The Flyers

George Barr McCutcheon

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CHAPTER I. THE FARAWAY CLUB

A cold, thick drizzle, blown by a biting wind that sent chills to the marrow, marred the early spring night, and kept indoors the few hardy members who had haunted the clubhouse since the season's opening a week before. Not more than a dozen loyal devotees to the sports of the open air lounged about the big clubhouse. Three or four rangy young women in sweaters and jackets strove bravely to dispel the gloom of the night as it settled down upon the growling masculine majority. The club steward hovered near, anxiously directing the movements of a silent and as yet undrilled corps of servants who flitted from group to group with decanters and checks, taking and mistaking orders with the usual abandon. A huge fireplace threw out heat sufficient to make the big lounging room comfortable. Now and then a spiteful gust of wind swept the rain against the western window−panes with a menace that set the teeth on edge.

"Rotten night," reflected the big man who monopolised the roomiest chair and the best position in front of the blazing logs. "Going to town to−night?" The question was general: there were half a dozen answers. Every one was going in by the last express. All of them had dined well: they had been hungry and the club was a wealthy one; even the most exclusive of appetites could be entertained at the Faraway Country Club. The last 'bus was to leave the clubhouse at ten minutes past ten, and it was then half−past eight. Ten minutes' drive from the clubhouse on the edge of the little town to the railway station—then thirty minutes to the heart of the big city in which the members lived and died at great risk to themselves.

Each succeeding spring saw the formal opening of the Faraway Country Club. The boards were pulled down from the windows and the door hinges were oiled properly after a winter of discontent. May saw the reopening, but it was not until June that crowds began to fill the house and grounds. Only the more restless and hardy had the temerity to test the pleasures of the raw spring days and nights. The M.F.H. was a loyal, eager chap; he knew what was required of him in his official capacity. With the first symptoms of softening soil he led his followers through field and wood, promising the "real hunt" inside of a month. Following a pack of overfed hounds was what every one at Faraway Club called a "real hunt."

The night so meagrely described at the beginning of this tale followed hard upon a grey, chill day. A few golfers had spent the afternoon upon the course, inanely cursing the temporary tees and greens. A couple of polo enthusiasts tried out their ponies, and several men and women took their hunters over the course, that fairly bristled with spectres of last year's anise−seed. Now they were comfortably ensconced in the clubhouse, berating the unfortunate elements, and waiting for the last express with a persistency which allowed three or four earlier trains to come and go unnoticed. The cheerful highball was coming into its own. A stern winter of bridge had not killed the ardour of certain worshippers; continuous criticism of play arose from the table in the corner where two men and two women were engaged with the cards.

The perennial bore, who noses into everything in order to sniff his own wit, sauntered amiably from group to group, pouring out jests as murky as the night itself. He saw none of the scowls nor heard the toe−taps; he went blithely along his bridgeless way.

"I say, Brown, I saw your wife on the street yesterday, but she didn't see me," he observed to the blase−looking man in corduroys.

"Ya−as," returned the other, calmly staring past him; "so she told me last night." The bore and his blissful smile passed on to the next group. There, two or three women were chatting with as many men, yawning and puffing at their cigarettes, bored by the risque stories the men were telling, but smiling as though they had not already heard them from other men. Occasional remarks, dropped softly into the ears of the women, may have brought faint blushes to their cheeks, but the firelight was a fickle consort to such changes. The sly turn of a sentence gave many a double meaning; the subtle glance of the eye intended no harm. Dobson's new toast to "fair women" earned a roar of laughter, but afterwards Dobson was called to account by a husband who realised. A man over in the corner was thumping aimlessly on the piano; a golf fanatic was vigorously contending that he had driven 243 yards against the wind; a tennis enthusiast was lamenting the fact that the courts were too soft to be used; there was a certain odour of rain−soaked clothes in the huge room, ascendant even above the smell of cigarettes. Altogether, it was a night that owed much to the weather.

Mrs. Scudaway, dashing horsewoman and exponent of the free rein, was repeating the latest story concerning an intimate friend of every one present—and, consequently, absent.

"She's just sailed for Europe, and that good−looking actor friend of the family happened to go on the same steamer," she was saying with a joyous smile.

"Accidents will happen," remarked some one, benevolently.

"Where's her husband? I haven't seen him with her in months," came from one of the men.

"Oh, they have two children, you know," explained Mrs. Scudaway.

"Delicate, I hear," said Miss Ratliff.

"Naturally; he nurses them," said Mrs. Scudaway, blowing smoke half− way across the room through her delicate nostrils.

"I say, Mrs. Scudaway," cried the rapt bore, "don't you ever do anything but inhale?"

"Yes, I exhale occasionally. No, thanks," as he held forth an ash tray. Then she flecked the ashes into the fireplace, ten feet away.

"Good Lord, it's a rotten night!" repeated the big man, returning dismally from a visit to the window. "There's a beastly fog mixed in with the rain."

"Better blow the fog horn for Henderson," said Ratliff, with a jerk of his thumb. "He's half seas over already and shipping a lot of water." Henderson, the convivial member, was on his third siphon.

"I don't care a whoop what McAlpine says," roared an irascible gentleman on the opposite side of the fireplace; "a man ought to use a midiron when he gets that kind of a lie. Nobody but an ass would take a brassie. He's—"

"Just listen to that blethering idiot," said young Rolfe to the lady beside him. "He ought to be choked."

"I like the way you speak of my husband," she responded gaily.

"Oh, I forgot. He is your husband, isn't he?" Then, after a moment's easy contemplation of the pretty young woman and a scornful glance at the golfer: "Lucky, but a very poor watchdog."

"He barks beautifully," resented the young wife, with a loyal grimace.

"That's why you're not afraid of him," he said quickly.

"Don't you think he'd bite?"

"They never do."

"Well, you just try him, that's all," remarked the young wife coldly, rising and moving away, a touch of red in her cheeks.

"I will," he sang out genially, as he crossed his legs and stretched his feet out to the fire. She looked back with a mirthless smile on her lips.

The man at the piano struck up the insidious "La Mattchiche," suggestive of the Bal Tabarin and other Fourteenth of July devotions.

"Don't play that, Barkley," complained the big man, as every one began beating time to the fascinating air. "I'm trying to forget Paris."

"Can you ever forget that night in Maxim's—" began Mrs. Scudaway.

"I recall the next day more vividly," he interrupted.

"Changing the subject," inserted the amiable bore, his moon−face beaming, "I see that the Thursdales have opened their place across the ravine. Isn't it rather early for them to leave town for the summer?"

"They come out every year about this time."

"Lot of people will be opening their places next week. I saw Mrs. Gorgus to−day. She says they're putting her house in shape—"

"Impossible!" cried Mrs. Tanner. "It hasn't any shape."

"The only thing that could put the Gorgus house in shape is an earthquake. Who was the architect of that abortion?" demanded Rolfe.

"Denison. He's an impressionist."

"The Thursdales have a new French car. Have you seen it? Eleanor ran over here in it this afternoon with her Englishman. Showing off both of her novelties at once, d'ye see?" said Carter, the tennis player.

"I understand the thing's a go—sure go," said the big man. "In the fall some time. He's a rather decent chap, too."

"And, what's better, if his brother and his cousin should happen to die, he'll be a duke."

"If they're as healthy as he seems to be, there'll be nothing doing for him."

A good−looking young fellow, who had been staring at the fire all evening, moved uneasily in his lounging chair. Several quick glances were sent to where he sat moodily apart from the others, and then surreptitious winks and nudges were exchanged.

"Joe is as crazy in love with her as ever, poor devil," whispered Rolfe. Gradually the group of gossips came closer together over the table top; the conversation was continued in more subdued tones.

"They're discussing me, damn 'em," said the moody young man to himself. "I suppose they're pitying me. Damn cats! But I'll show 'em a thing or two they're not looking for before long." He looked at his watch for the twentieth time in an hour and scowled at the drenched window−panes across the way. For some reason this exceedingly nice− looking young man was in a state of extreme nervousness, a condition which, luckily for him, he was able to keep within himself.

And this was what Mrs. Scudaway was saying in an urgent undertone to the half dozen who leaned across the big table: "Joe is a mighty good sort, and I'm sorry for him. He's been good enough for Eleanor Thursdale ever since she came out two years ago, and I don't see why he should cease being good enough for her now. This Englishman hasn't any more money and he isn't half as good looking. He's English, that's all. Her mother's crazy to have a look in at some of those London functions she's read so much about. She's an awful ass, don't you think, Tommy?"

"Ya−as," said the blase man; "such as she is."

"Mighty hard lines, this thing of being an ordinary American," lamented the placid bore.

"One might just as well be called Abraham or Isaac," reflected Carter.

"No romantic young lover would live through the first chapter with either of those names," said pretty Miss Ratliff, who read every novel that came out.

"Dauntless has been terribly out of humour for the past week or two," said Carter. "He's horribly cut up over the affair,—grouchy as blazes, and flocks by himself all the time. That's not like him, either."

"He's the sweetest boy I know," commented little Mrs. Tanner, whose husband had barked about the midiron.

"I've heard he's the only man you ever really loved," murmured Rolfe, close to her ear.

"Nonsense! I've known him all my life," she replied, with quick and suspicious resentment.

"Trite phrase," scoffed he. "I'll wager my head that every woman living has uttered that same worn expression a hundred times. 'Known him all my life!' Ha, ha! It's a stock apology, my dear. Women, good and bad, trade under that flag. Please, to oblige me, get a fresh excuse."

"The most ignorant duffer in the world could lay you a stymie if—" the loud−voiced golfer was complaining just at that instant. The man he was addressing was nodding his head politely and at the same time trying to hear what was being said at the round table.

"Joe Dauntless is good enough for anybody's daughter," vouchsafed the blase man in corduroys.

"He's a ripping good fellow," again said Mrs. Scudaway.

"Mrs. Thursdale's got an English governess for her kids, an English butler, an English bull terrier, and a new Cobden−Sanderson binding on that antique History of England she talks so much about," observed Carter.

"And she's beginning to wear her evening gowns on the street in the morning. Besides, her shoes lob over at the heels," remarked the rangy Mrs. Carter.

"Yes, she's getting to be thoroughly English. I've noticed a tendency to chirp like a bird when she talks, too."

"That governess is a mighty stunning girl, by the way," said Rolfe.

"She's been over here a year, you know," said Mrs. Scudaway, with no apparent relevancy.

"Have you heard when Eleanor's engagement is to be announced?" asked Miss Ratliff.

"I'm not supposed to tell, but I have it on the best authority that it will be announced next week, and the wedding will take place in November. I suppose they'll ask Joe Dauntless to be an usher," said Mrs. Carter.

"Hello! Joe's gone outside. He must have heard something we said," said Rolfe, setting his highball glass down with a thump.

"Oh, if he had only been educated at Cambridge instead of in Cambridge," mourned Mrs. Carter.

It was true that the tall, good−looking Mr. Dauntless had left the room, but not because he had heard the comments of his friends. He was standing on the wind−swept verandah, peering through the mist toward a distant

splash of light across the ravine to the right of the club grounds. The fog and mist combined to run the many lights of the Thursdale windows into a single smear of colour a few shades brighter than the darkness from which it protruded. Dauntless's heart was inside that vague, impressionistic circle of colour, but his brain was very much in evidence on the distant outside. What were the workings of that eager brain will soon be revealed—to the reader, at least, if not to the occupants of the rain−bound clubhouse.

A word concerning Dauntless. He was the good−looking son of old banker Dauntless, who died immediately after his cashier brought ruin to the concern of which he was president. This blow fell when his son was in his senior year at Harvard. He took his degree, and then, instead of the promised trip around the world, he came home and went to work in the offices of a big brokerage firm. Everybody knew and liked him. He was a steady, earnest worker, and likewise a sportsman of the right temperament. Big, fashionable Faraway looked upon him as its most gallant member; no one cared to remember that he might have been very rich; every one loved him because he had been rich and was worthy in spite of that. It was common knowledge that he was desperately in love with pretty Eleanor Thursdale, daughter of the eminently fashionable and snobbishly aristocratic widow Thursdale, mistress of many millions and leader of select hundreds. Moreover, it was now pretty well known that Mrs. Thursdale had utterly lost sight of Dauntless in surveying the field of desirable husbands for Eleanor. She could see nothing but Englishmen, behind whom lurked the historic London drawing−rooms and British estates. That is how and why young Windomshire, a most delightful Londoner, with prospects and a peerage behind him, came to be a guest in her city house, following close upon a long sojourn in the Bermudas. HE had been chosen; the battle was over, so far as Eleanor's hand was concerned. What matter if Dauntless had her heart?

The object of this indifference and scorn gazed long and hard at the blob of light across the ravine. His heart was beating fast, and his body tingled with a strange excitement, which made itself manifest in a mixture of impatient frowns and prophetic smiles.

"If it wasn't such a beastly night," he was muttering in one breath, and, "Still, it's just the sort of a night we want," in the next. He was looking at his watch in the light from the window when an automobile whizzed up the wet gravel drive and came to a stop in front of the club steps. As Dauntless re−entered the house from the verandah, a tall young man in a motor coat and goggles came in through the opposite door. They paused and looked steadily at each other, then nodded briefly. The crowd of loungers glanced at the two men with instant curiosity and then breathed easily. The man who was going to marry Miss Thursdale and the man who wanted to marry her were advancing to shake hands—a trifle awkwardly, perhaps, but more or less frankly.

"Rough weather for motoring," remarked Dauntless, nervously. Windomshire removed his cap and goggles.

"Beastly. I just ran over for something to warm the inside man. Won't you join me?" His voice was pleasant to the ear, his manner easy and appealing. He was not so good looking as Dauntless, true, but he had the air of a thoroughbred in his make−up—from head to foot.

"Sit down here," called Mrs. Scudaway readily, creating a general shift of chairs. The two men hesitated a moment, nervousness apparent in both, and then sat down quickly. The Englishman was next Mrs. Scudaway. "What were you doing out in the rain?" she asked after the order for drinks had been taken.

"Hurrying to get out of it," he said with evasive good humour, "and thinking how much nicer your fogs are than ours," he added quickly.

"Anybody come over with you?" asked the bore, agreeably.

"No, they're playing bridge over at Mrs. Thursdale's and that lets me out. Beastly headache, too. Got out for a breath of air." The silence that followed this observation seemed to call for further explanations. "Miss Thursdale retired soon after dinner, wretchedly under the weather. That rather left me adrift, don't you know. I'm not playing bridge this year."

"You're not? Why not, pray?"

"Chiefly because of last year. My Mercedes came on from New York yesterday and I got her out for a spin. Couldn't resist, don't you know. She's working beautifully."

"There's one thing about a Mercedes that I don't like—and you don't find it in a Panhard. I've got a Panhard and—" Dobson was saying with all the arrogance of a motor fiend, when Mrs. Scudaway ruthlessly and properly cut him off.

"We know all about your Panhard, Dobby. Don't bother. Is Eleanor really ill, Mr. Windomshire?"

"I had it from her own lips, Mrs. Scudaway."

"Oh, you know what I mean. Is it likely to be serious?"

"Really, I can't say. I offered to go and fetch the doctor in my car, but she assured me she'd be all right in the morning. What say, Mr. Dauntless?"

"I didn't speak, Mr. Windomshire."

"I thought you did." More than one at the table had heard Joe's involuntary chuckle.

"I say, Windomshire, what's the name of that pretty governess over at Thursdale's?" asked the busy bore. "Saw her this morning."

The Englishman looked down and flecked the ashes from his cigarette before answering.

"Miss Courtenay," he responded.

"She's a corking pretty girl." Windomshire went through the unnecessary act of flecking ashes again, but said nothing in reply. "Are there any more at home like her?" with a fine chuckle in behalf of his wit.

"She's of a very good family, I believe," said Windomshire, looking about helplessly. Mrs. Scudaway caught the look in his eyes and remembered that English gentlemen are not supposed to discuss women outside of their own set.

"It must be time for the 'bus," she said. "We're all going in by the 10.10, Mr. Windomshire."

"Can't I take some of you over to the station in my car?"

"The 'bus is dryer, I think, thank you." She led the way, and the other women followed her upstairs. "We'll be down in time," she called.

"I'll take some of you men over in Hardy's machine," volunteered Dauntless. "I've got it out here this week, while he's east."

"Ain't you going in, Joe?" demanded Rolfe.

"Not to−night. I'm staying overnight with my uncle in Cobberly Road."

"The 'bus is good enough for me. I haven't forgotten how you ran off the Peters Bridge last fall," said Carter.

"Hang it, man, he wasn't thinking about bridges that time," said the cheerful bore. "There was a girl with him. Elea—Ahem! I say, old man, what the devil time is it? Time for the confounded 'bus? Don't want to miss the train." He had caught the scowl of warning from Carter and, for a wonder, understood.

"By the way," said Windomshire, irrelevantly, "what was the disturbance over in O'Brien's Lane this morning? Anybody hurt? I was driving the car up Andrews' Hill when I saw the excitement. Couldn't make it out. Were all of the horses running away?"

"Running away!" roared the blase man, forgetting his pose for the first time. "Running away!" and he broke into a roar of laughter. "Why, that was the advance guard of the Faraway Country Club. Good Lord, did you see them coming in?"

"My word, they were coming in. But what was the rush? I came over to− night to see if any of the women had been hurt. I could have sworn the horses were absolutely unmanageable. They were tearing through bushes and taking fences they'd never seen before. Egad, I give you my word, one of the women took the fence at the south end of the golf course, and she didn't turn out for the bunker at No. 7, either. She took it like a bird, and straight across the course she flew on a dead line for the home green. What the deuce—"

"Sh! Windomshire, it will cost you your life if she hears you. That was Mrs. Scudaway. You don't know what happened, so I'll tell you. Half a dozen of the women went out with us for a run over the usual course. They are among our best and oldest hunters, too. Well, they were keeping right up with the men and having a splendid hunt, when all of a sudden a real, live fox dashed into view. By gad, sir, he started a panic. They'd never seen one in their lives, and they set up a howl that went clear to heaven. And they started for home—well, you saw 'em on the stretch. It was great! There never has been such riding in America. Mrs. Hooper lost her hat in the woods, and Mrs. Graves lost part of her habit coming through that break in the hedge over there. That skinny Miss Elperson, who never before has had nerve enough to jump her horse over the lawn hose, cleared the wall that runs along O'Brien's mill,—nobody's ever done it before,—and she came in hanging to the horse's mane and yelling like a wild−cat. Gad, it was two hours before we got 'em quiet and sent'em to town. They thought it was a tiger, I understand, although some of them held out for the lion and the hyena. Mrs. Scudaway was game enough to stay and enjoy the laugh."

"What became of the fox?" demanded the Englishman, his eyes glistening. At that moment the women came trooping down stairs; the 'bus bell was clanging sleepily.

"The fox? Oh—er—hanged if I know. I—er—"

"Were you riding?"

"Well—er—just a practice run, you know, old man. Er—I say, ladies, the 'bus waits!"

Two minutes later the 'bus rolled away in the fog and drizzle, leaving Dauntless and Windomshire alone on the steps.

"Good−night," said the Englishman, after an awkward silence.

"Good−night," was the response. Then, following a brief pause, both started toward their cars. The next minute they were chugging away, in the night and the lights in the clubhouse began to go out.

Two hours later a stealthy figure crept across the Thursdale lawn, lurking behind the rose beds and lilac bushes, finally worming its way to a dripping but secluded spot under the weather side of the house. It was past twelve o'clock, but there were still lights in the front part of the big summer−house. Quiet reigned there, however; the noise of merry−making came from the servants' quarters overlooking the ravine. A handful of gravel left an impatient hand and rattled against the second−story window above. Almost instantaneously the window was raised and a head came forth.

"Joe?" came a shrill whisper from above.

"What's the matter?" whispered the man below. "I've been waiting out there for two hours—well, half an hour, at least. Aren't you coming, dear?"

"I can't get out," came in a whispered wail. "I've had my hat on for hours, but—"

"Why can't you get out? Good Lord, you just must!"

"They're playing bridge in the front part of the house and the servants are having a reunion in the back. Oh, I've been nearly crazy. What are we to do? Shall I jump?"

"Don't! Is there no way to sneak out?"

"I'm afraid of being seen. It would give everything away if any one saw me in this automobile rigging at this time of night—and in a rain like this, too. Oh, dear, dear, I know I shall go mad! You poor darling, aren't you wet to the skin? I really couldn't help it. I just couldn't be there at 11.30."

"We'll never make that train—never in the world," groaned Dauntless. "It's ten miles, and the road's horrible all the way. By Jove, Nell, you must get out some way. It's now or never. I've got everything fixed."

"Oh, Joe—listen! Do you think you can get a ladder out from under the verandah? The painters left them there this morning. Look out for paint, dear. Don't make a noise—not a sound. Mr. Windomshire's room is just over the porte cochere. For Heaven's sake, don't arouse him."

"Drop your bag down first, dear,—here! I'll catch it."

"I've got to put some things in it first. It isn't quite ready," she gasped, darting away from the window.

"'T was ever thus," he muttered in despair. Cautiously he made his way to the end of the verandah. A close listener might have heard him snarl "damn" more than once as he tugged away at the painters' ladders, which had been left there when the rain began. He was a good− natured chap, but barking his knuckles, bumping his head, and banging his shins, added to the misfortunes that had gone before, were enough to demoralise a saint.

He imagined that he was making enough noise to rouse the neighbours for blocks around. No time was to be lost in self−commiseration, however. He hurriedly dragged out a ladder, which he managed to place against the window−sill without accident.

"Here it is," she whispered excitedly. The next instant a heavy object dropped at his feet with a crash. "Oh!" she exclaimed with horror, "my perfume bottles!"

"Good Lord!" he gasped.

"I thought you were going to catch it. Oh, here's the ladder. Do you think I'll fall? Oh, oh!"

"Don't be afraid. Climb out, dear—and hurry!"

She was brave enough in the crisis. While he held the bottom of the ladder she scrambled through the window and hurried downward. Before she reached the bottom he lifted her from the ladder in his strong arms and held her close for a moment.

"Take the ladder down, dearest," she whispered between kisses. "I don't want mother to know I left that way—not just yet,—nor Mr. Windomshire, either."

"Come this way," he whispered, after replacing the ladder. "I left the car just around the corner. Come on, darling, and we'll soon be safe. Don't make a noise!"

"Goodness, isn't it dark! What a horrid night! Oh, what's that?"

"Gad, I thought I heard something over there in the croquet ground. Sounded like some one mixing it up with a wicket. Quick! Out this way!" He had her hand in his, and was rushing ruthlessly through flower−beds toward the big gate, her travelling bag banging against his knee with the insistence of a hundredweight.

Panting and gasping for breath, they finally floundered into the roadway, and dashed off through the muddy surface toward the unseen automobile.

She was half fainting with the panic of excitement as he started to lift her into the tonneau of the car. "No, no! Please let me sit with you in the front seat," she implored. She had her way, and a moment later he was up beside her, both wrapped in the oil−cloths, the drizzle blowing in their hot faces.

"We're off, thank God!" he whispered joyously, as the car leaped forward under his hand.

"I wonder—oh, dear, how I wonder what mamma will say," she was crying in his ear.

Dauntless grinned happily as the car shot onward through the blackness of the night. Its lanterns were dark and cold, but he knew the road.

CHAPTER II. THE FLYERS CATCH THE FLYER

No one would have recognised either of them had it been possible to see them,—so carefully were their heads swathed in their coverings. She was veiled and he was goggled, and both of them scrooged down in the seat apprehensively. Hardy's car, borrowed in reality for the occasion, was performing nobly. It careened through the muddy streets of the village with a sturdiness that augured well for the enterprise. Out into the country road, scudding northward, it sped. Dauntless increased the speed, not to the limit, on account of the fog and uncertainty of the road, but enough to add new thrills to the girl who crouched beside him. Neither spoke until they were far from the town line; the strain was too intense.

"What will everybody say?" she finally cried in his ear—the most natural question in the world. "And the newspapers? Oh, dear!"

"You're not weakening, are you?" he cried. "Shall I turn back?"

She was silent for half a mile.

"No," she replied at last, "I couldn't climb UP that ladder. And besides—" with a gasp as the car shot over the railroad tracks,—"we never could get as good a start as this again."

"Bully for you!" he shouted.

"How far is it to Fenlock, Joe?" she asked, a quaver in her high− pitched voice.

"About seven miles. We'll take the short cut through O'Brien's Lane and strike Cobberly Road again at the crossroads. Then it will be easy going. We'll catch the flyer all right, Nell. Everything's arranged. You go into Car 5 and I in Car 7—"

"With a whole car between us? Heavens!"

"It's safest, dear. There might happen to be some one on board who'd know us and suspect. Keep your veil down until you get into the berth. There's not much danger of any one being up at this time of night, but don't take any chances."

"Goodness, isn't it thrilling! And when do we get to Omegon?"

"Little after seven in the morning. My cousin will meet us in a hack and drive us straight to the church. His wife will go with us as the extra witness. By eight o'clock we'll be married. Derby will be on the train with us. He's a full−fledged preacher now, and he'll marry us without a whimper."

"Oh," she sighed deliciously, in spite of the jarring of the motor, "isn't it nice to have old college chums who can be depended upon?"

"Poor old Windomshire," he laughed in the buoyancy of conquest.

"I don't think he'll—" She stopped.

"What?"

"Care very much," she concluded. He laughed doubtingly.

Mile after mile the car traversed the misty night, jolting over the ruts in the lane, taking the hills blindly—driven entirely by the hand of Good Luck.

Suddenly the "honk, honk!" of an invisible motor struck upon their tense ears, the sound coming from some point ahead in the black, narrow lane. Dauntless sat straight and peered ahead, sounding his horn sharply.

"I hope no one is coming toward us," he groaned, slowing up sharply. "We never can pass in this confounded lane. If we get off into the soft ground—Hello! Here he comes—and no lights either! Hey! Look out!" He brought his car to an abrupt standstill.

"Where are we, Joe?" she cried.

"Near the crossroads, I'm sure. Curse an idiot that runs around without lights on a night like this," he growled, forgetting that his own lamps were dark.

Out of the misty blackness loomed another car, directly ahead. It had come to a sudden stop not ten feet away. Both cars were tooting their horns viciously.

"Where are your lights?" roared Dauntless.

"Where are yours?" came back angrily through the fog.

"Good Lord!" gasped Joe, panic−stricken.

"It's Mr. Windomshire," whispered Eleanor, in consternation.

Before she realised what was happening her companion lifted her bodily over the back of the seat and deposited her in the bed of the tonneau.

"Hide, dearest," he whispered. "Get under the storm blankets. He must not see you! I'll—I'll bluff it out some way."

"Wha—what is he doing out here in a machine?" she was whispering wildly. "He is pursuing us! He has found out!"

In the other car Windomshire—for it was the tall Englishman—was hoarsely whispering to some one beside him:

"It's Dauntless! Hang him! What's he doing here?" Then followed a hurried scuffling and subdued whispers. A long silence, fraught with an importance which the throbbing of the two engines was powerless to disturb, followed the mutual discovery. Joe's brain worked the quicker. Disguising his voice as best he could, he shouted through the fog:

"We can't pass here."

"Is—is this Cobberly Road?" cried Windomshire, striving to obtain what he considered the American twang.

"No, it's not. It's O'Brien's Lane."

Then, after a long silence, "Can't you back out?"

"It's rather—I mean sorter risky, mister. I don't know how far I'd have to back, doncherknow—er, ahem!"

"The crossroads can't be more than a hundred yards behind you. Where are you going?"

"I'm going for—a doctor," called Windomshire, hastily.

"Well, then, we ought not to stand here all night," groaned Joe, his ears open to catch the sound of the locomotive's whistle. There was no time to be lost.

"I'll—I'll try to back her out," shouted Windomshire. Eleanor whispered something shrilly and anxiously from the tonneau, and Joe called out instantly:

"Who is ill?"

"Mrs.—Mrs. Smith," replied the other, bravely.

"Good!" exclaimed Dauntless, heartily. Windomshire was not in the least annoyed by the lack of sympathy. He began to drive his car backward by jerks and jolts, blindly trusting to luck in the effort to reach the road which he had passed in his haste a few minutes before. Joe was shouting encouragement and pushing slowly forward in his own machine. The noise of the engines was deafening.

"Hang it all, man, don't blow your horn like that!" roared Windomshire at last, harassed and full of dread. Joe, in his abstraction, was sounding his siren in a most insulting manner.

At last Windomshire's wheels struck a surface that seemed hard and resisting. He gave a shout of joy.

"Here we are! It's macadam!"

"Cobberly Road," cried Joe. "Back off to the right and let me run in ahead. I'm—I'm in a devil of a hurry."

"By Gad, sir, so am I. Hi, hold back there! Look out where you're going, confound you!"

"Now for it," cried Joe to Eleanor. "We've got the lead; I'll bet a bun he can't catch us." He had deliberately driven across the other's bows, as it were, scraping the wheel, and was off over Cobberly Road like the wind. "Turn to your right at the next crossing," he shouted back to Windomshire. Then to himself hopefully: "If he does that, he'll miss Fenlock by three miles."

They had covered two rash, terrifying miles before a word was spoken. Then he heard her voice in his ear—an anxious, troubled voice that could scarcely be heard above the rushing wind.

"What will we do if the train is late, dear? He'll be—be sure to catch us."

"She's never late. Besides, what if he does catch us? We don't have to go back, do we? You're of age. Brace up; be a man!" he called back encouragingly.

"There are too many men as it is," she wailed, sinking back into the tonneau.

"Here we are!" he shouted, as the car whizzed into a murky, dimly lighted street on the edge of Fenlock, the county seat. "There are the station lights just ahead."

"Is the train in?" she cried, struggling to her feet eagerly.

"I think not." He was slowing down. A moment later the throbbing car came to a stop beside the railway station platform. The lights blinked feebly through the mist; far off in the night arose the faint toot of a

locomotive's whistle.

"We're just in time," he cried. "She's coming. Quick!" He lifted her bodily over the side of the car, jerked two suitcases from beneath the curtains, and rushed frantically to the shelter of the platform sheds.

"I'll leave you here, dear," he was saying rapidly. "Wait a second; there is your railroad ticket and your drawing−room ticket, too. I'll wake Derby when I get on board. I have to run the automobile down to Henry's garage first. Won't take ten seconds. Don't worry. The train won't be here for three or four minutes. Get on board and go to sleep. I'll be two cars ahead."

"Oh, Joe, won't I see you again before we start?" she cried despairingly.

"I'll be back in a minute. It's only half a block to Henry's. All I have to do is to leave the car in front of his place. His men will look after it. It's all understood, dearest; don't worry. I'll be here before the train, never fear. Stand here in the shadow, dear." He gave her what might have been a passionate kiss had it not been for the intervention of veil and goggles. Then he was off to the motor, his heart thumping frantically. Standing as stiff and motionless as a statue against the damp brick wall, she heard the automobile leap away and go pounding down the street. Apparently she was alone on the platform; the ticking of telegraph instruments came to her anxious ears, however, and she knew there were living people inside the long, low building. The experience certainly was new to this tall, carefully nurtured girl. Never before had she been left alone at such an hour and place; it goes without saying that the circumstances were unique. Here she was, standing alone in the most wretched of nights, her heart throbbing with a dozen emotions, her eyes and ears labouring in a new and thrilling enterprise, her whole life poised on the social dividing line. She was running away to marry the man she had loved for years; slipping away from the knot that ambition was trying to throw over her rebellious head. If she had any thought of the past or the future, however, it was lost among the fears and anxieties of the present. Her soul was crying out for the approach of two objects—Joe Dauntless and the north−bound flyer.

Her sharp ears caught the sound which told her that the motor had stopped down the street; it was a welcome sound, for it meant that he was racing back to the station—and just in time, too; the flyer was pounding the rails less than half a mile away.

Fenlock was a division point in the railroad. The company's yards and the train despatcher's office were located there. A huge round−house stood off to the right; half a dozen big headlights glared out at the shivering Eleanor like so many spying, accusing eyes. She knew that all trains stopped in Fenlock. Joe had told her that the flyer's pause was the briefest of any during the day or night; still she wondered if it would go thundering through and spoil everything.

Miss Thursdale, watching the approaching headlight, her ears filled with the din of the wheels, did not see or hear a second motor car rush up to the extreme south end of the platform. She was not thinking of Windomshire or his machine. That is why she failed to witness an extraordinary incident.

As the driver leaped from the car a second man disconnected himself from the shadows, paused for a moment to take orders from the new arrival, and then jumped into the seat just vacated. Whereupon the one−time driver performed precisely the same feat that Dauntless had performed three minutes before him. He jerked forth a couple of bags and then proceeded to lift from the tonneau of the car a vague but animate something, which, an instant later, resolved itself into the form of a woman at his side.

"I've settled with the company, Meaders," hurriedly announced Windomshire to the man on the seat. "The car is in your hands now."

"Yes, sir; I understand. Your week is up to−night. Hope it was satisfactory, sir." The car shot off in the night, almost running down a man who scudded across the street in its path.

"Just in time, Anne," said Windomshire to the tall, hooded figure beside him. "Thank God, we didn't miss it."

"Hasn't it been good sport, Harry?" cried the young woman, with an unmistakably English inflection. "It's just like a book."

"Only more so," he observed. "This has really happened, you know. Things never really happen in books, don't you know. You've not lost your tickets, dear?"

"No; they do that only in books. Really, I'm trembling like a leaf. I can't realise that it is all taking place as we planned, and that I am to be your wife after all. Ah, Harry! isn't it splendid?"

"'Gad, little woman, I am the one who hasn't the right to realise. By Jove, I didn't give myself credit for the cleverness to fool every one so neatly. Really, don't you know, however, I feel a bit sorry for Miss Thursdale.

She's a ripping good sort, and I'm sorry on that account."

Miss Courtenay—erstwhile governess—took hold of the lapels of his raincoat and looked seriously up into his face. "Are you sure you'll never regret giving her up for me—with all her money?"

"Oh, I say, Anne dear, it's I who am running away, not you. I've always wanted you—all my life. I've been something of a cad—"

"It wasn't your fault. Mrs. Thursdale was bound to have you. It's her way."

"It hurts my pride to say it, but hanged if I think—er—Eleanor was very strong for the match. I've a notion she was bullied into it."

"I'm quite sure of it."

"You're doing her a good turn, my dear. You see, I couldn't love her, and I'd probably have beaten her and all that. It wasn't as if I had to marry her for her money. Deuce take it, I've got a few pounds of my own."

"I'm only Anne Courtenay, the governess."

"You'll be Lady Windomshire some day, my word for it—if the other chaps manage to die, God bless 'em. I say, here's the train. Good− night, dear, up you go! I'll go up ahead. Don't forget! The wedding's at noon to−morrow."

The long, shadowy train came to a stop. He elbowed the porter aside and helped her up the steps. Neither of them noticed the vague figure which rushed across the platform and into the second car below.

"Where's the luggage car?" shouted Windomshire to the porter.

"The what?"

"I mean the baggage van."

"Way up front, sir. Where they're puttin' on the trunks, sir."

Swinging his travelling bag almost at arm's length, the long Englishman raced forward. His own and Miss Courtenay's pieces had come over during the afternoon, skilfully smuggled out of the Thursdale house. Just as he reached the baggage truck a panting, mud−covered individual dashed up from the opposite direction, madly rushing for the train. They tried to avoid a collision, but failed. A second later the two men were staring into each other's eyes, open−mouthed and dismayed.

"Hello!" gasped Dauntless, staggered.

"What the devil, sir, do—My word! It's Dauntless!" sputtered Windomshire.

"Where is she?" shouted Joe, convinced that his rival had captured his runaway fiancee and was now confronting him for explanation.

"Confound you, sir, it's none of your business," roared Windomshire, confident that Dauntless had been sent by Mrs. Thursdale to intercept him in his flight with the governess. "Damn your impudence!"

"Stand aside, Windomshire," exclaimed Joe, white with anger and dread. "I'm going to find her. What have you done with her?"

"You sha'n't interfere, Dauntless," cried Windomshire, squaring himself. "She's going to be my wife, and—"

"I guess NOT! Get out of my way, or—"

"She's on that train, confound you, and I'm going away with her whether you like it or not—or anybody else, for that matter," said Windomshire, refusing to budge an inch.

"Well, you'll have a damned hard time getting rid of me," roared Joe, trying to break past his rival. A baggage−man leaped between them in time to prevent blows. He held the angry, mistaken rivals apart,— rivals no longer, if they only knew. "Let go of me! Hold this fellow and I'll give you a hundred dollars—hold him till the train goes!"

"Hold me, will you? My word! What is this? A highway robbery!"

Both men broke away from the baggage−man and rushed frantically down the line of cars, each trying to hold the other back. Joe succeeded in grasping the handrail of the first sleeping−car, but his adversary pulled him away. An instant later they were struggling across the station platform, clasped in savage and hysterical combat. The station employees were rushing up to separate them when the train began to move slowly away.

[Illustration: Eleanor was still sitting ... stiff and silent]

They came to their senses a moment later to find themselves held firmly by brawny peacemakers, the black cars rushing swiftly by without them.

Forgetting the battle so inopportunely begun, they started off madly in pursuit, shouting, yelling,

commanding. But the flyer was deaf to their cries, callous against their tears. It whistled off into the north, carrying two trusting, nervous young women, who were secure in the belief that their liege lords to be were aboard, utterly unconscious of the true state of affairs. In the drawing−room of Car 5 Eleanor was still sitting, with her veil down, her raincoat saturating the couch on which she sat stiff and silent. Anne Courtenay in Car 7 was philosophically preparing for bed, absolutely confident that the Englishman she had loved for years was not going to fail her.

Windomshire, alas, came to grief in his useless pursuit. He fell off the end of the platform and rolled in the mud, half stunned. When he painfully picked himself up, he saw Dauntless sitting on the edge of the walk, his haggard, staring face lighted by the glare of a sympathetic lantern. The station agent was offering vain but well−intended commiseration.

"Good God!" he heard Joe groan, but he did not catch the words, "she's gone without me!"

The next instant the distracted eloper was on his feet demanding a special engine.

"I've got to have it!" he shouted.

Windomshire's wits returned. Why not have a special too? It was the only way.

"You can order one for me, too," he exclaimed. "At once. It's imperative."

CHAPTER III. THE MORNING AFTER

The sun was peeping over the hilltops and shooting his merry glance across the rain−soaked lowlands when Eleanor Thursdale awoke from her final snatch of slumber. A hundred feverish lapses into restless subconsciousness had marked the passage of nearly as many miles of clatter and turmoil. Never before had she known a train to be so noisy; never before had she lain awake long enough to make the natural discovery. It seemed hours before she dropped off in the first surrender to sleep; it seemed hours between the succeeding falls. Her brain and heart were waging the most relentless battle against peace and security. She KNEW Joe Dauntless was but two cars ahead, and yet she wondered if were really there; she wondered and was troubled—oh, so troubled.

Daylight was creeping in beneath the curtain of the window. She stretched her fine, tired young body, and for the first time really felt like going to sleep. The perversity of early morning! Gradually it dawned upon her that the train was not moving; as far back as she could recall in her now wakeful spell it occurred to her that the cars had been standing still and that everything was as quiet as death. She looked at her watch; it was six o'clock.

"Goodness!" she thought, sitting up suddenly, "what is the matter?" The curtain flew up and her startled eyes blinked out upon the glaring world.

There was not a house in sight as far as her eyes could range forward and behind. Instead, a wide sweep of farm lands partially submerged by the flood water of many rains. Far away there were brown hills and a long army of tall trees standing at attention,—a bleak prospect despite the cheery intentions of the sun, which lurked behind the hills. Despondent cornstalks of last year's growth stood guard over the soggy fields; drenched, unhappy tufts of grass, and forlorn but triumphant reeds arose here and there from the watery wastes, asserting their victory over a dismantled winter. It was not a glorious view that met the gaze of the bride on her wedding morn.

Strangest of all, the train was so quiet, so utterly inactive, that an absurd feeling of loneliness grew upon her, gradually developing into the alarming certainty that she was the only living person in the world. Then she heard men's voices outside of the window; her relief was almost hysterical. Scrambling out of the berth, she began a hasty, nervous toilet. Three sharp pushes on the button brought the company's ladies' maid—advertised as a part of the luxury and refinement which made the flyer "the finest train in the world."

"What has happened? Where are we?" she demanded, upon the entrance of the sleepy young coloured woman.

"The Pride River bridge is washed away, ma'am," said the maid. "We can't go on no furder."

"Dear me," sighed Eleanor, turning to be buttoned at the back. "And where is Pride River bridge—or where was it, I mean?"

"'Bout twenty mile south of Omegon, ma'am—miss. The river's a sight— highest 'at it's ever been known. It's all over the bottoms. This here train came mighty nigh running into it, too. A boy flagged it just in time, 'bout five o'clock."

"Have we been standing here a whole hour?"

"Yes, miss; right here. They say we can't go back till the section boss has examined the track in Baxter's Cut. Seems as though there's some danger of a washout back yander."

"Do you mean to say we are likely to stay here indefinitely?" gasped Eleanor. "Ouch! Be careful, please!"

"Oh, it won't be long. The porter says they've sent back over the line to telegraft for the section men."

"Good Heavens, is there no station here?"

"No, ma'am; five miles back. They's one jest across the river, but it might as well be in Africa."

"Be quick, please, and then send the conductor to me—and the porter too," urged Eleanor, in distress.

The porter was the first to arrive.

"Porter, will you go to Car 7 and see if the occupant of lower 4 is awake? I am quite sure that is right, but if it should happen to be wrong, please let me know at once."

"Yes, miss; and what shall I tell her?"

"Ahem! It's a—a gentleman. Ask him to—to come to the rear end of the train. That's all. Oh, conductor, how soon will we be on the track again?" The conductor was standing in the door, evidently impressed by the summons from the drawing−room.

"We're not off the track, madam. There is no danger—just a little delay. I have telegraphed to see if I can have a relief train come down from Omegon and pick us up after we've been ferried across the river."

"This is the very worst road I've ever travelled over—the very worst," was Eleanor's natural complaint. "When will that get us to Omegon?"

"We should be there in an hour after leaving here."

"And when did you say we'd leave here?"

"I didn't say. I don't know."

"Who does know, if you don't?" demanded Eleanor.

"God, I presume," observed the harassed conductor, turning away with the realisation that he had erred in coming to her in the first place. The porter returned at that moment.

"Nobody in that section, ma'am. It was sold, but the party didn't show up."

"Good Heavens, you—but he DID show up. I—I know he did. Look again. Try—but wait! Ask for Mr. Dauntless. Ask quietly, please."

"Yes, ma'am."

Her nerves at highest tension, Miss Thursdale made her way toward the rear platform of the train. She passed down the curtained aisles of two coaches, wondering how people could sleep so soundly in a crisis like this. A porter politely opened a door and she slipped out upon the last platform. As far as the eye could reach stretched the roadbed and its telegraph poles, finally disappearing in the haze of the morning. Wide−spread flood, soaking the flat—

A sharp cry of amazement came from the track just below her. She looked down and into the eyes of Anne Courtenay, the governess. For a full minute they stared blankly at each other, apparently bereft of all the agencies that fall to the lot of woman.

"Miss Courtenay!" finally came from the lips of the girl on the platform.

"Miss Thursdale!" murmured Anne, reaching out to support herself against the bumper. Other words failed to come for the time being. In sheer despair, neither could accomplish more than a pallid smile. To the reader is left the privilege of analysing the thoughts which surged through the brains of the bewildered young women,—the fears, the doubts, the resentments.

"Where—where have you been?" at last fell from Miss Thursdale's lips.

"Been?" repeated Miss Courtenay, vaguely. "Oh, yes; I've been taking a walk—a constitutional. I always do."

Eleanor stared harder than ever. "All this distance?" she murmured.

"Down the track for half a mile, Miss Thursdale."

"Are—were you on this train?" ejaculated Eleanor.

"Yes—but I—I—" stammered Anne, her face growing red with rising resentment. "I did not think this of you."

"What do you mean? It is—May I ask why you are here, Miss Courtenay? It is most extraordinary."

"It is very easily explained," said Miss Courtenay, after a moment's battle with veracity. "My aunt is very ill in Vancouver." To herself she was saying: "I must keep her from really seeing Harry. She knows what he has done—in heaven's name, how could she have found it out?— and she is waiting to catch us if she can. She has followed us! Thank goodness, I've seen her first."

Eleanor was not blessed with the possibility of such an explanation for Anne's presence; she could only believe that the governess had been suddenly called to the bedside of her aunt—a real person, she happened to know, and very rich. But how was she to account for her own astonishing departure from home? Miss Courtenay had seen her at dinner; nothing had been said regarding "an unexpected journey." In truth, Eleanor remembered with inflexible accuracy that she had announced her intention to go to bed with a headache. Then, what must Miss Courtenay be thinking at this very instant?

An inspiration came to her like a flash. "I—I am running away, Miss Courtenay," she cried, with a brave attempt to appear naive.

"I don't understand," murmured poor Anne.

"Of course you don't," said Eleanor, inspiration heaping itself up within her. "Not really, you know, but just for a few days' rest. Mother thinks I'm looking wretchedly. We didn't say anything about it− −except to Mr. Windomshire, of course. He knows. Perhaps he will run up to Omegon in a day or two to see me. It's very quiet

there, and I'll get a good rest. The hotel is delightful—facing the lake. And the bathing's good. Dear me, I'm so sorry about your aunt." Miss Courtenay's eyes actually blinked with perplexity. This was a most staggering bit of news. Eleanor flushed painfully under the gaze of the other; utter rout followed. She stammered some flimsy excuse and dashed back into the car. To herself she was crying: "I must find Joe and tell him to keep out of sight. Oh, how awful this is!"

Just inside the door she met her porter.

"There's nobody named Dauntless on the train, miss. A gentleman who said he was his friend thinks he missed the train perhaps."

"He—he—oh, I see!" said Eleanor, suddenly perceiving method in Joe's reluctance to answer to his own name. "Thank you. That's all." Then, to herself: "He has seen Miss Courtenay, and she HASN'T seen him,— that's plain." She handed the porter a coin.

"I went to the berth you mentioned, ma'am, and I asked through the curtains: 'Is Mr. Dauntless in here?' There was a lady in the upper, miss, an'—an'—well, I'll never forget what she said to me." Eleanor had gone before he concluded, determined to unearth her cautious lover, if possible.

Anne caught the porter before he could follow.

"See here, porter," she whispered softly, "go to Car 5, section 6, and call its occupant. Tell him NOT to get up. Do you understand? NOT to get up!"

It goes without saying, of course, that all efforts, secret or otherwise, failed to locate the missing men. The distracted brides, each trying to run away from the other in a way, were in a state of collapse, necessarily subdued but most alarming. The Rev. Henry Derby, a nice−looking young fellow, who looked more like a tennis player than a minister of the gospel, eventually identified his old friend's ladye faire, and introduced himself with a discreetness that proved him to have been in college at the proper period and in a somewhat different class from that which he now sought to lead. In the privacy of her drawing−room the bewitching but distressed young woman discussed the situation with the man who had been chosen to perform the clandestine ceremony in the far−away town of Omegon. Derby, coming on from his eastern home in loyal acquiescence to his friend's request, had designedly taken this train, it being understood that Dauntless would board it at Fenlock with his fair conspirator. We all know why Dauntless failed to perform his part of the agreement; Derby, with the perspicuity of a college man, finally advanced a reason for his inexplicable failure to appear. Eleanor had begun tearfully to accuse him of abandoning her at the last moment; Mr. Derby indignantly scouted the idea. When she related their chase in the motor and their escape from Windomshire, he formed his conclusions, and they were in the main remarkably correct.

"I'm afraid, Miss Thursdale, that your disappointed lover, our ancient enemy, the Englishman, was not to be overcome so neatly. Has it occurred to you that he may have reached Fenlock before the train left, and that he is the explanation for Joe's non−appearance?"

"You—you don't mean that he has killed—" she was gasping, growing whiter and whiter. He hastened to reassure her.

"Oh, no; not so bad as that. But it is possible and quite probable that he—if, as you say, he was on to your—I should say, aware of your flight, it is probable that he succeeded in detaining Joe in Fenlock. That would—" "Impossible! Joe wouldn't let him!" she cried indignantly.

"Perhaps Joe couldn't help himself. Such things happen. At any rate, you'll understand, the despised enemy could have—"

"Mr. Windomshire is not a despised enemy. He's a VERY nice man, Mr. Derby," she interrupted.

"Certainly, Miss Thursdale. What I meant to say was, that he was morally sure of preventing the wedding if he could only keep you far enough apart. Now that is probably what he has done. You can't marry Joe in Omegon or anywhere else unless he is there and not in Fenlock."

"I see. Well, I'll go back to Fenlock!" she exclaimed emphatically, a little line of determination and stubbornness settling about the erstwhile trembling lips.

"I admire your loyalty," he said warmly. "Just at present, however, we are water−bound here, and we've got to make the best of it. I fancy Joe will telegraph before long."

"If—if he hasn't been hurt. Oh, Mr. Derby, they may have fought. It would be just like them. It may be dreadfully serious. You don't know as much about men as I do. They're terribly—"

"Please don't worry, Miss Thursdale," he said, smiling in recollection of his football days. "You'll find there's been nothing bloody about all this. The delay is vexatious, but only temporary, I'm sure."

"I'll marry Joe Dauntless now if it has to be delayed a hundred years," she cried, her eyes flashing.

During the next half−hour poor Derby ran errands, carried messages and complaints to every one of the train men, finally administering smelling salts when it occurred to Eleanor that Joe might have fallen off the train during the night.

In the meantime Anne Courtenay was having a sad half−hour of it. She had no one to turn to, no one to think it all out for her; she was alone and in great despair. The porter had failed to find the tall Englishman; the conductor had been equally unsuccessful; she herself had searched in vain. His trunks and hers were in the baggage car, she found, but there was no sign of the man himself. She was a self− reliant, sensible young woman, accustomed to the rigours of the world, but this was quite too overwhelming. The presence on the train of the girl that she had, to all intents and purposes, cruelly deceived, did not add to her comfort. As a matter of fact, she was quite fond of Eleanor; they were warm friends despite the vagaries of love. Miss Courtenay, among other things, began to wonder, as she sat in her tumbled berth, if retribution had more to do with this than chance.

"Could he have fallen off the train?" she wondered, with a sudden chill of apprehension. The next instant she was calling to the porter. "Send the conductor to me at once. My friend has fallen off the train− −out of his window, perhaps. I am quite sure of it. I want an engine to go back and look for him. Hurry, please! don't stand there grinning."

The Pullman conductor came up at that moment.

"Are you the young lady who was asking for Mr. Dauntless?" he asked.

"Dauntless?" she murmured. "No, I'm asking for an engine. Have you—"

"There's another young lady asking for an engine, too, madam. It's impossible."

"Am I to understand that I shall have to walk?—Oh," with a sudden start, "is—is there a Mr. Dauntless missing too?"

"Seems so. He's gone."

Anne dropped the curtains in his face, and then stared at them for a long time. Gradually she began to comprehend. A panic of fear came over her.

"They have met somewhere and quarrelled! Mr. Dauntless was jealous— terribly so. He may have—good Heavens!—he may have killed him in the mistaken idea that Harry was running away with Eleanor. She's on this very train! It's perfectly natural. Porter," she called, "there has been foul play!"

"Gee, miss! That's what the other lady is saying!"

"The other—then it is a double murder! Don't laugh! It's—it's—"

"Don't cry, miss; it's all right." She looked at him piteously for a moment, and then smiled at the absurdity of her conjecture.

A tousled head came from between the curtains of the upper berth opposite, and a sleepy, hoarse voice demanded:

"How long will we be here? What's the latest?"

"We're on time, sah," replied the porter, from sheer force of habit.

"The devil we are! Say, I've got to be in Omegon by ten o'clock. I'll sue this infernal road," snarled the irascible party, snapping the curtains together. It transpired that he was an agent for a medical college, travelling to Omegon on a most unwholesome but edifying mission. He was going up to take possession of the body of a man who had willed his carcass to the school. As the poor chap was not yet dead, but hopelessly ill, the desire for haste on the part of the agent may be misunderstood. It seems, however, that there was some talk of interference by relatives—and the disquieting prospect of a new will.

"If I were you, miss," counselled the porter, "I'd go out and take a little walk. The sun is up, an' it's fine. The relief train will be here 'fore long—an' you all will be rowed acrost the river. Don't worry."

"But I want to go back the way I came," expostulated Anne, feebly. "I can't go on without—until I know what has happened to—to Mr. Windomshire." She took his advice, however, and made her way to the rear platform.

A number of disgruntled passengers were now abroad, and complaining bitterly of the delay. There was no hope of breakfast until the train reached Omegon, where a dining car was waiting. She stood on the platform and looked gloomily back over the long stretch of roadbed.

"Isn't that an engine coming?" some one asked excitedly at her side. She turned and found Miss Thursdale, attended by a gentleman, to whom the question was addressed.

"I believe—yes, it is, Miss Thursdale."

"Then—then we'll all be taken back to the city," she said dejectedly.

"I fancy not. It's probably bringing relief."

"They—they may be bringing bad news," Eleanor groaned. "Oh, Miss Courtenay, how do you do—again? How is your—your grandmother, wasn't it?"

"I—I—yes, I think so—I mean, I think she's no better. They may be bringing his body!" said the other girl, her eyes fixed on the distant locomotive.

"Oh!" almost screamed Eleanor, and stared wildly without words.

A brakeman far down the track was flagging the locomotive; it came to a stop, and several men were seen climbing down from the cab. Two of them eventually disengaged themselves from the little group and hurried forward. One was carrying a suitcase, and both walked as though they were either in pain or attended by extreme old age.

"Why—why—" gasped Eleanor, "it's Joe!"

"And—yes, thank God, it's Har—Mr. Windomshire," almost shrieked Anne.

Then they turned and looked at each other in confusion. Neither had the courage to carry out the desire to fly to the arms of the man she longed to see more than all else in the world. They felt themselves to be caught red−handed.

CHAPTER IV. MRS. VAN TRUDER INTRUDES

None but the most eager, loving eyes could possibly have recognised the newcomers. It is not unlikely that the remaining passengers mistook them for tramps. The rivals, morbidly suspicious of each other, taciturn to the point of unfriendliness, had indeed chartered a locomotive—not jointly by intention, but because of provoking necessity. There was but one engine to be had. It is safe to say that while they travelled many sore and turbulent miles in close proximity to each other, neither felt called upon to offer or to demand an explanation.

Five hours in the tender of an engine had done much to reduce them to the level of the men in the cab, so far as personal appearance was concerned. They were still wearing their raincoats, much crumpled and discoloured; their faces were covered with coal dust; they were wet, bedraggled, and humble to the last degree. The American, naturally, was the one who clung to his suitcase; he had foreseen the need for a change of linen. They came toward the train with hesitating, uncertain steps. If their souls were gladdened by the sight of the two young women, general appearances failed to make record of it. It was noted by those who watched their approach that once both of them stopped short and seemed to waver in their determination to advance. That was when each became suddenly aware of the presence of an unexpected girl. Naturally, the Englishman was seriously staggered. The unexplained Eleanor appeared before his very eyes as an accusing nemesis; it is no wonder that his jaw dropped and his befuddled brain took to whirling.

The girls, less regardful of appearances, climbed down from the platform and started forward to meet their knights−errant. The reader may readily appreciate the feelings of the quartette. Not one of them knew just precisely how much or how little the others knew; they were precariously near to being lost in the labyrinth. Something intangible but regular urged Windomshire to be politic; he advanced to meet Eleanor as if it were her due. Anne fell back, perplexed and hurt.

"Hang it all," thought Joe, rage in his heart, "he beat me to her, after all. He'll be enough of a damned ass to try to kiss her before all these people, too." Whereupon, he closed his eyes tightly. When he opened them, Miss Courtenay was walking beside him and asking questions about the weather. Her cheeks were very pink. Windomshire had awkwardly clasped the hand of Miss Thursdale, muttering something not quite intelligible, even to himself. Eleanor was replying with equal blitheness.

"How nice of you to come. Where are you going?"

"Surprised, are you?" he was floundering. "Charmed. Ha, ha! By Jove, Eleanor—er—I heard you were booked by this train and I—I tried to catch it for a bit of a ride with you. I missed it, don't you know. I'll—I'll wager you don't know what I did in my desperation."

"I couldn't guess," she said, trying to catch Joe's eye.

"I hired a private engine, 'pon my word, and then telegraphed ahead to stop this train!"

"Di—did you do that?" she gasped, forgetting that the bridge was out.

Dauntless, meantime, was trying to explain to Miss Courtenay. She already had told him that her aunt was ill in Vancouver, and he had smiled politely and aimlessly.

"I'm on my way to M——. Sudden trip, very important," he was saying. "Missed the train—I dare say it was this one—so I took an engine to follow up. Had to ride in the tender."

"It must have been important," she ventured.

"It was. I—" then with an inspired plunge—"I was due at a wedding."

"How unfortunate! I hope you won't miss it altogether."

Joe caught his breath and thought: "Now what the devil did she mean by that? Has Eleanor told her the whole story?"

It must not be supposed that these young persons were lacking in the simpler gifts of intelligence; they were, individually, beginning to put two and two together, as the saying goes. They were grasping the real situation—groping for it, perhaps, but with a clear−sightedness and acumen which urged that a cautious tongue was expedient. If the duplicity was really as four−handed as it seemed, there could be no harm in waiting for the other fellow to blunder into exposure. Nothing could be explained, of course, until the conspirators found opportunity to consult privately under the new order of assignment.

"How romantic!" Eleanor said, as she walked stiffly ahead with her uncomfortable fiance.

"Eh?" was his simple remark. He was suddenly puzzled over the fact that he HAD caught up to the train. There was something startling in that. "Oh—er—not at all romantic, most prosaic. Couldn't get a coach. Been here long?"

"Since five o'clock."

"I—I suppose you got up to see the sunrise."

"No, to see the river rise," she replied. "The bridge is gone." He was silent for twenty paces, trying to recall what he had said about telegraphing ahead.

"You don't mean it! Then I daresay they haven't got my telegram stopping the train."

"How annoying!"

Dauntless had just said to Anne, in a fit of disgust: "Windomshire's got a lot of nerve. That was my engine, you know. I hired it."

Windomshire went on to say, careful that Joe was quite out of hearing: "Mr. Dauntless was quite annoying. He got into my engine without an invitation, and I'm hanged if he'd take a hint, even after I hired a stoker to throw a spadeful of coal over him. I don't know why he should be in such a confounded hurry to get to—what's the name of the place? I—er—I really think I must go and speak to Miss Courtenay, Eleanor. She—er—looks ill."

"It's her grandmother who is ill—not she. But, yes! Please try to cheer her up a bit, Harry. She's terribly upset."

"I'm sure she is," muttered he, dropping back with more haste than gallantry. Mr. Dauntless sprang forward with equal alacrity, and wrong was right a moment later.

"Joe dear," whispered Eleanor, "I've been nearly crazy. What happened?" He was vainly trying to clasp her hand.

"Nell, he's on to us. I wish I knew just why Miss Courtenay is here. Lord, I'll never forget that ride."

"It was just like you to take advantage of his engine."

"His engine!" exploded Joe, wrathfully. Securely separated from the others, the elopers analysed the situation as best they could. Two separate enterprises struggled earnestly for an outcome. On the surface, the truth seemed plain enough: it was quite clear to both parties that the extraordinary chain of coincidence was not entirely due to Providence. There was something of design behind it all. The staggering part was the calamitous way in which chance had handled their dear and private affairs.

"He doesn't know that you were in my automobile," concluded Dauntless, almost at the same time that a like opinion was being expressed by Windomshire. "Are you willing to go on with it, Nell? Are you scared out of it?"

"No, indeed," she exclaimed, perplexity leaving her brow. "At first I feared he might have telegraphed to mother, but now I am sure he hasn't. He was not following me at all. He is in love with Anne, and he was surreptitiously off for a part of the distance with her. He really doesn't want to marry me, you know."

"Well, he isn't going to, you see. By all that is holy, nothing shall stop us now, dear. We'll go on to Omegon and carry out everything just as we planned. If he's running off after another girl, it's time you put an end to him. Don't give him a thought."

"Don't you think we'd better talk it over with Mr. Derby? He discreetly disappeared when he saw it was you."

"Right! Let's hunt him out. By Jove, we can have him marry us right here,—great!"

"No," she cried firmly, "it MUST be in a church." He could not move her from that stand.

"Oh, if we could only get across that confounded river!" scolded Joe, as they went off in search of Derby.

Windomshire was slowly reconciling himself to the fact that Eleanor loved Dauntless, but he could not get it out of his head that she still expected to marry as her mother had planned.

"See here, Anne, it's all very well to say that she loves Dauntless. Of course she does. But that isn't going to prevent her from marrying me. I don't believe she was running away with him, don't you know. He was simply following her. That's the way these Americans do, you know. Now, the question is, won't she think it odd that you and I should happen to be doing almost the same thing?"

"To be sure she will," said Anne, coolly. "She has a very bad opinion of me. I'm sure she doesn't believe you expect to marry me."

"By Jove, dear, it sounds rather dreadful, doesn't it?" he groaned. "But of course you ARE going to marry me, so what's the odds? Then she can marry Dauntless to her heart's content. I say, are we never to get away from this

beastly place?"

"They are to row us across the river in boats. We'll be taken up by another train over there and carried on. Poor Mr. Dauntless, he looks so harassed."

"By Jove, I feel rather cut up about him. He ought to have her, Anne. He's a decent chap, although he was da—very unreasonable last night. I like him, too, in spite of the fact that he kicked coal over me twice in that confounded bin. He was good enough to take a cinder out of my eye this morning, and I helped him to find his watch in the coal−bin. I say, Anne, we might get a farm wagon and drive to some village where there is a minister—"

"No, Harry! you know I've set my heart on being married in a church. It seems so much more decent and—regular; especially after what has just happened."

A porter appeared in the rear platform and shouted a warning to all those on the ground.

"Get yo' things together. The boats'll be ready in ten minutes, ladies and gen'l'men." The locomotive uttered a few sharp whistles to reinforce his shouts, and everybody made a rush for the cars.

The conductor and other trainmen had all they could do to reassure the more nervous and apprehensive of the passengers, many of whom were afraid of the swollen, ugly river just ahead. Boats had been sent up from a town some miles down the stream, and the passengers with their baggage, the express, and the mail pouches were to be ferried across. Word had been received that a makeshift train would pick them up on the other side, not far from the wrecked bridge, and take them to Omegon as quickly as possible.

It was also announced that the company would be unable to send a train beyond Omegon and into the northwest for eight or ten hours, owing to extensive damage by the floods. Repairs to bridges and roadbed were necessary. In the meantime, the passengers would be cared for at the Somerset Hotel in Omegon, at the company's expense. The company regretted and deplored, etc.

There was a frightful clamour by the through passengers, threats of lawsuits, claims for damage, execrations, and groans. In time, however, the whole company went trooping down the track under the leadership of the patient conductor. It was a sorry, disgruntled parade. Everybody wanted a porter at once, and when he could not get one, berated the road in fiercer terms than ever; men who had always carried their own bags to escape feeing a porter, now howled and raged because there was not an army of them on the spot. Everybody was constantly "damning" the luck.

The conductor led his charges from the track through a muddy stubble− field and down to a point where half a dozen small rowboats were waiting among the willows. Dauntless and Eleanor were well up in front, their faces set resolutely toward Omegon. For some well−defined reason, Windomshire and Anne were the last in the strange procession. The medical college agent, the tall and sombre Mr. Hooker, was the first man into a boat. He said it was a case of life or death.

Eleanor looked backward down the long file of trailers, a little smile on her lips.

"They are not all going away to be married, are they, Joe?" she said, taking note of the unbroken array of sour countenances.

"It looks like a funeral, my dear. Look at the cadaverous individual beside the con—Heavens, Nell, isn't that—by George, it is! It's old Mrs. Van Truder! Back there about half−way—the fat one. See her? Good Lord!"

Eleanor turned pale and the joyous light fled from her eyes.

"Oh, dear! I forgot that the Van Truders spend all their summers at Omegon. And it is she—and he, too. Oh, Joe, it's just awful!"

"She's the worst old cat in town," groaned Dauntless. "We can't escape her. She'll spot us, and she'll never let go of us. I don't mind him. He's so near−sighted he couldn't see us. But she!"

"She will suspect, Joe—she's sure to suspect, and she'll watch us like a hawk," whispered the distressed Eleanor. The Van Truders lived in the same block with the Thursdales in town. "She'll telegraph to mother!"

"That reminds me," muttered Joe, looking at his watch. "I had hoped to telegraph to your mother about this time."

"She will forgive us," said she, but she failed in her assumption of confidence. As a matter of fact she felt that her mother would not forgive.

"Well, you left a note pinned on your pillow," said he, as if that covered all the sins.

"Yes, but it was directed to Miss Courtenay, asking her to break it gently to mamma," said she, dismally.

They had reached the edge of the river by this time and others came up with them. For a while they managed to keep out of old Mrs. Van Truder's range of vision, but her sharp eyes soon caught sight of them as they tried to slip into a boat that was already crowded to its full capacity.

"Why, Eleanor Thursdale!" shouted the old lady, her aristocratic eyes almost crossing in their stare of amazement.

"Discovered!" groaned Dauntless to the willows.

Mrs. Van Truder pounced upon Eleanor and, between personal questions and impersonal reflections upon non−government railways, gave her a dizzy quarter of an hour. She ignored Mr. Dauntless almost completely,—quite entirely when she discovered Mr. Windomshire in the background. Little old Mr. Van Truder, in his usual state of subjection, was permitted to study the scenery at close range.

"I was so afraid you'd marry that horrid Dauntless fellow," whispered Mrs. Van Truder. Eleanor gave vent to a constrained laugh.

"How perfectly preposterous!"

"When are you to be married, my dear?"

"At once—I mean, quite soon. Isn't the scenery beautiful, Mr. Van Truder?" asked Eleanor in desperation.

"It's too far away. I can't see it," grumbled the old gentleman.

"He's so very near−sighted," explained his wife. "Do you expect to stay long at the Somerset?"

"It all depends," said Eleanor, with a glance at Dauntless.

"Isn't that your governess with Mr. Windomshire? I can't be mistaken."

"Yes, she's going out to spend a few weeks with a rich aunt,—her sister's mother, I think."

"How's that?" gasped the old lady.

"I mean her mother's sister."

"It sounded very strange, my dear."

"About the mother having a sister?" guessed old Mr. Van Truder, sharply. "Seems all right to me."

"They are going to row us across the river," volunteered Eleanor, helplessly.

"Good−morning, Mr. Windomshire," called Mrs. Van Truder. Windomshire started and got very red in the face. Miss Courtenay's bow went unnoticed by the old lady. In sheer despair, the Englishman turned to Dauntless, a fellow−sufferer.

"I say, old man," he began nervously, "I'd like to ask a favour of you."

"Go ahead—anything I can do," said the other, blankly. Windomshire continued in lowered tones:

"Deucedly awkward, but I forgot my bags at Fenlock. I see you've got yours. Would you mind lending me a fresh shirt and a collar, old chap?"

"Gladly," cried Joe, very much relieved. "Will you take them now?" starting to open his bag. Windomshire hastily interposed.

"I'd rather not, old chap. It's rather exposed here, don't you know. Later on, if you please. Thanks, old man; I'll not forget this." They shook hands without any apparent excuse.

"Mr. Windomshire!" called Mrs. Van Truder. He turned with a hopeless look in his eyes. The two girls had misery and consternation plainly stamped in their faces. "We can't all go over in the next boats, you know. I've no doubt you and Miss Thursdale would not in the least mind being left to the last," with a sly smile.

"Oh—er—ah, by Jove!" gasped Windomshire, with a glance at the still faces of the young women. He saw no relief there.

"Blamed cat!" muttered Dauntless, gritting his teeth.

"Mr. Dauntless, will you and Miss Courtenay come with us in this boat? I want some one to keep the snakes away; Mr. Van Truder can't see them, you know."

There was no way out of it. Joe and Anne meekly followed the Van Truders into the wobbly boat, resentment in their hearts, uncertainty in their minds. They rowed away, leaving Windomshire and Eleanor standing among the willows, ill at ease and troubled beyond expression.

CHAPTER V. AS NIGHT APPROACHES

Neither spoke until the boat came to its slippery, uncertain landing− place on the opposite side of the river. Then each breathed easier, in a sigh that seemed to express both relief and dismay.

"It's a very ugly looking river," she murmured encouragingly. She was afraid he might feel obliged, in honour, to offer an explanation for his presence, perhaps attempt to convince her in some tangible way that she was to expect nothing but slavish devotion from him in the future.

"I don't wonder that the bridge gave way," he replied politely. They looked at each other involuntarily, and then instantly looked away.

"I'd give my head to know what she expects of me," thought Windomshire miserably.

"How I despise that old woman!" welled up in Eleanor's bitter heart. Everything was awry. Luckily for both of them a small boy slipped into the river at that moment. He was rescued by the brakeman, but not until the catastrophe had served its purpose as a godsend. The excitement which attended the rescue saved the couple an uncomfortable ten minutes. Eleanor went to the assistance of the distracted mother; Windomshire, in his eagerness to do something, offered to exchange clothes with the dripping trainman; the small boy howled as lustily as his wheezy lungs would permit. Everybody shouted advice to the mother, rebukes to the boy, and praise to the hero; altogether Providence was acting most handsomely.

At last the final boatload of passengers crossed the river and drew up at the landing; Eleanor, with her bewildered fiance, stepped into the beaming presence of Mrs. Van Truder.

"Come with us," she said with a friendliness that shattered all hope. "Mr. Van Truder has just arranged for breakfast at that farmhouse over there. The relief train won't be here for half an hour or more and you must be famished." Eleanor's flimsy excuses were unavailing; her protestations that she could not eat a mouthful fell on obdurate ears. Windomshire, catching sight of the forlorn Anne, was about to assert himself vigorously in declining the invitation when a meaning look from the governess caused him to refrain. The look very plainly told him to accept.

The unhappy couple followed the Van Truders to the nearby farmhouse. They left behind them on the edge of the crowd, seated side by side on a pile of ties, two miserable partners in the fiasco. Gloomy, indeed, was the outlook for Miss Courtenay and the despised Mr. Dauntless. They were silent for many minutes after the departure, rage in their hearts. Then Mr. Dauntless could hold his tongue no longer.

"Damn her!" he exploded so viciously that Anne jumped and cried out,—

"Mr. Dauntless!"

"Oh, you feel just as I do about it only you won't say it aloud," he exclaimed. "I won't stand for it!"

"I—I am sure Miss Thursdale has done nothing to deserve your curses," she began diplomatically.

"Good Heavens, Miss Courtenay, you—Oh, I say, you know I didn't mean Eleanor. The old pelican—that's the one. Old Mrs. Intruder," he grated.

"I am sure it is all quite regular," observed Anne, so seriously that he looked at her in wonder. It began to creep into his head that his speculations were wrong, after all. At any rate it seemed advisable to put a sharp curb on his tongue.

"I'm sorry I spoke as I did about the old lady," he said, after a moment's reflection. "I was thinking of the way in which she left you out of her invitation to breakfast."

"And yourself, incidentally," she smiled.

"Miss Courtenay, I'm—I'm a confounded ass for not thinking of your breakfast. It's not too late. We are both hungry. Won't you come with me and have a bit of something to eat? We'll try that farmhouse ourselves. Come, let us hurry or the crowd will get in ahead of us. Ham and eggs and coffee! they always have that sort of breakfast in farmhouses, I'm told. Come."

[Illustration: Seated side by side...two miserable partner in the fiasco]

She sprang up cheerfully, and followed him across the meadow to the farmhouse. The Van Truder party was entering the door, smoke pouring forth suggestively from a chimney in the rear of the house. The sudden desire for ham and eggs was overcoming, in a way, the pangs of outraged love; there was solace in the new thought.

That breakfast was one never to be forgotten by four persons; two others remembered it to their last days on account of its amazing excellence. A dozen persons were crowded into the little dining−room; no one went forth upon his travels with an empty stomach. No such profitable harvest had ever been reaped by the farmer. Dauntless and Anne ate off of a sewing−table in the corner. Mrs. Van Truder deliberately refused to hear Mr. Windomshire's timorous suggestion that they "make room" for them at the select table. Silent anathemas accompanied every mouthful of food that went down the despot's throat, but she did not know it. Fortunately the lovers were healthy and hungry.

They fared forth after that memorable breakfast with lighter hearts, though still misplaced by an unrelenting fate.

All the way to Omegon Anne sat in the seat with the seething Dauntless, each nursing a pride that had received almost insupportable injuries during the morning hours. Windomshire and Eleanor, under the espionage of the "oldest friend of the family," moped and sighed with a frankness that could not have escaped more discerning eyes. Mrs. Van Truder, having established herself as the much needed chaperon, sat back complacently and gave her charges every opportunity to hold private and no doubt sacred communication in the double seat just across the aisle.

Eleanor pleaded fatigue, and forthwith closed her wistful eyes. Windomshire, with fine consideration, sank into a rapt study of the flitting farm lands. Having got but little sleep among the coals, he finally dropped off into a peaceful cat nap.

Omegon was reached before Eleanor had the courage to awaken him. She did so then only because it was impossible for her to crawl over his knees without losing her dignity; they were planted sturdily against the seat in front. She fled like a scared child to Joe's side, her mind made up to cling to him now, no matter what manner of opposition prevailed.

"I'll go with you, Joe," she whispered fiercely. "I don't care what any one says or thinks. Your cousin WILL meet us with the carriage, won't he?" she concluded piteously. Windomshire also had taken the bull by the horns and was helping Miss Courtenay from the train with an assiduity that brought down the wrath of obstructing passengers upon his devoted head.

"He said he would," replied Dauntless, his spirits in the clouds. "We must get away from these people, Nell. I'll go crazy in another minute. There's Derby waiting for instructions. Dear old Darb—he's a brick. My cousin Jim is a deacon or something in the village church, dear, and he has promised to let us in. I suppose he has a key. He and his wife will be the only witnesses. By George, nothing can stop us now, dear, if you have the nerve to—Where the dickens is Jim? Confound him, I don't see him on the platform."

He looked about the station platform—first anxiously, then impatiently, then—with consternation! His cousin was nowhere in sight. Cold with apprehensiveness, he dashed over to a citizen who wore a star upon his coat, almost dragging Eleanor after him.

"Is Jim Carpenter here? Have you seen him? Do you know him?" he demanded.

"He was here, mister. 'Bout two hours ago, I reckon. I guess you must be the fellow he was to meet—"

"Yes, yes,—where is he now?"

"I don't know, mister. His wife's got pneumonia, an' he told me to tell you he couldn't wait. He took the doctor right out to—"

"Good Lord!" exploded Joe. The citizen jumped a few inches into the air. "He's gone?"

"Yep. But he told me to tell you to go over to the Somerset an' wait till you hear from him."

"Wait—till—I hear—from—him?" groaned Dauntless, wild−eyed but faint. He and Eleanor looked at each other in despair.

"Go—to—the—hotel?" she murmured, her heart in her boots. "I never can do that," she continued. Her voice was full of tears.

Mrs. Van Truder bore down upon them like an angry vulture. They saw her coming, but neither had the strength of purpose to move.

Before they really knew how it happened, she was leading Eleanor to the hotel 'bus and he was limply following, lugging both bags with a faithfulness that seemed pathetic. Two minutes later they were in the 'bus, touching knees with the equally dazed and discomfited English people.

Back on the platform the elongated medical gentleman, Mr. Hooker, was talking loudly, wrathfully to the

station agent. His voice rang in their ears long after the 'bus rolled away on its "trip" to the big summer hotel.

"You say old man Grover ain't dead yet?" Mr. Hooker was growling resentfully, even indignantly.

"He ain't expected to live till night, sir, poor old man," replied the agent.

"Well, I'll be damned!" roared Mr. Hooker. "I don't see any sense in a man of his age hanging on like this. He's eighty−three. My time is valuable"—looking at his big silver watch—"and I can't afford to hang around here if he's going to act like this." The agent stared after him as if he were looking at a maniac. Mr. Hooker set off in the direction of old Mr. Grover's house, which had been pointed out to him by a gaping small boy. "I'll go up and see about it," he remarked, as he stepped across a wide rivulet in the middle of the main street. The Somerset Hotel was situated on the most beautiful point of land touching that trim little lake which attracted hundreds of city people annually by its summer wiles. It was too sedate and quiet to be fashionable; the select few who went there sought rest from the frivolities of the world. Eleanor Thursdale had spent one tiresome but proper season there immediately after the death of her father. She hated everything in connection with the place except the little old− fashioned church at the extreme end of the village street, fully half a mile from the hotel. She had chosen it, after romantic reflection, as the sanctuary in which she should become the wife of the man she loved, spurning the great church in town and one of its loveless matches.

The forenoon is left to the imagination of the reader,—with all of its unsettled plans, its doubts and misgivings, its despairs and its failures, its subterfuges and its strategies, its aggravations and complaints. Bell−boys carried surreptitious notes from room to room; assurances, hopes, and reassurances passed one another in systematic confusion. Love was trying to find its way out of the maze.

Immediately after luncheon Dauntless set out to discover his faithless cousin. Eleanor kept close to her room, in readiness for instant flight. The necessary Mr. Derby had his instructions to remain where he could be found without trouble. Mrs. Van Truder, taking up Eleanor's battles, busied herself and every one else in the impossible task of locating the young woman's trunks, which, according to uncertain reports, had gone mysteriously astray. Moreover, she had prepared a telegram to the young lady's mother, assuring her that she was quite safe; but Mr. Dauntless boldly intercepted Mr. Van Truder on his way to the desk.

"Allow me," he remarked, deliberately taking the despatch from the old gentleman. "I'll send it from the station. Don't bother about it, Mr. Van Truder." He drove through the village, but did not stop at the station; his instructions to the driver did not include a pause anywhere. It is not necessary to relate what took place when he descended upon the unfortunate Jim; it is sufficient to say that he dragged him from his sick wife's bedside and berated him soundly for his treachery. Then it was all rearranged,—the hapless Jim being swept into promises which he could not break, even with death staring his wife in the face. The agitated Mr. Dauntless drove back to the hotel with a new set of details perfected. This time nothing should go wrong.

His first action was to acquaint Derby with the plans, and then to send a note of instructions to Eleanor, guarding against any chance that they might not be able to communicate with each other in person.

"It's all fixed," he announced to Derby, in a secluded corner of the grounds. "To−night at nine we are to be at the church down the road there—see it? Nobody is on to us, and Jim has a key. He will meet you there at a quarter of nine. But, hang it all, his wife can't act as a witness. We've got to provide one. He suggested the postmaster, but I don't like the idea; it looks too much like a cheap elopement. I'd just as soon have the cook or the housemaid. I'll get Eleanor there if I have to kill that Van Truder woman. Now, whom shall we have as the second witness?"

"Windomshire, I'm afraid," lamented Derby. "You won't be able to get rid of him."

"Hang him!" groaned Dauntless, his spirits falling, but instantly reviving. "But he's dead in love with Miss Courtenay. It's pitiful, old man. He feels that he's got to marry Nell, but it's not in his heart to do it. Now if we could only shunt him off on to Miss Courtenay this evening! Her train leaves at nine, they say. He might be forced to take her to the station if you will only get busy and make him jealous."

"Jealous? I?"

"Certainly. It won't be much of an effort for you, and it will help me immensely. Make love to her this afternoon, and when you suggest taking her to the station this evening he'll be so wrought up that he won't stand for it. See what I mean?"

"Now see here, Joe, I'm willing to do a great deal for you, but this is too much. You forget that I am a minister of the gospel. It's—"

"I know, old man, but you might do a little thing like this for—By Jove, I've got it! Why not have old Mr. Van

Truder for the other witness?"

Mr. Van Truder was crossing the lawn, picking his way carefully.

"Good afternoon," greeted Dauntless.

"Afternoon," responded Mr. Van Truder. "Is this the hotel?"

"No, sir; the hotel is about ten feet to your left. By the way, Mr. Van Truder, would you mind doing me a favour this evening?"

"Gladly. Who are you?"

"Joe Dauntless."

"Anything, my dear Joe."

"Well, it's a dead secret."

"A secret? Trust me," cried the old man, joyfully.

"First, let me introduce my friend, the Rev. Mr. Derby. He's in the secret. It will go no farther, I trust, Mr. Van Truder."

"My wife says I can't keep a secret, but I'll show her that I can. Trust me, my boy."

"I'll bet you a hundred dollars you can't keep this one," said Joe, inspired.

"Done!"

"Well," bravely but cautiously, "I'm going to be married to−night. Be careful now! Look out! Don't explode! Remember the bet!" The old gentleman repressed his feelings.

"Beautiful!" he exclaimed. "Congratulations, my boy."

"Now for the favour. I want you to act as a witness. It's to be a very quiet affair." Dauntless explained as much of the situation to him as he thought necessary, omitting the lady's name. Mr. Van Truder bubbled over with joy and eagerness. He promised faithfully to accompany Mr. Derby, pooh−hooing the suggestion that he could not slip away from the hotel without his wife being aware of the fact.

"Trust me, my boy. Don't worry. I'm always Johnny−on−the−spot. Where did you say the hotel was? I'll go up and get ready. Oh, by the way, who is the young lady?"

"She's a friend of Mr. Dauntless's," said Mr. Derby.

"To be sure; I might have known. Silly question."

The young men watched him enter the hotel, but they did not see him fall into the clutches of his wife just inside the door.

"Where have you been?" demanded Mrs. Van Truder.

"I've been looking everywhere for you, my dear," he said, almost whimpering. "I've got a grand secret, but I can't tell you. Don't ask me!"

"Is it a wedding?" she demanded sternly.

"Dear me! Do you know it too?" he cried, bewildered. "But that's not the real secret; it's only part of it. Joe is going to marry some friend of his to−night—but that's as far as I'll go. I'll NOT betray the secret." He hurried away to avoid questions, muttering to himself as he went: "She's dying to know. But a secret's a secret. She sha'n't know that I am to be a witness."

Mrs. Van Truder pondered long and deeply, but she was not well enough acquainted with all of the facts to hazard a guess as to who the girl might be. It came to her memory that Dauntless had been with Miss Courtenay all morning, however, and she wondered not a little. Windomshire was approaching in search of Anne, who was to have met him as if by accident in a corner of the reading−room.

"Oh, Mr. Windomshire," exclaimed Mrs. Van Truder, darting toward him.

"How do, Mrs. Van Truder? How are you to−day?" he asked, scarcely able to hide his annoyance.

"That is the tenth time you've asked me that question. I must repeat: I am quite well."

"Oh, pardon my inquisitiveness. It has been a very long day, you know."

"I want you and Miss Thursdale to dine with me at eight this evening. I think I'll have a little surprise for you," she said mysteriously. Windomshire glared, and then managed to give a provisional acceptance. It all depended on the hour for leaving for the train. As he hurried off to find Anne he was groaning to himself: "How the deuce can I go to a dinner and run off again with Anne? I've got everything arranged. I can't let a beastly dinner interfere. I won't go, hang me if I do." He came upon Anne in the corner of the library—the most unfrequented corner.

"Well?" she questioned eagerly. He clasped her hands, beaming once more.

"I've seen him, dear. It's all right. My word, I've had no end of a busy day. The confounded fellow was out making calls on the congregation, as they say, and I had to pursue him from house to house, always missing him, by Jove."

"But you DID find him?" anxiously.

"Of course. He will be at the church at nine to−night—sharp. He understands that no one is to know about it. His fee is ten pounds— quite a bit for a chap like him. I found him calling upon a fellow who is about to die—a Mr. Grover. He sent out word I'd have to wait as the old gentleman was passing away. By Jove, do you know I was that intense that I sent in word that the old gentleman would have to wait a bit—I COULDN'T. The pastor came out and—well, it seems that the fee for helping a chap to get married is more substantial than what he gets for helping one to die. And, as luck would have it, I found a fellow who will act as one of the witnesses to the ceremony at this same house,—a Mr. Hooker, Anne. He came down on the train with us. Tall, dark, professional looking man. He was sitting on Mr. Grover's front steps when I got there. The other witness—must have two, you know—is the head−waiter in the dining−room here—"

"The—head−waiter?" she gasped.

"He's a very decent sort of chap, my dear—and, besides, we can't be choosers. Waiters are most discreet fellows, too. He's to get two pounds for his trouble. By Jove, I think I've done rather well. I'm sorry if you don't approve," he lamented.

"But I do approve, Harry," she cried bravely. "It's lovely!"

"Good! I knew you would. Now all we have to do is to slip away from here this evening, and—Oh, I say, hang it all! Mrs. Van Truder has asked me to dine with them this evening."

"Isn't she running you a bit?" cried Anne, indignantly. "She had you for breakfast and luncheon and now it's dinner. I daresay she'll have you for tea too."

"But I'm not going to her confounded dinner. That's settled. I can't do it, you know, and be on time for the wedding. Deuce take it, what does she take a fellow for? Hello, here comes the chap that Dauntless introduced to us this morning." Derby was approaching with a warm and ingratiating smile. "What's his name? Confound him."

"Mr. Derby, I think. Why can't they give us a moment's peace?" she pouted. Derby came up to them, his eyes sparkling with a fire which they could not and were not to understand. He had surveyed them from a distance for some time before deciding to ruthlessly, cruelly break in upon the tranquil situation.

"She's a pretty girl," he reflected, unconsciously going back to his college days, and quite forgetting his cloth—which, by the way, was a neat blue serge with a tender stripe. Consoling himself with the thought that he was doing it to accommodate an old friend, the good− looking Mr. Derby boldly entered the lists for the afternoon. He felt, somehow, that he had it in his power to make Mr. Windomshire quite jealous—and at the same time do nothing reprehensible. What he did succeed in doing, alas, was to make two young people needlessly miserable for a whole afternoon—bringing on grievous headaches and an attack of suppressed melancholia that savoured somewhat of actual madness.

[Illustration: Windomshire]

True to his project, he laboured hard and skilfully for hours. Windomshire moved about in solitude, gnashing his teeth, while Derby unceremoniously whisked the dazed Anne off for pleasant walks or held her at bay in some secluded corner of the parlours. By dinner−time, encouraged by Joe's wild but cautious applause, he had driven Windomshire almost to distraction. A thing he did not know, however,— else his pride might have cringed perceptibly,—was that Anne Courtenay was growing to hate him as no one was ever hated before.

"Well," he said to the nervous Mr. Dauntless at seven o'clock that evening, having arrived at what he called the conclusion of his day's work, "I think I've done all that was expected, haven't I?"

"You've got him crazy, old boy. Look at him! It's the first minute he's had since half−past two. Say, what do you think of this cursed weather? It's raining again—and muddy! Great Scot, old man! it's knee deep, and we don't dare take a carriage to the church. One can't sneak worth a cent in a cab, you know. See you later! There's Eleanor waiting to speak to me. By George, I'm nervous. You WON'T fail us, old man?"

"I'll do my part, Joe," said Derby, smiling.

"Well, so long, if I don't see you before nine. You look out for old Mr. Van Truder, will you? See that he sneaks out properly. And—"

"Don't worry, old chap. Go to Miss Thursdale. She seems nervous."

CHAPTER VI. THE ROAD TO PARADISE

Night again—and again the mist and the drizzle; again the country lane, but without the warm club−house fire, the cheery lights, the highball, and the thumping motor car. Soggy, squashy mud instead of the clean tonneau; heavy, cruel wading through unknown by−ways in place of the thrilling rush to Fenlock. Not twenty−four hours had passed, and yet it seemed that ages lay between the joyous midnight and the sodden, heart−breaking eve that followed.

The guests at the Somerset kept close indoors,—that is, most of them did. It is with those who fared forth resolutely into the night that we have to do; the rest of the world is to be barred from any further connection with this little history. It is far out in the dreary country lane and not inside the warm hotel that we struggle to attain our end. First one, then another stealthy figure crept forth into the drizzle; before the big clock struck half−past eight, at least six respectable and supposedly sensible persons had mysteriously disappeared. Only one of our close acquaintances remained in the hotel,—Mrs. Van Truder. It was not to be long, however, before she, too, would be adventuring forth in search of the unknown.

By this it may be readily understood that Mr. Van Truder had succeeded in escaping from beneath her very nose, as it were.

The little village church stood at the extreme end of the street,— dark, dismal, quite awe−inspiring on a night like this. A narrow lane stretched from the hotel to the sanctuary and beyond. There is nothing at hand to show whether it is a Methodist, a Presbyterian, or a Baptist church. As the two young women most vitally concerned in this tale were professedly high church, it is therefore no more than right that, in the darkness, it should be looked upon as an Episcopalian church.

Two stumbling figures, pressing close to each other in the shelter of a single wobbly umbrella, forged their uncertain way through the muddy lane. Except for the brief instants when the dull flicker of lightning came to their relief, they were in pitch darkness.

"Beastly dark, isn't it?" said one of the figures.

"And beastly muddy too," said the other, in a high, disconsolate treble. "Oh, dear, where are we?"

"I don't know, but I feel as though we were about to step off of something every moment. Do you know, Anne, it's extraordinary that I shouldn't know how to light one of these confounded lanterns."

"Try it again, Harry dear. I'll hold the umbrella."

"Oh, I see! By Jove, one has to open the thing, don't you know. Ah, there we are! That's better," he said, after he had succeeded in finally lighting the wick. He held the lantern up close to her face and they looked at each other for a moment. "Anne, I do love you!" he exclaimed. Then he kissed her. "That's the first time I've had a chance to kiss you in thirty−six hours."

They plodded onward, closer together than ever, coming at last to the little gate which opened into the churchyard. Before them stood the black little building with its steeple, but the windows were as dark as Erebus. They stopped in consternation. He looked at his watch.

"Confound him, he's not here!" growled Windomshire.

"Perhaps we are early," suggested Anne, feebly.

"It's a quarter to nine," he said. "I suppose there is nothing left for us to do but to wait. I'll look around a bit, dear. Perhaps the witnesses are here somewhere."

"Oo−oo−ooh! Don't leave me!" she almost shrieked. "Look! There is a graveyard! I won't stay here alone!" They were standing at the foot of the rough wooden steps leading up to the church door.

"Pooh! Don't be afraid of tombstones," he scoffed; but he was conscious of a little shiver in his back. "They can't bite, you know. Besides, all churches have graveyards and crypts and—"

"This one has no crypt," she announced positively. "Goodness, I'm mud up to my knees and rain down to them. Why doesn't he come?"

"I'll give the signal; we had to arrange one, you know, for the sake of identity." He gave three loud, guttural coughs. A dog in the distance howled mournfully, as if in response. Anne crept closer to his side.

"It sounded as if some one were dying," she whispered. "Look, isn't that a light?—over there among the

gravestones!" A light flickered for an instant in the wretched little graveyard and then disappeared as mysteriously as it came. "It's gone! How ghostly!"

"Extraordinary! I don't understand. By Jove, it's beginning to rain again. I'm sure to have tonsilitis. I feel it when I cough." He coughed again, louder than before.

Suddenly the steady beam of a dark lantern struck their faces squarely; a moment later the cadaverous Mr. Hooker was climbing over the graveyard fence.

"Am I late?" he asked, as he came forward.

"I say, turn that beastly light the other way," complained Windomshire, half blinded. "I thought no one but robbers carried dark lanterns."

"The darker the deed, the darker the lantern," said Mr. Hooker, genially. "Good−evening, madam. Are we the only ones here?" He was very matter−of−fact and business−like; Anne loathed him on the instant.

"We're all here but the minister and the other witness. I'll cough again—although it hurts me to do it."

He coughed thrice, but instead of a response in kind, three sharp whistles came from the trees at the left.

"What's that?" he gasped. "Has he forgotten the signal?"

"Maybe he is trying to cough," said Hooker, "and can't do any better than wheeze. It's this rotten weather."

"No, it was a whistle. Good Heavens, Anne—it may be detectives."

"Detectives!" exclaimed Mr. Hooker, hoarsely. "Then this is no place for me. Excuse me, I'll just step around the corner." As he scurried off, he might have been heard to mutter to himself: "They've been hounding me ever since that job in the Cosgrove cemetery. Damn 'em, I wonder if they think I'm up here to rob the grave of one of these jays." From which it may be suspected that Mr. Hooker had been employed in the nefarious at one time or another.

"Detectives, Harry?" gasped Anne. "Why should there be detectives? We're not criminals."

"You can't tell what Mrs. Thursdale may have done when she discovered− −Hello! There's a light down the road! 'Gad, I'll hide this lantern until we're sure." He promptly stuck the lantern inside his big raincoat and they were in darkness again. A hundred yards to the left a light bobbed about, reminding them of childhood's will−o'−the−wisp. Without a word Windomshire drew her around the church, stumbling over a discarded pew seat that stood against the wall. Groaning with pain, he urged her to crouch down with him behind the seat. All the while he held the umbrella manfully over her devoted head.

Voices were heard, drawing nearer and nearer—one deep and cheery, the other high and querulous.

"It—it—oh, Harry, it's that Mr. Derby!" she whispered. "I'd know his voice in a thousand."

"The devil!" he whispered intensely, gripping her hand.

Mr. Derby was saying encouragingly: "There is the church, Mr. Van Trader. Brace up. We seem to be the first to arrive."

"It's much farther away than you think," growled Mr. Van Truder. "I can't see the lights in the window."

"There are no lights yet. We are ahead of them. I'll try the door."

The young minister kicked the mud from his shoes as he went up the steps with the lantern. He tried the door vigorously, and then, holding the lantern high, surveyed the surroundings. Mr. Van Truder, bundled up like a motorman, stood below shivering—but with joy.

"This is a great night for an affair of this kind," he quaked. "By George, I feel twenty years younger. I believe I could turn handsprings."

"I wouldn't if I were you. Don't forget your somersault over that log back there, and your splendid headspin in the mud puddle. It's past nine o'clock. Joe's cousin was to be here at 8.45. Wonder what keeps him. Joe will be here himself in a jiffy. Dear me, what a dreadful night they have chosen for a wedding!"

Windomshire whispered in horror to the girl beside him: "Good Lord, Anne, they're following us."

"Please, Harry," she whispered petulantly, "hold the umbrella still. The water from the rainspout is dripping down my back."

"By George, I wish Mrs. Van Truder could see me now," came valiantly from the old gentleman around the corner. "Say, whistle again." Derby gave three sharp, shrill whistles. In silence they waited a full minute for the response. There was not a sound except the dripping of the rain.

"I'm afraid something is wrong," said Derby. Just at that instant Windomshire, despite most heroic efforts to prevent the catastrophe, sneezed with a violence that shook his entire frame. "Sh! don't speak," hissed the startled

minister. "We are being watched. That was unmistakably a sneeze."

"I can't see any one," whispered Mr. Van Trader, excitedly. "I see just as well in the dark as I do in the light, too."

"Some one is coming. See! There's a light down the road. Let's step out of sight just for a moment."

Windomshire sneezed again, as if to accelerate the movements of the two men.

"Hang it all!" he gurgled in despair. Mr. Derby had blinded his lantern and was hurrying off into the grove with his companion.

"I can't help laughing, Harry," whispered Anne, giggling softly. "You sneeze like an elephant."

"But an elephant has more sense than to sneeze as I do. I knew I'd take cold. Anne, they're after us. It's old Mrs. Van Truder's work. What are they up to?"

"Whatever it is, dear, they're just as much mystified as we are. Did you hear him whistle? It is a signal."

"I say, Anne, it's a beastly mess I've got you into," groaned he.

"Dear old Harry, it is but the beginning of the mess you're getting yourself into. I love this—every bit of it."

"You're ripping, Anne; that's what you are. I—Great Scotland! Here comes the head−waiter, but we don't dare show ourselves. Did you ever know such beastly luck?"

"There's another man too, away back there. And, look! Isn't that a light coming through the trees back of the gravestones? Good Heavens, Harry, we can't be married in a public thoroughfare. Everybody is walking with lanterns. It's awful."

"Let's go around to the rear of the church," he exclaimed suddenly. "Perhaps we can get our brains to work on a plan of action. But, look here, Anne, no matter who they are or what they want, I'm going to marry you to−night if I have to do it in the face of the entire crowd."

As they scurried off through the tall wet grass to a less exposed station, a solitary figure came haltingly through the little gate. It was the head−waiter, and, as he carried no lantern, he was compelled to light matches now and then; after getting his bearings he would dart resolutely on for a dozen paces before lighting another. Stopping in front of the church door, he nervously tried to penetrate the gloom with an anxious gaze; then, suddenly bethinking, he gave three timid little coughs. Getting no immediate response, he growled aloud in his wrath:

"I've coughed my head off in front of every house between here and the hotel, and I'm gettin' darned tired of it. I don't like this business; and I never could stand for graveyards. Good Lord! what's that?"

Three sharp whistles came to his alert ears, coming, it seemed, from the very heart of some grim old gravestone. A man strode boldly across the yard from the gate, his walk indicating that he was perfectly familiar with the lay of the land.

"Who coughed?" he demanded loudly. "Is there no one here? What the dickens does it mean? Joe Dauntless! Where are you? No fooling now; my wife's worse, and I can't stay here all night." He whistled again, and the head−waiter coughed in a bewildered reply. "That's queer. Nothing was said about coughing."

"Hello!" called the head−waiter. "Is it you, sir?"

Joe Dauntless's cousin held his lantern on high and finally discovered the waiter near the pile of cordwood, ready to run at a moment's notice.

"Who are you?" demanded Mr. Carpenter.

"Gustave. But you ain't the man."

"I ain't, eh? Didn't you whistle a minute ago?"

"I ain't supposed to. I cough. Say, do you know if a wedding has taken place here? I am a witness."

"Oh, I see. He said he'd bring one. Are you alone?"

"I don't know. It feels like a crowd every time I cough. Are you the preacher?"

"No, I'm the bridegroom's cousin. We've got to get in through a window. I couldn't find my key. Would you mind giving me a leg?"

"A leg? Nothing was said about legs," said the waiter, moving away. Carpenter laughed.

"I mean a boost up to the window."

"Oh! Sure."

"There's one in the rear I can smash. We'll get inside and light up. I can open the door from that side, too. Come on—follow me." They turned the corner and followed the path so lately taken by Windomshire and Anne.

As they came to the back of the church they were startled and not a little alarmed by the sound of sudden scurrying and a well− defined imprecation, but it was too dark for them to distinguish any one. While they were trying to effect an entrance through one of the windows, other mystified participants in the night's affairs were looking on from secret and divers hiding−places. Far out in the little grove Derby and his old companion watched the operations of the church−breakers, the sickly glare of Carpenter's lantern as it stood upon the edge of the rain barrel affording an unholy light for the occasion. Windomshire and Anne, crouching behind a stack of old benches, looked on in amazement. Mr. Hooker, whose conscience was none too easy, doubtless for excellent reasons, peered forth from behind a tall tombstone. He had arrived at the conclusion that he was being hounded down as a body−snatcher.

"This is a devil of a mess," he muttered dolefully. "If they catch me in this graveyard, I'll have a hard time proving an alibi. What an idiot I was to get into this thing! I guess I'll get out of it. He's got plenty of witnesses and I've got his ten dollars." He began sneaking off toward the extreme west end of the graveyard, bent on finding the road to town. "Holy smoke!" stopping short. "Another bunch of them coming! I'm surrounded!" He dropped down behind a weed−covered mound and glared straight ahead. Almost directly in his path a lantern wobbled and reeled slowly, finally bringing its bearer to the fence between the burying−ground and the churchyard. A man carried the light and half carried the form of a woman besides.

"Brace up, Nell dear," Mr. Hooker heard the newcomer say as tenderly as his exertions would allow. "The worst is over. Here's the church. Good Heavens, just think of being lost in a graveyard!"

"And climbing four fences and a tree," moaned Eleanor Thursdale. They had come up through the graveyard by mistake.

"It wasn't a tree; it was a fence post. Great Scot! There's no light in the church. What's up? Wait here, dear, and I'll investigate."

"Alone? Never!" she cried. They climbed their fifth fence, notwithstanding the fact that a gate was near at hand.

"This is an awful pickle I've got you into. You ought to hate me—" he was groaning, but she checked him nobly.

"Hush, Joe, I LOVE it," she cried.

"You just wait and see how happy I'll make you for this." He was about to kiss her rapturously, but the act was stayed by the sound of a shrill whistle, thrice given. "There's Jim Carpenter and Derby," he exclaimed, and whistled in response. A moment later Derby strolled up from the grove, followed by the chattering Mr. Van Truder.

"That you, Joe?"

"Hello, Darb. Good! Where's Jim?"

Some one whistled sharply off to the left, and then Jim Carpenter came hurrying up, the head−waiter close behind.

"Hello, Joe. Say, has either of you been coughing?" demanded Carpenter, his hair ready to stand on end.

"I should say not," said Joe. "I've scarcely been breathing."

"Then some ghost is having a hemorrhage," said the head−waiter, dismally.

[Illustration: "Hush, Joe, I LOVE it," she cried.]

"Hello, Mr. Dauntless, are you a witness too?"

"Say, Joe," said his cousin, quickly, "there's something strange going on. The whole place is full of people. I went back there to open a window and at least two men coughed—one of 'em sneezed. We're being watched. This man says he heard a woman back there, and I saw a funny kind of light in the graveyard."

"Hang 'em!" growled Joe. "We can't stop now. Open up the church, Jim."

"Can't. Lost my key. Is this Miss Thursdale? Glad to meet you. The window's the only way and they're surely watching back there."

"Mamma has sent the officers after us," wailed Eleanor.

"Let's go home," said the waiter. "I didn't agree to stay out all night."

"Agree? Aha, I see. You are a spy!" cried Joe.

"A spy? I guess not. I'm a witness."

"It's the same thing," cackled Mr. Van Truder. "You're a spy witness."

"Joe, isn't this fellow your witness?" demanded Carpenter.

"I should say not. Mr. Van Truder is mine."

"By George, I don't understand—"

"Never mind, Jim, break into the church and let's have it over with. It's going to rain again."

"Oh, I'm so tired," moaned the poor bride, mud−spattered, wet, and very far from being the spick and span young woman that fashionable society knew and loved.

"By Jove!" came suddenly from the darkness, startling the entire party—a masculine voice full of surprise and—yes, consternation. Then there strode into the circle of light a tall figure in a shimmering mackintosh, closely followed by a young, resolute woman.

"Windomshire!" gasped Dauntless, leaping in front of Eleanor, prepared to defend her with his life.

"Miss Courtenay, too," murmured Eleanor, peeking under his arm.

"Yes, by Jove," announced the harassed Englishman, at bay,— "Windomshire and Miss Courtenay." There was a long silence—a tableau, in fact. "Well, why doesn't some one say something? You've got us, don't you know."

Eleanor Thursdale was the first to find words. She was faint with humiliation, but strong with the new resolve. Coming forth from behind Dauntless, she presented herself before the man her mother had chosen.

"So you have found me out, Mr. Windomshire," she said pleadingly, a wry little smile on her lips. "You know all about it?"

"I—er—by Jove, this is quite beyond me. Found you out? My word, you don't mean to say—"

"I say, old man," said Dauntless, manfully, "let me explain. We've always loved each other. It isn't that she—"

"Hang it all, man, I knew that," expostulated Windomshire. "It was a mistake all around. I love Anne, don't you know. There's no real harm done, I'm sure. But what puzzles me is this: why does Miss Thursdale persist in pursuing us if she loves you and doesn't care to marry me?"

"The deuce! I like that," cried Dauntless. "You'd better begin by asking questions at home."

"I take it," interposed Mr. Derby, with rare tact and discernment, "that both of you expect to be married, but not to each other as originally planned." Both Eleanor and Windomshire signified eager affirmation in more ways than one. "Then it seems to me a simple case of coincidence, which may be explained later on. Why discuss it now? I am in reality a minister, Miss Courtenay, and I am here to unite Miss Thursdale and Mr. Dauntless in the holy bonds of matrimony. I trust we may expect no interference on the part of Mr. Windomshire?"

"Good Lord! No!" almost shouted Windomshire, clasping Anne's hand in a mighty grasp. "That's what we are here for ourselves—to be married— but the damned parson has deceived us." Jim Carpenter came out of his trance at this. "Say, are you the fellow Rev. Smith was to marry? Well, he won't be here. There's a surprise pound party at his house and the whole town is there. He couldn't leave to save his soul. It's the way he gets his living."

"Oh, Anne!" cried Windomshire, in real despair.

Anne slipped into the breach with rare old English fortitude. She addressed herself sweetly to Mr. Derby.

"Mr. Derby, do you remember saying this afternoon that you'd do anything in the world for me?" Mr. Derby blushed and looked most unworthy of his calling, but managed to say that he WOULD do anything in the world for her. "Then, please take the place of the minister who couldn't come."

"Good!" cried Dauntless, almost dancing.

"I will, Miss Courtenay," said Derby. Windomshire grasped him by the hand, speechless with joy and relief.

"I don't understand all this," complained Mr. Van Truder, vainly trying to see the excited, jubilant quartette. He only knew that they were all talking at once, suddenly without restraint. "I wish my wife were here; she'd understand."

Jim Carpenter at last came to his senses and, dragging the head−waiter after him, sped to the rear of the church. A few minutes later lights flashed in the windows and then the front door swung open. Carpenter and Gustave stood smiling upon the threshold.

"Enter!" called out the former. As the group quickly passed through the doorway, a long figure climbed down from the fence hard by and ventured up to the portal. It was Mr. Hooker, his face the picture of bewilderment.

"Well, this beats me!" he ejaculated, leaning against the door jamb; none of those at the altar heard his remark. He stood there listening until the last words of the service which united two couples were uttered. Then he turned sorrowfully away and started across the yard. The sound of a wedding march played upon the wheezy cabinet

organ by Jim Carpenter followed him into the gloom; above the gasp of the organ was lifted the unmistakable chatter of joyous voices.

As he passed through the gate a great vehicle rolled up and stopped. It was drawn by two steaming horses, and the wagon lanterns told him that it was the Somerset Hotel 'bus. "I'll ride back with 'em," he thought comfortably.

Some one climbed down from the rear of the 'bus, assisted by two young men in brass buttons. Mr. Hooker made way for a corpulent, puffing old lady. She stopped in front of him and demanded in hot, strident tones:

"Where is my husband?"

"Your husband?" repeated Mr. Hooker, politely. "Madam, you can search me. There's a whole churchful of husbands up there."

"You—you—" she sputtered. "Am I too late? Support me, you fools," she cried to the two bell−boys. They hurried across the churchyard, Mr. Hooker following. At the doorway she stopped, glaring hard at the well−lighted interior. "Mr. Van Truder! Mr. Van Truder!" she called out angrily, but her joyful other half did not hear her. He was trying at that moment to organise the company into a wedding procession.

"Say," said Mr. Hooker, "maybe you'd better cough three times."