes over here with what I've ordered, and tell him that I will pay double for everything, and to-morrow morning you can tell the proprietor of this house that we broke the rules to-night."

For the first time in her life Miss Tilly sat down to a meal served by a member of her late profession. She sat on the edge of Miss Thackeray's bed and held a chicken sandwich in one hand and a full glass of beer in the other. Be it said to the credit of her forebears, she did not take even so much as a sip from the glass, but seven sandwiches, two slices of cold ham, half a box of sardines, a plate of potato salad, a saucer of Boston baked beans, two hardboiled eggs, a piece of apple pie and two cups of coffee passed her freshly carmined lips. She was in her seventh heaven. She was no longer dreaming of fame: it was a gay reality. Emulating the example of Miss Thackeray, she addressed Mr. Dillingford as "dear," and came near to being the cause of his death by strangulation.

Miss Cameron submitted to the contagion. She had had no such dreams as Miss Tilly's, but she was quite as thrilled by the novelty of her surroundings, the informality of the feast, and the sprightliness of these

undaunted spirits. She sat on Miss Thackeray's trunk, her back against the wall, her bandaged foot resting on a decrepit suit-case. Her eyes were sparkling, her lips ever ready to part in the joy of laughter, the colour leaping into her cheeks in response to the amazing quips of these unconventional vagabonds.

She too was hungry. Food had never tasted so good to her. From time to time her soft, smiling eyes sought Barnes with a look of mingled wonder and confusion. She always laughed when she caught the expression of concern in his eyes, and once she slyly winked at him. He was entranced.

He crossed over and sat beside her. "They are a perfectly irresponsible lot," he said in a low voice. "I hope you don't mind their—er—levity."

"I love it," she whispered. "They are an inspiration. One would think that they had never known such a thing as trouble. I am taking lessons, Mr. Barnes."

She was still warmly conscious of the thrill that had come into her blood when he carried her up the stairs in his powerful arms, disdaining the offer of assistance from the suddenly infatuated Tommy Gray.

"Rehearsal at eleven sharp," announced Mr. Rushcroft, arising from the window-sill on which he was seated. "Letter perfect, every one of you. No guessing. By the way, Miss—er—'pon my soul, I don't believe I got your name?"

"Jones," said the new member, shamelessly.

"Ah," said he, smiling broadly, "a word oft spoken in jest—ahem!—how does it go? No matter. You know what I mean. I have not had time to write in the part for you, Miss Jones, but I shall do so the first thing in the morning. Now that I see how difficult it is for you to get around, I have hit upon a wonderful idea. I shall make it a sitting part. You won't have to do anything with your legs at all. Most beginners declare that they don't know what to do with their hands, but I maintain that they know less about what to do with their legs. Fortunately you are incapacitated—"

"Perhaps it would be just as well to excuse Miss Jones from rehearsal in the morning," broke in Barnes hastily. "She is hardly fit to—"

"Just as you say, old chap. Doesn't matter in the least. Good night, everybody. Sleep tight."

"I sha'n't sleep a wink," said Miss Tilly.

"Homesick already?" demanded Mr. Bacon, fixing her with a pitying stare.

"Worrying over my part," she explained.

"Haven't you committed it yet? Say it now. 'It is half past seven, my lord.' All you have to do is to remember that it comes in the second act and not in the first or third."

"Good night," said Miss Cameron, giving her hand to Barnes at the door. She was leaning on Miss Thackeray's arm. He never was to forget the deep, searching look she sent into his eyes. She seemed to be asking a thousand questions.

He went down to the dingy lobby. A single, half-hearted electric bulb shed its feeble light on the desk, in front of which stood a man registering under the sleepy eye of the night clerk.

After the late arrival had started upstairs in the wake of the clerk, Barnes stepped up to inspect the book. The midnight express from the north did not stop at Crowndale, he had learned upon inquiry, and it was the only train touching the town between nightfall and dawn.

The register bore the name of Thomas Moore, Hornville. There was not the slightest doubt in Barnes's mind that this was the man who had been detailed to shadow the luckless Peter. Only an imperative demand by government authorities could have brought about the stopping of the express at Hornville and later on at Crowndale.

Barnes smiled grimly. "I've just thought of a way to fool you, my friend," he said to himself, and was turning away when a familiar voice assailed him.

Whirling, he looked into the face of a man who stood almost at his elbow,—the sharp, impassive face of Mr. Sprouse.

CHAPTER XX — THE FIRST WAYFARER HAS ONE TREASURE THRUST UPON HIM—AND FORTHWITH CLAIMS ANOTHER

"That fellow is a rat-catcher," said Sprouse. "What are you doing here?" demanded Barnes, staring. He seized the man's arm and inquired eagerly: "Have you got the jewels?"

"No; but I will have them before morning," replied Sprouse coolly. He shot a furtive glance around the deserted lobby. "Better not act as though you knew me. That bull is no fool. He doesn't know me, but by this time he knows who you are."

"He is trailing Peter Ames."

"Ship Peter to-morrow," advised Sprouse promptly.

"I had already thought of doing so," said Barnes, surprised by the uncanny promptness of the man in hitting upon the strategy he had worked out for himself after many harassing hours. "He goes to my sister's place to-morrow morning."

"Send him by train. He will be easier to follow. There is a train leaving for the south at 9:15."

"You were saying that before morning you would—"

"Be careful! Don't whisper. People don't whisper to utter strangers. Step over here by the front door. Would you be surprised if I were to tell you that his royal nibs is hiding in this town? Well, he certainly is. He bought a railway ticket for Albany at Hornville the day he beat it, but he got off at the second station,—which happens to be this one."

"How can you be sure of all this?"

"Simple as falling off a log," said Sprouse, squinting over his shoulder. "The Baroness Hedlund has been here for a week or ten days. The Baron wasn't so far wrong in his suspicions, you see. He lost track of her, that's all. I happened to overhear a conversation at Hart's Tavern between him and his secretary. I have a way of hearing things I'm not supposed to hear, you know. By a curious coincidence I happened to be taking the air late one night just outside his window at the Tavern,—on the roof of the porch, to be accurate. I told Ugo what I'd heard and he nearly broke his neck trying to head her off. O'Dowd and De Soto rushed over to Hornville and telegraphed for her to leave the train at the first convenient place and return to New York. She was on her way up here, you see. She got off at Crowndale and everybody supposed that she had taken the next train home. But she didn't do anything of the kind. She is a silly, obstinate fool and she's crazy about Ugo,—and jealous as fury. She hated to think of him being up here with other women. A day or so later she sent him a letter. No one saw that letter but Ugo, and—your humble servant.

"I happened to be the one to go to Spanish Falls for the mail that day. The postmark excited my curiosity. If I told you what I did to that letter before delivering it to Mr. Loeb, you could send me to a federal prison. But that's how I came to know that she had decided to wait in Crowndale until he sent word that the coast was clear. She went to the big sanatorium outside the town and has been there ever since, incognito, taking a cure for something or other. She goes by the name of Mrs. Hasselwein. I popped down here this afternoon and found out that she is still at the sanatorium but expects to leave early to-morrow morning. Her trunks are over at the station now, to be expressed to Buffalo. I made another trip out there this evening and waited. About eight o'clock Mr. Hasselwein strolled up. He sat on the verandah with her for half an hour or so and then left. I followed him. He went to one of the little cottages that belong to the sanatorium. I couldn't get close enough to hear what they said, but I believe he expects to take her away in an automobile early in the morning. It is a seventy mile ride from here to the junction where they catch the train for the west. I'm going up now to make a call on Mr. Hasselwein. Would you like to join me?"

Barnes eyed him narrowly. "There is only one reason why I feel that I ought to accompany you," he said. "If you have it in your mind to kill him, I certainly shall do everything in my power to prevent—"

"Possess your soul in peace. I'm not going to do anything foolish. Time enough left for that sort of thing. I will get him some day, but not now. By the way, what is the number of your room?"

"Twenty-two,—on the next floor."

"Good. Go upstairs now and I'll join you in about ten minutes. I will tap three times on your door."

"Why should you come to my room, Sprouse? We can say all that is to be said—"

"If you will look on the register you will discover that Mr. J. H. Prosser registered here about half an hour ago. He is in room 30. He left a call for five o'clock. Well, Prosser is another name for Ugo."

"Here in this hotel? In room 30?" cried Barnes, incredulously.

"Sure as you're alive. Left the cottage an hour ago. Came in a jitney or I could have got to him on the way over."

Barnes, regardless of consequences, dashed over to inspect the register. Sprouse followed leisurely, shooting anxious glances up the stairs at the end of the lobby.

"See!" cried Barnes, excitedly, putting his finger on the name "Miss Jones." "She's in room 32,—next to his. By gad, Sprouse, do you suppose he knows that she is here? Would the dog undertake anything—"

"You may be sure he doesn't know she's here, or you either, for that matter. The country's full of Joneses and Barneses. Go on upstairs. Leave everything to me."

He strolled away as the clerk came shuffling down the steps. As Barnes mounted them, he glanced over his shoulder and saw Sprouse take up a suitcase near the door and return to the desk, evidently for the purpose of engaging a room for the night.

Before going to his room, he strode lightly down the hall in the direction of room 30. There was no light in the transom. Stepping close to the door, he listened intently for sounds from within. He started back almost

instantly. The occupant was snoring with extreme heartiness.

A glance revealed a light in the transom of room 32. As he looked, however, it disappeared. Abashed, he turned and went swiftly away. She was going to bed. He felt like a snooping, despicable "peeping Tom" caught in the act.

He had been in his room for twenty minutes before he heard the tapping on his door. He opened it and Sprouse slid into the room. The instant the door closed behind him, he threw open his coat and coolly produced a long, shallow metal box, such as one finds in safety vaults.

"With my compliments," he said drily, thrusting the box into Barnes's hands. "You'd better have the Countess check them up and see if they're all there. I am not well enough acquainted with the collection to be positive."

Barnes was speechless. He could only stare, open-mouthed, at this amazing man.

"Grip 'em tight," went on Sprouse, grinning. "I may relieve you of them if you get too careless. My advice to you is to hide them and keep your lips closed—"

"My God, Sprouse, have you been in that man's room since I saw you down—"

"I forgot to say that no questions were to be asked," broke in the other.

"But I insist upon having everything cleared up. Here am I with a box of jewels stolen from a lodger's room, God knows how, and in danger of being slapped into jail if they catch me with the—"

"All you have to do is to keep quiet and look innocent. Stay out of the hall to-night. Don't go near the door of No. 30. Act like a man with brains. I said I would square myself with you and with him, too. Well, I've done both. Maybe you think it is easy to give up this stuff. There is a half million dollars' worth of nice little things in that box, small as it is. I went to a lot of trouble to get 'em, and all I'll receive for my pains is a thank you from Mr. Thomas K. Barnes, New York."

"I cannot begin to thank you enough," said Barnes. "See here, you must allow me to reward you in some way commensurate with your—"

"Cut that out," said Sprouse darkly. "I'm not so damned virtuous that I have to be rewarded. I like the game. It's the breath of life to me."

"The time will surely come when I can do you a good turn, Sprouse, and you will not find me reluctant," said Barnes, lamely. He was completely at a loss in the presence of the master-crook. He felt very small, and stupid, and inadequate,—as one always feels when confronted by genius. Moreover, he was utterly stupefied.

"That's different. If I ever need a friendly hand I'll call on you. It's only fair that I should give you a tip, Barnes, just to put you on your guard. I've lived up to my word in this business, and I've done all that I said I would. From now on, I'm a free agent. I want to advise you to put that stuff in a safe place. I'll give you two days' start. After that, if I can get 'em away from you, or whoever may have them, I'm going to do it. They will be fair plunder from then on. Notwithstanding the fact that I put them in your hands to-night,—and so wash my own of them temporarily,—I haven't a single scruple about relieving you of them on some later occasion. I may have to crack you over the head to do it,—so a word to the wise ought to be sufficient. If you don't guard them pretty closely, my friend, you will regain consciousness some day and find you haven't got them any longer. Good night—and good-bye for the present. Stick close to your room till morning and—then beat it with her for New York. I give you two days' start, remember."

He switched off the light suddenly. Barnes gasped and prepared to defend himself. Sprouse chuckled.

"Don't be nervous. I'm merely getting ready to leave you with your ill-gotten gains. It isn't wise, you see, to peep out of a door with a light in the room behind you. Keep cool. I sha'n't be more than a minute."

There was no sound for many seconds, save the deep breathing of the two men. Then, with infinite caution, Sprouse turned the knob and opened the door a half inch or so. He left the room so abruptly that Barnes never quite got over the weird impression that he squeezed through that slender crack, and pulled it after him!

Many minutes passed before he turned on the light. The key of the box was tied to the wire grip. With trembling fingers he inserted it in the lock and opened the lid.... "A half-million dollars' worth of nice little things," Sprouse had said!

He did not close his eyes that night. Daybreak found him lying in bed, with the box under his pillow, a pistol at hand, and his eyes wide-open. He was in a graver quandary than ever. Now that he had the treasure in his possession, what was he to do with it? He did not dare to leave it in the room, nor was it advisable to carry it about with him. The discovery of the burglary in room 30 would result in a search of the house, from top to bottom.

Cold perspiration started out on his brow. The situation was far from being the happy one that he had anticipated.

He solved the breakfast problem by calling downstairs for a waiter and ordering coffee and rolls and eggs sent up to his room. Singularly enough the waiter solved the other and more disturbing problem for him.

"SOME robbery last night," said that worthy, as he re-appeared with the tray. Barnes was thankful that the waiter was not looking at him when he hurled the bomb, figuratively speaking. He had a moment's time to recover.

"What robbery?" he enquired, feigning indifference.

"Feller up in one of the cottages at the sanatorium. All beat up, something fierce they say."

"Up in—Where?" almost shouted Barnes, starting up.

The man explained where the cottages were situated, Barnes listening as one completely bereft of intelligence.

"Seems he was to leave by auto early this mornin', and they didn't know anything was wrong till Joe Keep—he's driving a Fierce-Arrow that Mr. Norton has for rent—till Joe'd been settin' out in front for nearly half an hour. The man's wife was waitin' fer him up at the main buildin' and she got so tired waitin' that she sent one of the clerks down to see what was keeping her husband. Well, sir, him and Joe couldn't wake the feller, so they climb in an open winder, an' by gosh, Joe says it was terrible. The feller was layin' on the bed, feet an' hands tied and gagged, and blood from head to foot. He was inconscious, Joe says, an'—my God, how his wife took on! Joe says he couldn't stand it, so he snook out, shakin' like a leaf. He says she's a pippin, too. Never seen a purtier—"

"Is—is the man dead?" cried Barnes, aghast. He felt that his face was as white as chalk.

"Nope! Seems like it's nothing serious: just beat up, that's all. Terrible cuts on his head and—"

"What is his name?" demanded Barnes.

"Something like Hackensack."

"Have they caught the thief?"

"I should say not. The police never ketch anything but drunks in this burg, and they wouldn't ketch them if they could keep from stumblin'."

"What time did all this happen?" Barnes was having great difficulty in keeping his coffee from splashing over.

"Doc Smith figgers it was long about midnight, judgin' by the way the blood co'gulated."

"Did they get away with much?"

"Haven't heard. Joe says the stove pipe in the feller's room was knocked down and they's soot all over everything. Looks like they must have been a struggle. Seems as though the burglar,—must ha' been more'n one of 'em, I say,—wasn't satisfied with cracking him over the head. He stuck the point of a knife or something into him,—just a little way, Joe says—in more'n a dozen places. What say?"

"I—I didn't say anything."

"I thought you did. Well, if I hear anything more I'll let you know."

"Anything for a little excitement," said Barnes casually.

He listened at the door until he heard the waiter clattering down the stairway, and then went swiftly down the hall to No. 30. Mr. Prosser was sleeping just as soundly and as resoundingly as at midnight!

"By gad!" he muttered, half aloud. Everything was as clear as day to him now. Bolting into his own room, he closed the door and stood stock-still for many minutes, trying to picture the scene in the cottage.

No stretch of the imagination was required to establish the facts. Sprouse had come to him during the night with Prince Ugo's blood on the hands that bore the treasure. He had surprised and overpowered the pseudo Mr. Hasselwein, and had actually tortured him into revealing the hiding place of the jewels. The significance of the scattered stove pipe was not lost on Barnes; it had not been knocked down in a struggle between the two men. Prince Ugo was not, and never had been, in a position to defend himself against his wily assailant. Barnes's blood ran cold as he went over in his mind the pitiless method employed by Sprouse in subduing his royal victim. And the coolness, the unspeakable bravado of the man in coming direct to him with the booty! His amazingly clever subterfuge in allowing Barnes to think that room No. 30 was the scene of his operations, thereby forcing him to remain inactive through fear of consequences to himself and the Countess if he undertook to investigate!

He found a letter in his box when he went downstairs, after stuffing the tin box deep into his pack,—a risky thing to do he realised, but no longer perilous in the light of developments. It was no longer probable that his effects would be subjected to inspection by the police. He walked over to a window to read the letter. Before he slit the envelope he knew that Sprouse was the writer. The message was brief.

"After due consideration, I feel that it would be a mistake for you to abandon your present duties at this time. It might be misunderstood. Stick to the company until something better turns up. With this thought in view I withdraw the two days' limit mentioned recently to you, and extend the time to one week. Yours very truly, J. H. Wilson."

"Gad, the fellow thinks of everything," said Barnes to himself. "He is positively uncanny."

He read between the lines, and saw there a distinct warning. It had not occurred to him that his plan to leave for New York that day with Miss Cameron might be attended by disastrous results.

On reflection, he found the prospect far from disagreeable. A week or so with the Rushcroft company was rather attractive under the circumstances. The idea appealed to him.

But the jewels? What of them? He could not go gallivanting about the country with a half million dollars' worth of precious stones in his possession. A king's ransom strapped on his back! He would not be able to sleep a wink. Indeed, he could see himself wasting away to a mere shadow through worry and dread. Precious stones? They would develop into millstones, he thought, with an inward groan.

He questioned the advisability of informing Miss Cameron that the crown jewels were in his possession. Her anxiety would be far greater than his own. There was nothing to be gained by telling her in any case; so he decided to bear the burden alone.

The play was not to open in Crowndale until Tuesday night, three full days off. He revelled in the thought of sitting "out front" in the empty little theatre, watching the rehearsals. At such times he was confident that his thoughts would not be solely of the jewels. He would at least have surcease during these periods of forgetfulness.

He spent the early part of the forenoon in wandering nervously about the hotel,—upstairs and down. The jewels were locked in his pack upstairs. He went up to his room half a dozen times and almost instantly walked down again, after satisfying himself that the pack had not been rifled.

Exasperation filled his soul. Ten o'clock came and still no sign of the lazy actors. Rehearsal at eleven, and not one of them out of bed.

Peter came to the hotel soon after ten. He had forgotten Peter and his decision to send him down to the Berkshires that day, and was sharply reminded of the necessity for doing so by the appearance of the man who had registered just before midnight. This individual strolled casually into the lobby a few seconds behind Peter.

He acted at once and with decision. The stranger took a seat in the window not far away. Barnes, in a brisk and business-like tone, informed Peter that he was to leave on the one o'clock train for the south, and to go direct to his sister's place near Stockbridge. He was to leave the automobile in Crowndale for the present.

"Here is the money for your railroad fare," he announced in conclusion. "I have telegraphed Mrs. Courtney's man that you will arrive this evening. He will start you in on your duties to-morrow. I understand they are short-handed on the place. And now let me impress upon you, Peter, the importance of holding yourself ready to report when needed. You know what I mean. Remember, I have guaranteed that you will appear."

The stranger drank in every word that passed between the two men. When the one o'clock train pulled out of Crowndale, it carried Peter Ames in one of the forward coaches, and a late guest of the Grand Palace Hotel in the next car behind. Barnes took the time to assure himself of these facts, and smiled faintly as he drove away from the railway station after the departure of the train. Miss Cameron, her veil lowered, sat beside him in the "hack."

For the next three days and nights rehearsals were in full swing, with scarcely a moment's let-up. The Rushcroft company was increased by the arrival of three new members and several pieces of baggage. The dingy barn of a theatre was the scene of ceaseless industry, both peaceful and otherwise. The actors quarrelled and fumed and all but fought over their grievances. Only the presence of the "backer" and the extremely pretty and cultured "friend of the family" in "front" prevented sanguinary encounters among the male contenders for the centre of the stage. The usually placid Mr. Dillingford was transformed into a snarling beast every time one of his "lines" was cut out by the relentless Rushcroft, and there were times when Mr. Bacon loudly accused his fiancee of "crabbing" his part. Everybody called everybody else a "hog," and God was asked a hundred times a day to bear witness to as many atrocities.

Each day the bewildered, distressed young woman who sat with Barnes in the dim "parquet," whispered in his ear:

"Can they ever be friendly again?"

And every night at supper she rejoiced to find them all on the best of terms, calling each other "dearie," and "old chap," and "honey," and declaring that no such company had ever been gotten together in the history of the stage! Such words as "slob," "fat-head," "boob" or "you poor nut" never found their way outside the sacred precincts of the theatre.

Mr. Rushcroft magnanimously offered to coach "Miss Jones" in the part he was going to write in for her just as soon as he could get around to it.

"No use writing a part for her, Mr. Barnes, until I get through beating the parts we already have into the heads of these poor fools up here. I've got trouble enough on my hands."

And so the time crept by, up to the night of the performance. Miss Cameron remained in ignorance of the close proximity of the jewels, and the police of Crowndale remained in even denser ignorance as to the whereabouts of the man who robbed Mr. Hasselwein of all his spare cash and an excellent gold watch.

Hasselwein's story was brief but dramatic. He was recovering rapidly from his experience and the local newspaper, on Tuesday, announced that he would be strong enough to accompany his wife when she left the "city" toward the end of the week. (Considerable space was employed by the reporter in "writing up" the wonderful devotion of Mrs. Hasselwein, who, despite the fact that she was quite an invalid, conducted herself with rare fortitude, seldom leaving her husband's room in the hospital.)

According to the injured man, his assailant was a huge, powerful individual, wearing a mask and armed to the teeth. He came in through an open window and attacked him while he was asleep in bed. Notwithstanding the stunning blow he received while prostrate, Mr. Hasselwein struggled to his feet and

engaged the miscreant—(while the word was used at least twenty times in the newspaper account, I promise to use it but once)—in a desperate conflict. Loss of blood weakened him and he soon fell exhausted upon the bed. To make the story even shorter than Prince Ugo made it, not a word was said about the jewels, and that, after all, is the only feature of the case in which we are interested.

Barnes smiled grimly over Ugo's failure to mention the jewels, and the misleading description of the thief. He was thankful, however, and relieved to learn that the one man who might recognise Miss Cameron was not likely to leave the hospital short of a week's time.

No time was lost by the Countess in getting word to her compatriots in New York. Barnes posted a dozen letters for her; each contained the tidings of her safety and the assurance that she would soon follow in person.

Those three days and nights were full of joy and enchantment for Barnes. True, he did not sleep very well,—indeed, scarcely at all,—but it certainly was not a hardship to lie awake and think of her throughout the whole of each blessed night. He recalled and secretly dilated upon every sign of decreasing reserve on her part. He shamed himself more than once for deploring the fact that her ankle was mending with uncommon rapidity, and that in a few days she would be quite able to walk without support. And he actually debased himself by wishing that the Rushcroft company might find it imperative to go on rehearsing for weeks in that dim, enchanted temple.

It was not a "barn of a place" to him. It was paradise. He sat for hours in one of the most uncomfortable seats he had ever known, devouring with hungry eyes the shadowy, interested face so close to his own,—and never tired.

And then came a time at last when conversation became difficult between them; when there were long silences fraught with sweet peril, exceeding shyness, and a singular form of deafness that defied even the roars of the players and yet permitted them to hear, with amazing clearness, the faintest of heart-beats.

On the afternoon of the dress rehearsal, he led her, after an hour of almost insupportable repression, to the rear of the auditorium, in the region made gloomy by the shelving gallery overhead. Dropping into the seat beside her, he blurted out, almost in anguish:

"I can't stand it any longer. I cannot be near you without—why, I—I—well, it is more than I can struggle against, that's all. You've either got to send me away altogether or—or—let me love you without restraint. I tell you, I can't go on as I am now. I must speak, I must tell you all that has been in my heart for days. I love you—I love you! You know I love you, don't you? You know I worship you. Don't be frightened. I just had to tell you to-day. I could not have held it back another hour. I should have gone mad if I had tried to keep it up any longer." He waited breathlessly for her to speak. She sat silent and rigid, looking straight before her. "Is it hopeless?" he went on at last, huskily. "Must I ask your forgiveness for my presumption and—and go away from you?"

She turned to him and laid her hand upon his arm.

"Am I not like other women? Have you forgotten that you once said that I was not different? Why should I forgive you for loving me? Doesn't every woman want to be loved? No, no, my friend! Wait! A moment ago I was so weak and trembly that I thought I—Oh, I was afraid for myself. Now I am quite calm and sensible. See how well I have myself in hand? I do not tremble, I am strong. We may now discuss ourselves calmly, sensibly. A moment ago—Ah, then it was different! I was being drawn into—Oh! What are you doing?"

"I too am strong," he whispered. "I am sure of my ground now, and I am not afraid."

He had clasped the hand that rested on his sleeve and, as he pressed it to his heart, his other arm stole over her shoulders and drew her close to his triumphant body. For an instant she resisted, and then relaxed into complete submission. Her head sank upon his shoulder.

"Oh!" she sighed, and there was wonder, joy—even perplexity, in the tremulous sign of capitulation. "Oh," came softly from her parted lips again at the end of the first long, passionate kiss.

CHAPTER XXI — THE END IN SIGHT

Barnes, soaring beyond all previous heights of exaltation, ranged dizzily between "front" and "back" at the Grand Opera House that evening. He was supposed to remain "out front" until the curtain went up on the second act. But the presence of the Countess in Miss Thackeray's barren, sordid little dressing-room rendered it exceedingly difficult for him to remain in any fixed spot for more than five minutes at a stretch. He was in the "wings" with her, whispering in her delighted ear; in the dressing-room, listening to her soft words of encouragement to the excited leading-lady; on the narrow stairs leading up to the stage, assisting her to mount them,—and not in the least minding the narrowness; out in front for a jiffy, and then back again; and all the time he was dreading the moment when he would awake and find it all a dream.

There was an annoying fly in the ointment, however. Her languorous surrender to love, her physical

confession of defeat at the hands of that inexorable power, her sweet submission to the conquering arms of the besieger, left nothing to be desired; and yet there was something that stood between him and utter happiness: her resolute refusal to bind herself to any promise for the future.

"I love you," she had said simply. "I want more than anything else in all the world to be your wife. But I cannot promise now. I must have time to think, time to—"

"Why should you require more time than I?" he persisted. "Have we not shown that there is nothing left for either of us but to make the other happy? What is time to us? Why make wanton waste of it?"

"I know that I cannot find happiness except with you," she replied. "No matter what happens to me, I shall always love you, I shall never forget the joy of THIS. But—" She shook her head sadly.

"Would you go back to your people and marry—" he swallowed hard and went on—"marry some one you could never love, not even respect, with the memory of—"

"Stop! I shall never marry a man I do not love. Oh, please be patient, be good to me. Give me a little time. Can you not see that you are asking me to alter destiny, to upset the teachings and traditions of ages, and all in one little minute of weakness?"

"We cannot alter destiny," he said stubbornly. "We may upset tradition, but what does that amount to? We have but one life to live. I think our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren will be quite as well pleased with their ancestors as their royal contemporaries will be with theirs a hundred years from now."

"I cannot promise now," she said gently, and kissed him.

The first performance of "The Duke's Revenge" was incredibly bad. The little that Barnes saw of it, filled him with dismay. Never had he witnessed anything so hopeless as the play, unless it was the actors themselves. But more incredible than anything else in connection with the performance was the very palpable enjoyment of the audience. He could hardly believe his ears. The ranting, the shouting, the howling of the actors sent shivers to the innermost recesses of his being. Then suddenly he remembered that he was in the heart of the "barn-stormer's" domain. The audience revelled in "The Duke's Revenge" because they had never seen anything better!

Between the second and third acts Tommy Gray rushed back with the box-office statement. The gross was $359. The instant that fact became known to Mr. Rushcroft he informed Barnes that they had a "knockout," a gold mine, and that never in all his career had he known a season to start off so auspiciously as this one.

"It's good for forty weeks solid," he exclaimed. Both Barnes and the wide-eyed Countess became infused with the spirit of jubilation that filled the souls of these time-worn, hand-to-mouth stragglers. They rejoiced with them in their sudden elevation to happiness, and overlooked the vain-glorious claims of each individual in the matter of personal achievement. Even the bewildered Tilly bleated out her little cry for distinction.

"Did you hear them laugh at the way I got off my speech?" she cried excitedly.

"I certainly did," said Mr. Bacon amiably. "By gad, I laughed at it myself."

"Parquet $217.50, dress circle $105, gallery $36.50," announced Tommy Gray, as he donned his wig and false beard for the third act. "Sixty-forty gives us $215.40 on the night. Thank God, we won't have to worry about the sheriff this week."

In Miss Thackeray's dressing-room that level-headed young woman broke down and wept like a child.

"Oh, Lord," she stuttered, "is it possible that we're going to stay above water at last? I thought we had gone down for the last time, and here we are bobbing up again as full of ginger as if we'd never hit the bottom."

The Countess kissed her and told her that she was the rarest girl she had ever known, the pluckiest and the best.

"If I had your good looks, Miss Cameron," said Mercedes, "added to my natural ability, I'd make Julia Marlowe look like an old-fashioned one-ring circus. Send Mr. Bacon to me, Mr. Barnes. I want to congratulate him."

"He gave a fine performance," said Barnes promptly.

"I don't want to congratulate him on his acting," said she, smiling through her tears. "He's going to be married to-morrow. And I am going to have Miss Cameron for my bridesmaid," she added, throwing an arm about the astonished Countess. "Mr. Bacon will want Dilly for his best man, but he ought to think more of the general effect than that. Dilly only comes to his shoulder." She measured the stalwart figure of Thomas Barnes with an appraising eye. "What do you say, Mr. Barnes?"

"I'll do it with the greatest pleasure," he declared.

The next afternoon in the town of Bittler the Countess Mara-Dafanda, daughter of royalty, and Thomas Kingsbury Barnes "stood up" with the happy couple during a lull in the hastily called rehearsal on the stage of Fisher's Imperial Theatre, and Lyndon Rushcroft gave the bride away. There was $107 in the house that night, but no one was down-hearted.

"You could do worse, dear heart, than to marry one of us care-free Americans," whispered Barnes to the girl who clung to his arm so tightly as they entered the wings in the wake of the bride and groom.

And she said something in reply that brought a flush of mortification to his cheek.

"Oh, it would be wonderful to marry a man who will never have to go to war. A brave man who will not have to be a soldier."

The unintentional reflection on the fighting integrity of his country struck a raw spot in Barnes's pride. He knew what all Europe was saying about the pussy-willow attitude of the United States, and he squirmed inwardly despite the tribute she tendered him as an individual. He was not a "peace at any price" citizen.

He gave the wedding breakfast at one o'clock that night.

Three days later he and "Miss Jones" said farewell to the strollers and boarded a day train for New York City. They left the company in a condition of prosperity. The show was averaging two hundred dollars nightly, and Mr. Rushcroft was already booking return engagements for the early fall. He was looking forward to a tour of Europe at the close of the war.

"My boy," he said to Barnes on the platform of the railway station, "I trust you will forgive me for not finding a place in our remarkably well-balanced cast for your friend. I have been thinking a great deal about her in the past few days, and it has occurred to me that she might find it greatly to her advantage to accept a brief New York engagement before tackling the real proposition. It won't take her long to find out whether she really likes it, and whether she thinks it worth while to go on with it. Let me give you one bit of advice, my dear Miss Jones. This is very important. The name of Jones will not get you anywhere. It is a nice old family, fireside name, but it lacks romance. Chuck it. Start your new life with another name, my dear. God bless you! Good luck and—good-bye till we meet on the Rialto."

"I wonder how he could possibly have known," she mused aloud, the pink still in her cheeks as the train pulled out.

"You darling," cried Barnes, "he doesn't know. But taking it by and large, it was excellent advice. The brief New York engagement meets with my approval, and so does the change of name. I am in a position to supply you with both."

"Do you regard Barnes as an especially attractive name?" she inquired, dimpling.

"It has the virtue of beginning with B, entitling it to a place well toward the top of alphabetical lists. A very handy name for patronesses at charity bazaars, and so forth. People never look below B unless to make sure that their own names haven't been omitted. You ought to take that into consideration. If you can't be an A, take the next best thing offered. Be a B."

"You almost persuade me," she smiled.

His sister met them at the Grand Central Terminal.

"It's now a quarter to five," said Barnes, after the greeting and presentation. "Drop me at the Fifth Avenue Bank, Edith. I want to leave something in my safety box downstairs. Sha'n't be more than five minutes."

He got down from the automobile at 44th Street and shot across the sidewalk into the bank, casting quick, apprehensive glances through the five o'clock crowd on the avenue as he sprinted. In his hand he lugged the heavy, weatherbeaten pack. His sister and the Countess stared after him in amazement.

Presently he emerged from the bank, still carrying the bag. He was beaming. A certain worried, haggard expression had vanished from his face and for the first time in eight hours he treated his travelling wardrobe with scorn and indifference. He tossed it carelessly into the seat beside the chauffeur, and, springing nimbly into the car, sank back with a prodigious sigh of relief.

"Thank God, they're off my mind at last," he cried. "That is the first good, long breath I've had in a week. No, not now. It's a long story and I can't tell it in Fifth Avenue. It would be extremely annoying to have both of you die of heart failure with all these people looking on."

He felt her hand on his arm, and knew that she was looking at him with wide, incredulous eyes, but he faced straight ahead. After a moment or two, she snuggled back in the seat and cried out tremulously:

"Oh, how wonderful—how wonderful!"

Mrs. Courtney, in utter ignorance, inquired politely:

"Isn't it? Have you never been in New York before, Miss Cameron? Strangers always find it quite wonderful at the—"

"How are all the kiddies, Edith, and old Bill?" broke in her brother hastily.

He was terribly afraid that the girl beside him was preparing to shed tears of joy and relief. He could feel her searching in her jacket pocket for a handkerchief.

Mrs. Courtney was not only curious but apprehensive. She hadn't the faintest idea who Miss Cameron was, nor where her brother had picked her up. But she saw at a glance that she was lovely, and her soul was filled with strange misgivings. She was like all sisters who have pet bachelor brothers. She hoped that poor Tom hadn't gone and made a fool of himself. The few minutes' conversation she had had with the stranger only served to increase her alarm. Miss Cameron's voice and smile—and her eyes!—were positively alluring.

She had had a night letter from Tom that morning in which he said that he was bringing a young lady friend down from the north,—and would she meet them at the station and put her up for a couple of days? That was all she knew of the dazzling stranger up to the moment she saw her. Immediately after that, she knew, by intuition, a great deal more about her than Tom could have told in volumes of correspondence. She knew, also, that Tom was lost forever!

"Now, tell me," said the Countess, the instant they entered the Courtney apartment. She gripped both of his arms with her firm little hands, and looked straight into his eyes, eagerly, hopefully. She had forgotten Mrs. Courtney's presence, she had not taken the time to remove her hat or jacket.

"Let's all sit down," said he. "My knees are unaccountably weak. Come along, Ede. Listen to the romance of my life."

And when the story was finished, the Countess took his hand in hers and held it to her cool cheek. The tears were still drowning her eyes.

"Oh, you poor dear! Was that why you grew so haggard, and pale, and hollow-eyed?"

"Partly," said he, with great significance.

"And you had them in your pack all the time? You—!"

"I had Sprouse's most solemn word not to touch them for a week. He is the only man I feared. He is the only one who could have—"

"May I use your telephone, Mrs. Courtney?" cried she, suddenly. She sprang to her feet, quivering with excitement. "Pray forgive me for being so ill-mannered, but I—I must call up one or two people at once. They are my friends. I have written them, but—but I know they are waiting to see me in the flesh or to hear my voice. You will understand, I am sure."

Barnes was pacing the floor nervously when his sister returned after conducting her new guest to the room prepared for her. The Countess was at the telephone before the door closed behind her hostess.

"I wish you had been a little more explicit in your telegram, Tom," she said peevishly. "If I had known who she is I wouldn't have put her in that room. Now, I shall have to move Aunt Kate back into it to-morrow, and give Miss Cameron the big one at the end of the hall." Which goes to prove that Tom's sister was a bit of a snob in her way. "Stop walking like that, and come here." She faced him accusingly. "Have you told me ALL there is to tell, sir?"

"Can't you see for yourself, Ede, that I'm in love with her? Desperately, horribly, madly in love with her. Don't giggle like that! I couldn't have told you while she was present, could I?"

"That isn't what I want to know. Is she in love with YOU? That's what I'm after."

"Yes," said he, but frowned anxiously.

"She is perfectly adorable," said she, and was at once aware of a guilty, nagging impression that she would not have said it to him half an hour earlier for anything in the world.

The Countess was strangely white and subdued when she rejoined them later on. She had removed her hat. The other woman saw nothing but the wealth of sun-kissed hair that rippled. Barnes went forward to meet her, filled with a sudden apprehension.

"What is it? You are pale and—what have you heard?"

She stopped and looked searchingly into his eyes. A warm flush rose to her cheeks; her own eyes grew soft and tender and wistful.

"They all believe that the war will last two or three years longer," she said huskily. "I cannot go back to my own country till it is all over. They implore me to remain here with them until—until my fortunes are mended." She turned to Mrs. Courtney and went on without the slightest trace of indecision or embarrassment in her manner. "You see, Mrs. Courtney, I am very, very poor. They have taken everything. I—I fear I shall have to accept the kind, the generous proffer of a—" her voice shook slightly—"of a home with my friends until the Huns are driven out."

Barnes's silence was more eloquent than words. Her eyes fell. Mrs. Courtney's words of sympathy passed unheard; her bitter excoriation of the Teutons and Turks was but dimly registered on the inattentive mind of the victim of their ruthless greed; not until she expressed the hope that Miss Cameron would condescend to accept the hospitality of her home until plans for the future were definitely fixed was there a sign that the object of her concern had given a thought to what she was saying.

"You are so very kind," stammered the Countess. "But I cannot think of imposing upon—"

"Leave it to me, Ede," said Barnes gently, and, laying his hand upon his sister's arm, he led her from the room. Then he came swiftly back to the outstretched arms of the exile.

"A very brief New York engagement," he whispered in her ear, he knew not how long afterward. Her head was pressed against his shoulder, her eyes were closed, her lips parted in the ecstasy of passion.

"Yes," she breathed, so faintly that he barely heard the strongest word ever put into the language of man.

Half-an-hour later he was speeding down the avenue in a taxi. His blood was singing, his heart was bursting with joy,—his head was light, for the feel of her was still in his arms, the voice of her in his enraptured ears.

He was hurrying homeward to the "diggings" he was soon to desert forever. Poor, wretched, little old "diggings"! As he passed the Plaza, the St. Regis and the Gotham, he favoured the great hostelries with contemplative, calculating eyes; he even looked with speculative envy upon the mansions of the Astors, the Vanderbilts and the Huntingtons. She was born and reared in a house of vast dimensions. Even the Vanderbilt places were puny in comparison. His reflections carried him back to the Plaza. There, at least, was something

comparable in size. At any rate, it would do until he could look around for something larger! He laughed at his conceit,—and pinched himself again.

He was to spend the night at his sister's apartment. When he issued forth from his "diggings" at half-past seven, he was attired in evening clothes, and there was not a woman in all New York, young or old, who would have denied him a second glance.

Later on in the evening three of the Countess's friends arrived at the Courtney home to pay their respects to their fair compatriot, and to discuss the crown jewels. They came and brought with them the consoling information that arrangements were practically completed for the delivery of the jewels into the custody of the French Embassy at Washington, through whose intervention they were to be allowed to leave the United States without the formalities usually observed in cases of suspected smuggling. Upon the arrival in America of trusted messengers from Paris, headed by no less a personage than the ambassador himself, the imperial treasure was to pass into hands that would carry it safely to France. Prince Sebastian, still in Halifax, had been apprised by telegraph of the recovery of the jewels, and was expected to sail for England by the earliest steamer.

And while the visitors at the Courtney house were lifting their glasses to toast the prince they loved, and, in turn, the beautiful cousin who had braved so much and fared so luckily, and the tall wayfarer who had come into her life, a small man was stooping over a rifled knapsack in a room far down-town, glumly regarding the result of an unusually hazardous undertaking, even for one who could perform, such miracles as he. Scratching his chin, he grinned,—for he was the kind who bears disappointment with a grin,—and sat himself down at the big library table in the centre of the room. Carefully selecting a pen-point, he wrote:

"It will be quite obvious to you that I called unexpectedly to-night. The week was up, you see. I take the liberty of leaving under the paperweight at my elbow a two dollar bill. It ought to be ample payment for the damage done to your faithful traveling companion. Have the necessary stitches taken in the gash, and you will find the kit as good as new. I was more or less certain not to find what I was after, but as I have done no irreparable injury, I am sure you will forgive my love of adventure and excitement. It was really quite difficult to get from the fire escape to your window, but it was a delightful experience. Try crawling along that ten inch ledge yourself some day, and see if it isn't productive of a pleasant thrill. I shall not forget your promise to return good for evil some day. God knows I hope I may never be in a position to test your sincerity. We may meet again, and I hope under agreeable circumstances. Kindly pay my deepest respects to the Countess Ted, and believe me to be,

"Yours VERY respectfully,
"Sprouse.

"P.S.—I saw O'Dowd to-day. He left a message for you and the Countess. Tell them, said he, that I ask God's blessing for them forever. He is off to-morrow for Brazil. He was very much relieved when he heard that I did not get the jewels the first time I went after them, and immensely entertained by my jolly description of how I went after them the second. By the way, you will be interested to learn that he has cut loose from the crowd he was trailing with. Mostly nuts, he says. Dynamiting munition plants in Canada was a grand project, says he, and it would have come to something if the damned women had only left the damned men alone. The expletives are O'Dowd's."

Ten hours before Barnes found this illuminating message on his library table, he stood at the window of a lofty Park Avenue apartment building, his arm about the slender, yielding figure of the only other occupant of the room. Pointing out over the black house-tops, he directed her attention to the myriad lights in the upper floors of a great hostelry to the south and west, and said,

"THAT is where you are going to live, darling."

THE END

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