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***** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE FORTUNE HUNTER *****

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[Illustration: "You can be worth a million ... within a year"]

THE FORTUNE HUNTER

By

Louis Joseph Vance

Author Of "The Brass Bowl,"
"The Bronze Bell," Etc.

With illustrations by
Arthur William Brown

1910

To

George Spellvin, Esq.,

This book is cheerfully dedicated

CONTENTS

CHAPTER

- I. FROM HIM THAT HATH NOT
- II. TO HIM THAT HATH
- III. INSPIRATION
- IV. TRIUMPH OF MR. HOMER LITTLE JOHN
- V. MARGARET'S DAUGHTER
- VI. INTRODUCTION TO MISS CARPENTER
- VII. A WINDOW IN RADVILLE
- VIII. THE MAN OF BUSINESS IN EMBRYO
- IX. SMALL BEGINNINGS
- X. ROLAND BARNETTE'S FRIEND
- XI. BLINKY LOCKWOOD
- XII. DUNCAN'S GRUBSTAKE
- XIII. THE BUSINESS MAN AND MR. BURNHAM
- XIV. MOSTLY ABOUT BETTY

- XV. MANOEUVRES OF JOSIE
- XVI. WHERE RADVILLE FEARED TO TREAD
- XVII. TRACEY'S TROUBLES
- XVIII. A BARGAIN IS A BARGAIN
- XIX. PROVING THE PERSPICUITY OF MR. KELLOGG
- XX. ROLAND SHOWS HIS HAND
- XXI. AS OTHERS SAW HIM
- XXII. ROLAND'S TRIUMPH
- XXIII. THE RAINBOW'S END

ILLUSTRATIONS

"You can be worth a million ... within a year"

"You mean you're going to work here?"

"Four hundred dollars, Mr. Sheriff"

"Betty!"

"You're a thief with a reward out for you"

"Forever and ever and a day"

I

FROM HIM THAT HATH NOT

Receiver at ear, Spaulding, of Messrs. Atwater & Spaulding, importers of motoring garments and accessories, listened to the switchboard operator's announcement with grave attention, acknowledging it with a toneless: "All right. Send him in." Then hooking up the desk telephone he swung round in his chair to face the door of his private office, and in a brief ensuing interval painstakingly ironed out of his face and attitude every indication of the frame of mind in which he awaited his caller. It was, as a matter of fact, anything but a pleasant one: he had a distasteful duty to perform; but that was the last thing he designed to become evident. Like most good business men he nursed a pet superstition or two, and of the number of these the first was that he must in all his dealings present an inscrutable front, like a

poker-player's: captains of industry were uniformly like that, Spaulding understood; if they entertained emotions it was strictly in private. Accordingly he armoured himself with a magnificent imperturbability which at times almost deceived its wearer.

Occasionally it deceived others: notably now it bewildered Duncan as he entered on the echo of Spaulding's "Come!" He had apprehended the visage of a thunderstorm, with a rattle of brusque complaints: he encountered Spaulding as he had always seemed: a little, urbane figure with a blank face, the blanker for glasses whose lenses seemed always to catch the light and, glaring, mask the eyes behind them; a prosperous man of affairs, well groomed both as to body and as to mind; a machine for the transaction of business, with all a machine's vivacity and temperamental responsiveness. It was just that quality in him that Duncan envied, who was vaguely impressed that, if he himself could only imitate, however minutely, the phlegm of a machine, he might learn to ape something of its efficiency and so, ultimately, prove himself of some worth to the world--and, incidentally, to Nathaniel Duncan. Thus far his spasmodic attempts to adapt to the requirements and limitations of the world of business his own equipment of misfit inclinations and ill-assorted abilities, had unanimously turned out signal failures. So he envied Spaulding without particularly admiring him.

Now the sight of his employer, professionally bland and capable, and with no animus to be discerned in his attitude, provided Duncan with one brief, evanescent flash of hope, one last expiring instant of dignity (tempered by his unquenchable humour) in which to face his fate. Something of the hang-dog vanished from his habit and for a little time he carried himself again with all his one-time grace and confidence.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Spaulding," he said, replying to a nod as he dropped into the chair that nod had indicated. A faint smile lightened his expression and made it quite engaging.

"G'dafternoon." Spaulding surveyed him swiftly, then laced his fat little fingers and contemplated them with detached intentness. "Just get in, Duncan?"

"On the three-thirty from Chicago...."

There was a pause, during which Spaulding reviewed his fingernails with impartial interest; in that pause Duncan's poor little hope died a natural death. "I got your wire," he resumed; "I mean, it got me--overtook me at Minneapolis.... So here I am."

"You haven't wasted time."

"I fancied the matter might be urgent, sir."

Spaulding lifted his brows ever so slightly. "Why?"

"Well, I gathered from the fact that you wired me to come home that you wanted my advice."

A second time Spaulding gestured with his eyebrows, for once fairly surprised out of his pose. "_Your_ advice!..."

"Yes," said Duncan evenly: "as to whether you ought to give up your customers on my route or send them a man who could sell goods."

"Well...." Spaulding admitted.

"Oh, don't think I'm boasting of my acuteness: anybody could have guessed as much from the great number of heavy orders I have not been sending you."

"You've had bad luck...."

"You mean you have, Mr. Spaulding. It was good luck for me to be drawing down my weekly cheques, bad luck to you not to have a man who could earn them."

His desperate honesty touched Spaulding a trifle; at the risk of not seeming a business man to himself he inclined dubiously to relent, to give Duncan another chance. The fellow was likeable enough, his employer considered; he had good humour and even in dejection, distinction; whatever he was not, he was a man of birth and breeding. His face might be rusty with a day-old stubble, as it was; his shirt-cuffs frayed, his shoes down at the heel, his baggy clothing weirdly ready-made, as they were: there remained his air. You'd think he might amount to something, to somewhat more than a mere something, given half a chance in the right direction. Then what?... Spaulding sought from Duncan elucidation of this riddle.

"Duncan," he said, "what's the trouble?"

"I thought you knew that; I thought that was why you called me in with my route half-covered."

"You mean--?"

"I mean I can't sell your line."

"Why?"

"God only knows. I want to, badly enough. It's just general incompetence, I presume."

"What makes you think that?"

Duncan smiled bitterly. "Experience," he said.

"You've tried--what else?"

"A little of everything--all the jobs open to a man with a knowledge of Latin and Greek and the higher mathematics: shipping clerk, time-keeper, cashier--all of 'em."

"And yet Kellogg believes in you."

Duncan nodded dolefully. "Harry's a good friend. We roomed together at college. That's why he stands for me."

"He says you only need the right opening--."

"And nobody knows where that is, except my unfortunate employers: it's the back door going out, for mine every time.... Oh, Harry's been a prince to me. He's found me four or five jobs with friends of his--like yourself. But I don't seem to last. You see I was brought up to be ornamental and irregular rather than useful; to blow about in motor cars and keep a valet busy sixteen hours a day--and all that sort of thing. My father's failure--you know about that?"

Spaulding nodded. Duncan went on gloomily, talking a great deal more freely than he would at any other time--suffering, in fact, from that species of auto hypnosis induced by the sound of his own voice recounting his misfortunes, which seems especially to affect a man down on his luck.

"That smash came when I was five years out of college--I'd never thought of turning my hand to anything in all that time. I'd always had more coin than I could spend--never had to consider the worth of money or how hard it is to earn: my father saw to all that. He seemed not to want me to work: not that I hold that against him; he'd an idea I'd turn out a genius of some sort or other, I believe.... Well, he failed and died all in a week, and I found myself left with an extensive wardrobe, expensive tastes, an impractical education--and not so much of that that you'd notice it--and not a cent.... I was too proud to look to my friends for help in those days--and perhaps that was as well; I sought jobs on my own.... Did you ever keep books in a fish-market?"

"No." Spaulding's eyes twinkled behind his large, shiny glasses.

"But what's the use of my boring you?" Duncan made as if to rise, suddenly remembering himself.

"You're not. Go on."

"I didn't mean to; mostly, I presume, I've been blundering round an explanation of Kellogg's kindness to me, in my usual ineffectual way--felt somehow an explanation was due you, as the latest to suffer through his misplaced interest in me."

"Perhaps," said Spaulding, "I am beginning to understand. Go on: I'm interested. About the fish-market?"

"Oh, I just happened to think of it as a sample experience--and the last of that particular brand. I got nine dollars a week and earned every cent of it inhaling the atmosphere. My board cost me six and the other three afforded me a chance to demonstrate myself a captain of finance--paying laundry bills and clothing myself, besides buying lunches and such-like small matters. I did the whole thing, you know--one schooner of beer a day and made my own cigarettes: never could make up my mind which was the worst. The hours were easy, too: didn't have to get to work until five in the morning.... I lasted five weeks at that job, before I was taken sick: shows what a great constitution I've got."

He laughed uncertainly and paused, thoughtful, his eyes vacant, fixed upon the retrospect that was a grim prospect of the imminent future.

"And then--?"

"Oh--?" Duncan roused. "Why, then I fell in with Kellogg again; he found me trying the open-air cure on a bench in Washington Square. Since then he's been finding me one berth after another. He's a sure-enough optimist."

Spaulding shifted uneasily in his chair, stirred by an impulse whose unwisdom he could not doubt. Duncan had assuredly done his case no good by painting his shortcomings in colours so vivid; yet, somehow strangely, Spaulding liked him the better for his open-hearted confession.

"Well...." Spaulding stumbled awkwardly.

"Yes; of course," said Duncan promptly, rising. "Sorry if I tired you."

"What do you mean by: 'Yes, of course'?"

"That you called me in to fire me--and so that's over with. Only I'd be sorry to have you sore on Kellogg for saddling me on you. You see, he believed I'd make good, and so did I in a way: at least, I hoped to."

"Oh, that's all right," said Spaulding uncomfortably. "The trouble is, you see, we've nothing else open just now. But if you'd really like another chance on the road, I--I'll be glad to speak to Mr. Atwater about it."

"Don't you do it!" Duncan counselled him sharply, aghast. "He might say yes. And I simply couldn't accept; it wouldn't be fair to you, Kellogg, or myself. It'd be charity--for I've proved I can't earn my wages; and I haven't come to that yet. No!" he concluded with determination, and picked up his hat.

"Just a minute." Spaulding held him with a gesture. "You're forgetting something: at least I am. There's a month's pay coming to you; the cashier will hand you the cheque as you go out."

"A month's pay?" Duncan said blankly. "How's that? I've drawn up to the end of this week already, if you didn't know it."

"Of course I knew it. But we never let our men go without a month's notice or its equivalent, and--"

"No," Duncan interrupted firmly. "No; but thank you just the same. I couldn't. I really couldn't. It's good of you, but ... Now," he broke off abruptly, "I've left my accounts--what there is of them--with the book-keeping department, and the checks for my sample trunks. There'll be a few dollars coming to me on my expense account, and I'll send you my address as soon as I get one."

"But look here--" Spaulding got to his feet, frowning.

"No," reiterated Duncan positively. "There's no use. I'm grateful to you for your toleration of me--and all that. But we can't do anything better now than call it all off. Good-bye, Mr. Spaulding."

Spaulding nodded, accepting defeat with the better grace because of an innate conviction that it was just as well, after all. And, furthermore, he admired Duncan's stand. So he offered his hand: an unusual condescension. "You'll make good somewhere yet," he asserted.

"I wish I could believe it." Duncan's grasp was firm since he felt more assured of some humanity latent in his late employer. "However ... Good-bye."

"Good luck to you," rang in his ears as the door put a period to the interview. He stopped and took up the battered suitcase and rusty overcoat which he had left outside the junior partner's office, then went on, shaking his head. "Much obliged," he said huskily to himself. "But what's the good of that. There's no room anywhere for a professional failure. And that's what I am; just a ne'er-do-well. I never realised what that meant, really, before, and it's certainly taken me a damn' long time to find out. But I know now, all right...."

Outside, on the steps of the building, he paused a moment, fascinated by the brisk spectacle afforded by lower Broadway at the hour when the cave-like offices in its cliff-like walls begin to empty themselves, when the overlords and their lieutenants close their desks and turn their faces homewards, leaving the details of the day's routine to be wound up by underlings. In the clear light of the late spring afternoon a stream of humanity was high and fluent upon the sidewalks. Duncan had glimpses of keen-faced men, bright-faced women, eager boys, quickened all by that manner of efficiency and intelligence which seems so integrally American. A well-dressed throng, well-fed, amiable and animated, looking ever forward, the resistless tide of affairs that gave it being bore it onward; it passed the onlooker as a strong current passes flotsam in a back-eddy, with no pause, no turning aside. Acutely he felt his aloofness from it, who had no part in its interests and scarcely any comprehension of them. The sunken look, the leanness of his young face, seemed suddenly accentuated; the gloom in his

discontented eyes deepened; his slight habitual stoop became more noticeable. And a second time he nodded acquiescence to his unspoken thought.

"There," said he, singling out a passer-by upon whose complacent features prosperity had set its smug hall-mark--"there, but for the grace of God, goes Nat Duncan!" He rolled the paraphrase upon his tongue and found it bitter--not, however, with a tonic bitterness.

"Lord, what a worthless critter I am! No good to myself--nor to anybody else. Even on Harry I'm a drag--a regular old man of the mountains!"

Despondently he went down to the sidewalk and merged himself with the crowd, moving with it though a thousand miles apart from it, and presently diverging, struck across-town toward the Worth Street subway station.

"And the worst of it is, he's too sharp not to find it out--if he hasn't by this time--and too damn' decent by far to let me know if he has! ... It can't go on this way with us: I can't let him ... Got to break with him somehow--now--to-day. I won't let him think me ... what I've been all along to him.... Bless his foolish heart!..."

This resolution coloured his reverie throughout the uptown journey. And he strengthened himself with it, deriving a sort of acrid comfort from the knowledge that henceforth none should know the burden of his misfortunes save himself. There was no deprecation of Kellogg's goodness in his mood, simply determination no longer to be a charge upon it. To contemplate the sum total of the benefits he had received at Kellogg's hands, since the day when the latter had found him ill and half-starved, friendless as a stray pup, on the bench in Washington Square, staggered his imagination. He could never repay it, he told himself, save inadequately, little by little--mostly by gratitude and such consideration as he purposed now to exhibit by removing himself and his distresses from the other's ken. Here was an end to comfort for him, an end to living in Kellogg's rooms, eating his food, busying his servants, spending his money--not so much borrowed as pressed upon him. He stood at the cross-roads, but in no doubt as to which way he should most honourably take, though it took him straight back to that from which Kellogg had rescued him.

There crawled in his mind a clammy memory of the sort of housing he had known in those evil days, and he shuddered inwardly, smelling again the effluvia of dank oilcloth and musty carpets, of fish-balls and fried ham, of old-style plumbing and of nine-dollar-a-week humanity in the unwashed raw--the odour of misery that permeated the lodgings to which his lack of means had introduced him. He could see again, and with a painful vividness of mental vision, the degenerate "brownstone fronts" that mask those haunts of wretchedness, with their flights of crumbling brownstone steps leading up to oaken portals haggard with flaking paint, flanked by squares of soiled note-paper upon which inexpert hands had traced the warning, not: "Abandon hope all ye who enter here," but: "Furnished rooms to let with board." And pursuing this grim trail of memory, whether he would or no--again he climbed, wearily at

the end of a wearying day, a darksome well of a staircase up and up to an eyrie under the eaves, denominated in the terminology of landladies a "top hall back"--a cramped refuge haunted by pitiful ghosts of the hopes and despairs of its former tenants. And he remembered with reminiscently aching muscles the comfort of such a "single bed" as is peculiar (one hopes) to top hall backs, and with a qualm what it was to cook a surreptitious meal on a metal heater clamped to the gas-bracket (with ears keen to catch the scuffle of the landlady's feet as she skulked in the hall, jealous of her gas bill).

And to this he must return, to that treadmill round of blighted days and joyless nights must set his face....

Alighting at the Grand Central Station he packed the double weight of his luggage and his cares a few blocks northward on Madison Avenue ere turning west toward the bachelor rooms which Kellogg had established in the roaring Forties, just the other side of the Avenue--Fifth Avenue, on a corner of which Duncan presently was held up for a time by a press of traffic. He lingered indifferently, waiting for the mounted policeman to clear a way across, watching the while with lack-lustre eyes the interminable procession of cabs and landaus, taxis and town-cars that romped by hazardously, crowding the street from curb to curb.

The day was of young June, though grey and a little chill with the discouraged spirit of a retarded season. Though the hegira of the well-to-do to their summer homes had long since set in, still there remained in the city sufficient of their class to keep the Avenue populous from Twenty-third Street north to the Plaza in the evening hours. The suggestion of wealth, or luxury, of money's illimitable power, pervaded the atmosphere intensely, an ineluctable influence, to an independent man heady, to Duncan maddening. He surveyed the parade with mutiny in his heart. All this he had known, a part of it had been--upon a time. Now ... the shafts of his roving eyes here and there detected faces recognisable, of men and women whose acquaintance he had once owned. None recognised him who stood there worn, shabby and tired. He even caught the direct glance of a girl who once had thought him worth winning, who had set herself to stir his heart and--had been successful. To-day she looked him straight in the eyes, apparently, with undisturbed serenity, then as calmly looked over and through and beyond him. Her limousine hurried her on, enthroned impregably above the envious herd.

He sped her transit with a mirthless chuckle. "You're right," he said, "dead right. You simply don't know me any more, my dear--you musn't; you can't afford to any more than I could afford to know you."

None the less the fugitive incident seemed to brim his disconsolate cup. In complete dejection of mind and spirit he pushed on to Kellogg's quarters, buoyed by a single hope--that Kellogg might be out of town or delayed at his office.

In that event Duncan might have a chance to gather up his belongings

and escape unhandicapped by the immediate necessity of justifying his course. At another time, surely, the explanation was inevitable; say to-morrow; he was not cur enough to leave his friend without a word. But to-night he would willingly be spared. He apprehended unhappily the interview with Kellogg; he was in no temper for argumentation, felt scarcely strong enough to hold his own against the fire of objections with which Kellogg would undoubtedly seek to shake his stand. Kellogg could talk, Heaven alone knew how winningly he could talk! with all the sound logic of a close reasoner, all the enthusiasm of youth and self-confidence, all the persuasiveness of profound conviction singular to successful men. Duncan had been wont to say of him that Kellogg could talk the hind-leg off of a mule. He recalled this now with a sour grin: "That means me..."

The elevator boy, knowing him of old, neglected to announce his arrival, and Duncan had his own key to the door of Kellogg's apartment. He let himself in with futile stealth: as was quite right and proper, Kellogg's man Robbins was in attendance--a stupefied Robbins, thunderstruck by the unexpected return of his master's friend and guest. "Good Lord!" he cried at sight of Duncan. "Beg your pardon, sir, but--but it can't be you!"

"Your mistake, Robbins. Unfortunately it is." Duncan surrendered his luggage. "Mr. Kellogg in?"

"No, sir. But I'm expecting him any minute. He'll be surprised to see you back."

"Think so?" said Duncan dully. "He doesn't know me, if he is."

"You see, sir, we thought you was out West."

"So you did." Duncan moved toward the door of his own bedroom, Robbins following.

"It was only yesterday I posted a letter to you for Mr. Kellogg, sir, and the address was Omaha."

"I didn't get that far. Fetch along that suitcase, will you please? I want to put some clean things in it."

"Then you're not staying in town over night, Mr. Duncan?"

"I don't know. I'm not staying here, anyway." Duncan switched on the lights in his room. "Put it on the bed, Robbins. I'll pack as quickly as I can. I'm in a hurry."

"Yes, sir, but--I hope there's nothing wrong?"

"Then you lose," returned Duncan grimly: "everything's wrong." He jerked viciously at an obstinate bureau drawer, and when it yielded unexpectedly with the well-known impishness of the inanimate, dumped upon the floor a tangled miscellany of shirts, socks, gloves, collars

and ties.

"Didn't you like the business, sir?"

"No, I didn't like the business--and it didn't like me. It's the same old story, Robbins. I've lost my job again--that's all."

"I'm very sorry, sir."

"Thank you--but that's all right. I'm used to it."

"And you're going to leave, sir?"

"I am, Robbins."

"I--may I take the liberty of hoping it's to take another position?"

"You may, but you lose a second time. I've just made up my mind I'm not going to hang round here any longer. That's all."

"But," Robbins ventured, hovering about with exasperating solicitude--"but Mr. Kellogg'd never permit you to leave in this way, sir."

"Wrong again, Robbins," said Duncan curtly, annoyed.

"Yes, sir. Very good, sir." With the instinct of the well-trained servant, Robbins started to leave, but hesitated. He was really very much disturbed by Duncan's manner, which showed a phase of his character new in Robbins' experience of him. Ordinarily reverses such as this had seemed merely to serve to put Duncan on his mettle, to infuse him with a determination to try again and win out, whatever the odds; and at such times he was accustomed to exhibit a mad irresponsibility of wit and a gaiety of spirit (whether it were a mask or no) that only outrivalled his high good humour when things ostensibly were going well with him.

Intermittently, between his spasms of employment, he had been Kellogg's guest for several years, not infrequently for months at a time; and so Robbins had come to feel a sort of proprietary interest in the young man, second only to the regard which he had for his employer. Like most people with whom Duncan came in contact, Robbins admired him from a respectful distance, and liked him very well withal. He would have been much distressed to have harm happen to him, and he was very much concerned and alarmed to see him so candidly discouraged and sick at heart. Perhaps too quick to draw an inference, Robbins mistrusted his intentions; his dour habit boded ill in the servant's understanding: men in such moods were apt to act unwisely. But if only he might contrive to delay Duncan until Kellogg's return, he thought the former might yet be saved from the consequences of folly of some insensate sort. And casting about for an excuse, he grasped at the most sovereign solace he knew of.

"Beg pardon, sir," he advanced, hesitant, "but perhaps you're just feeling a bit blue. Won't you let me bring you a drop of something?"

"Of course I will," said Duncan emphatically over his shoulder. "And get it now, will you, while I'm packing.... And, Robbins!"

"Sir?"

"Only put a little in it."

"A little what, sir?"

"Seltzer, of course."

II

TO HIM THAT HATH

It had been a forlorn hope at best, this attempt of his to escape Kellogg: Duncan acknowledged it when, his packing rudely finished, he started for the door, Robbins reluctantly surrendering the suit-case after exhausting his repertoire of devices to delay the young man. But at that instant the elevator gate clashed in the outer corridor and Kellogg's key rattled in the lock, to an accompanying confusion of voices, all masculine and all very cheerful.

Duncan sighed and motioned Robbins away with his luggage. "No hope now," he told himself. "But--O Lord!"

Incontinently there burst into the room four men: Jim Long, Larry Miller, another whom Duncan did not immediately recognise, and Kellogg himself, bringing with them an atmosphere breezy with jubilation. Before he knew it Duncan was boisterously overwhelmed. He got his breath to find Kellogg pumping his hand.

"Nat," he was saying, "you're the only other man on earth I was wishing could be with me tonight! Now my happiness is complete. Gad, this is lucky!"

"You think so?" countered Duncan, forcing a smile. "Hello, you boys!" He gave a hand to Long and Miller. "How're you all?" He warmed to their friendly faces and unfeigned welcome. "My, but it's good to see you!" There was relief in the fact that Kellogg, after a single glance, forbore to question his return; he was to be counted upon for tact, was Kellogg. Now he strangled surprise by turning to the fourth member of the party.

"Nat," he said, "I want you to meet Mr. Bartlett. Mr. Bartlett, Mr. Duncan."

A wholesome smile dawned on Duncan's face as he encountered the blank blue stare of a young man whose very smooth and very bright red face was admirably set off by semi-evening dress. "Great Scott!" he cried, warmly pressing the lackadaisical hand that drifted into his. "Willy Bartlett--after all these years!"

A sudden animation replaced the vacuous stare of the blue eyes. "Duncan!" he stammered. "I say, this is rippin'!"

"As bad as that?" Duncan essayed an accent almost English and nodded his appreciation of it: something which Bartlett missed completely.

He was very young--a very great deal younger, Duncan thought, than when they had been classmates, what time Duncan shared his rooms with Kellogg: very much younger and suffering exquisitely from over-sophistication. His drawl barely escaped being inimitable; his air did not escape it. "Smitten with my old trouble," Duncan appraised him: "too much money... Heaven knows I hope he never recovers!"

As for Willy, he was momentarily more nearly human than he had seemed from the moment of his first appearance. "You know," he blurted, "this is simply extraordinary. I say, you chaps, Duncan and I haven't met for years--not since he graduated. We belonged to the same frat, y'know, and had a jolly time of it, if he was an upper-class man. No side about him at all, y'know--absolutely none whatever. Whenever I had to go out on a spree, I'd always get Nat to show me round."

"I was pretty good at that," Duncan admitted a trifle ruefully.

But Willy rattled on, heedless. "He knew more pretty gels, y'know... I say, old chap, d'you know as many now?"

Duncan shook his head. "The list has shrunk. I'm a changed man, Willy."

"Ow, I say, you're chawfin'," Willy argued incredulously. "I don't believe that, y'know--hardly. I say, you remember the night you showed me how to play faro bank?"

"I'll never forget it," Duncan told him gravely. "And I remember what a plug we thought my room-mate was because he wouldn't come with us." He nodded significantly toward the amused Kellogg.

"Not him!" cried Willy, expostulant. "Not really? Why it cawn't be!"

"Fact," Duncan assured him. "He was working his way through college, you see, whereas I was working my way through my allowance--and then some. That's why you never met him, Willy: he worked--and got the habit. We loafed--with the same result. That's why he's useful and you're ornamental, and I'm--" He broke off in surprise. "Hello!" he said as Robbins offered a tray to the three on which were slim-stemmed glasses filled with a pale yellow, effervescent liquid. "Why the blond waters of excitement, please?" he inquired, accepting a glass.

From across the room Larry Miller's voice sounded. "Are you ready, gentlemen? We'll drink to him first and then he can drink to his royal little self. To the boy who's getting on in the world! To the junior member of L.J. Bartlett and Company!"

Long applauded loudly: "Hear! Hear!" And even Willy Bartlett chimed in with an unemotional: "Good work!" Mechanically Duncan downed the toast; Kellogg was the only man not drinking it, and from that the meaning was easily to be inferred. With a stride Duncan caught his hand and crushed it in his own.

"Harry," he said a little huskily, "I can't tell you how glad I am! It's the best news I've had in years!"

Kellogg's responsive pressure was answer enough. "It makes it doubly worth while, to win out and have you all so glad!" he said.

"So you've taken him into the firm, eh?" Duncan inquired of Bartlett.

The blue eyes widened stonily. "The governor has. I'm not in the business, y'know. Never had the slightest turn for it, what?" Willy set aside his glass. "I say, I must be moving. No, I cawn't stop, Kellogg, really. I was dressin' at the club and Larry told me about it, so I just dropped round to tell you how jolly glad I am."

"Your father hadn't told you, then?"

"Who, the governor?" Willy looked unutterably bored. "Why, he gave up tryin' to talk business with me long ago. I can't get interested in it, 'pon my word. Of course I knew he thought the deuce and all of you, but I hadn't an idea they were goin' to take you into the firm. What?"

Long and Miller interrupted, proposing adieus which Kellogg vainly contended.

"Why, you're only just here--" he expostulated.

"Cawn't help it, old chap," Willy assured him earnestly. "I must go, anyway. I've a dinner engagement."

"You'll be late, won't you?"

"Doesn't matter in the least; I'm always late. 'Night, Kellogg. Congratulations again."

"We just dropped round to take off our hats to you," Long continued, pumping Kellogg's hand.

"And tell you what a good fellow we think you are," added Miller, following suit.

"You don't know how good you make me feel," Kellogg told them.

Under cover of this diversion Duncan was making one last effort to slip away; but before he could gather together his impedimenta and get to the door Willy Bartlett intercepted him.

"I say, Duncan--"

"Oh, hell!" said Duncan beneath his breath. He paused ungraciously enough.

"We've got to see a bit of one another, now we've met again, y'know. Wish you'd look me up--Half Moon Club'll get me 'most any time. We'll have to arrange to make a regular old-fashioned night of it, just for memory's sake."

Duncan nodded, edging past him. "I've memories enough," he said.

"Right-oh! Any reason at all, y'know, just so we have the night."

"Good enough," assented Duncan vaguely. He suffered his hand to be wrung with warmth. "I'll not forget--good-night." Then he pulled up and groaned, for Willy's insistence had frustrated his design: Kellogg had suddenly become alive to his attitude and hailed him over the heads of Long and Miller.

"Nat, I say! Where the devil are you going?"

"Over to the hotel," said Duncan.

"The deuce you are! What hotel?"

"The one I'm stopping at."

"Not on your life. You're not going just yet--I haven't had half a chance to talk to you. Robbins, take Mr. Duncan's things."

Duncan, set upon by Robbins, who had been hovering round for just that purpose, lifted his shoulders in resignation, turning back into the room as Miller and Long said good-night to him and left at Bartlett's heels, and smiled awry in semi-humorous deprecation of the way in which he let Kellogg out-manoeuvre him. When it came to that, it was hard to refuse Kellogg anything; he had that way with him. Especially if one liked him... And how could anyone help liking him?

Kellogg had him now, holding him fast by either shoulder, at arm's length, and shaking a reproving head at his friend. "You big duffer!" he said. "Did you think for a minute I'd let you throw me down like that?"

Duncan stood passive, faintly amused and touched by the other's show of affection. "No," he said, "I didn't really think so. But it was worth

trying on, of course."

"Look here, have you dined?"

'At this suggestion Duncan stiffened and fell back. "No, but--"

Kellogg swept the ground from under his feet. "Robbins," he told the man, "order in dinner for two from the club, and tell 'em to hurry it up."

"Yes, sir," said Robbins, and flew to obey before Duncan could get a chance to countermand his part in the order.

"And now," continued Kellogg, "we've got the whole evening before us in which to chin. Sit down." He led Duncan to an arm-chair and gently but firmly plumped him into its capacious depths. "We'll have a snug little dinner here and--what do you say to taking in a show afterwards?"

"I say no."

"You dassent, my boy. This is the night we celebrate. I'm feeling pretty good to-night."

"You ought to, Harry." Duncan struggled to rouse himself to share in the spirit of gratulation with which Kellogg was bubbling. "I'm mighty glad, old man. It's a great step up for you."

"It's all of that. You could have knocked me over with a feather when Bartlett sprang it on me this morning. Of course, I was expecting something--a boost in salary, or something like that. Bartlett knew that other houses in the Street had made me offers--I've been pretty lucky of late and pulled off one or two rather big deals--but a partnership with L.J. Bartlett--! Think of it, Nat!"

"I'm thinking of it--and it's great."

"It'll keep me mighty busy," Kellogg blundered blindly on; "it means a lot of extra work--but you know I like to work...."

"That's right, you do," agreed Duncan drearily. "It's queer to me--it must be a great thing to like to work."

"You bet it's a great thing; why, I couldn't exist if I couldn't work. You remember that time I laid off for a month in the country--for my health's sake? I'll never forget it: hanging round all the time with my hands empty--everyone else with something to do. I wouldn't go through with it again for a fortune. Never felt so useless and in the way--"

"But," interrupted Duncan, knitting his brows as he grappled with this problem, "you were independent, weren't you? You had money--could pay your board?"

"Of course; nevertheless, I felt in the way."

"That's funny...."

"It's straight."

"I know it is; it wouldn't be you if you didn't love work. It wouldn't be me if I did.... Look here, Harry; suppose you didn't have any money and couldn't pay your board--and had nothing to do. How'd you feel in that case?"

"I don't know. Anyhow, that's rot--"

"No, it isn't rot. I'm trying to make you understand how I feel when--when it's that way with me.... As it generally is." He raised one hand and let it fall with a gesture of despondency so eloquent that it roused Kellogg out of his own preoccupation.

"Why, Nat!" he cried, genuinely sympathetic. "I've been so taken up with myself that I forgot.... I hadn't looked for you till to-morrow."

"You knew, then?"

"I met Atwater at lunch to-day. He told me; said he was sorry, but--"

"Yes. Everybody is always sorry, _but_--"

Kellogg let his hand fall on Duncan's shoulder. "I'm sorry, too, old man. But don't lose heart. I know it's pretty tough on a fellow--"

"The toughest part of it is that you got the job for me--and I _had_ to fall down."

"Don't think of that. It's not your fault--"

"You're the only man who believes that, Harry."

"Buck up. I'll stumble across some better opening for you before long, and--"

"Stop right there. I'm through--"

"Don't talk that way, Nat. I'll get you in right somewhere."

"You're the best-hearted man alive, Harry--but I'll see you damned first."

"Wait." Kellogg demanded his attention. "Here's this man Burnham--you don't know him, but he's as keen as they make 'em. He's on the track of some wonderful scheme for making illuminating gas from crude oil; if it goes through--if the invention's really practicable--it's bound to work a revolution. He's down in Washington now--left this afternoon to look up the patents. Now he needs me, to get the ear of the Standard Oil people, and I'll get you in there."

"What right've you got to do that?" demanded Duncan. "What the dickens do I know about illuminating gas or crude oil? Burnham'd never thank you for the likes o' me."

"But--thunder!--you can learn. All you need--."

"Now see here, Harry!" Duncan gave him pause with a manner not to be denied. "Once and for all time understand I'm through having you recommend an incompetent--just because we're friends."

"But, Harry--"

"And I'm through living on you while I'm out of a job. That's final."

"But, man--listen to me!--when we were at college--"

"That was another matter."

"How many times did you pay the room-rent when I was strapped? How many times did your money pull me through when I'd have had to quit and forfeit my degree because I couldn't earn enough to keep on?"

"That's different. You earned enough finally to square up. You don't owe me anything."

"I owe you the gratitude for the friendly hand that put me in the way of earning--that kept me going when the going was rank. Besides, the conditions are just reversed now; you'll do just as I did--make good in the world and, when it's convenient, to me. As for living here, you're perfectly welcome."

"I know it--and more," Duncan assented a little wearily. "Don't think I don't appreciate all you've done for me. But I know and you must understand that I can't keep on living on you,--and I won't."

For once baffled, Kellogg stared at him in consternation. Duncan met his gaze steadily, strong in the sincerity of his attitude. At length Kellogg surrendered, accepting defeat. "Well...." He shrugged uncomfortably. "If you insist ..."

"I do."

"Then that's settled."

"Yes, that's settled."

"Dinner," said Robbins from the doorway, "is served."

INSPIRATION

"Look here, Nat," demanded Kellogg, when they were half way through the meal, "do you mind telling me what you're going to do?"

Duncan pondered this soberly. "No," he replied in the end.

Kellogg waited a moment, but his guest did not continue. "What does that kind of a 'No' mean, Nat?"

"It means I don't mind telling you."

Again an appreciable pause elapsed.

"Well, then, what do you mean to do?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

Kellogg regarded him sombrely for a moment, then in silence returned his attention to his plate; and in silence, for the most part, the remainder of the dinner was served and eaten. Duncan himself had certainly enough to occupy his mind, while Kellogg had altogether forgotten his own cause for rejoicing in his concern for the fortunes of his friend. He was entirely of the opinion that something would have to be done for Nat, with or without his consent; and he sounded the profoundest depths of romantic impossibilities in his attempts to discover some employment suited to Duncan's interesting but impracticable assortment of faculties and qualifications, natural and acquired. But nothing presented itself as feasible in view of the fact that employment which would prove immediately remunerative was required. And by the time that Robbins, clearing the board, left them alone with coffee and cigars and cigarettes, Kellogg was fain to confess failure--though the confession was a very private one, confined to himself only.

"Nat," he said suddenly, rousing that young man out of the dreariest of meditations, "what under the sun can you do?"

"Me? I don't know. Why bother your silly old head about that? I'll make out somehow."

"But surely there's something you'd rather do than anything else."

"My dear sir," Duncan told him impressively, "the only walk of life in which I am fitted to shine is that of the idle son of a rich and foolish father. Since I lost that job I've not been worth my salt."

"That's piffle. There isn't a man living who hasn't some talent or other, some sort of an ability concealed about his person."

"You can search me," Duncan volunteered gloomily.

His unresponsiveness irritated Kellogg; he thought a while, then delivered himself of a didactic conclusion:

"The trouble with you is you were brought up all wrong."

"Well, I've been brought down all right. Besides, that's a platitude in my case."

"Let's see: I've know you--er--nine years."

"Is it that long?" Duncan looked up from a gloomy inspection of the interior of his demitasse, displaying his first gleam of interest in this analysis of his character. "You are a long-suffering old duffer. Any man who'd stand for me for nine years--"

"That'll be all of that," Kellogg cut in sharply. "I was going on to say that you can't room with a man for four terms at college and then know him, off and on, for five years more, pretty intimately, without forming a pretty clear estimate of what he's worth in your own mind."

"And I don't mind telling you, Harry, I think you're the best little business man as well as the finest sort of an all-round good-fellow on this continent."

"Thanks awfully. I presume that's why you're determined to throw me down just at the time you need me most.... What I was trying to get at is the fact that I've never doubted your ultimate success for an instant."

"You'd be a mighty lonesome minority in a congress of my employers, Harry."

"Given the proper opportunity--"

"Hold on," Duncan interrupted. "I know just what you're going to say, and it's all very fine, and I'm proud that you want to say it of me. But you're dead wrong, Harry. The truth is I haven't got it in me--the capacity to succeed. Just as much as you love work, I hate it. I ought to know, for I've had a good, hard try at it--several tries, in fact. And you know what they came to."

"But if you persist in this way, Nat,--don't you know what it means?"

"None better. It means going back to what you helped me out of--the life that nearly killed me."

"And you'd rather--"

"I'd rather that a thousand years before I'd sponge on you another day.... But, on the level, I'd as lieve try the East River or turn on the gas.... What's the use? That's the way I feel."

"That's fool talk. Brace up and be a man. All you need is a way to earn money."

"No," Duncan insisted firmly: "get it. I'll never be able to earn it--that's a cinch."

Kellogg laughed a little mirthlessly, absorbed in revolving something which had popped into his head within the last few moments. "There are ways to get it," he admitted abstractedly, "if you're not too particular."

"I'm not. I only wish I understood the burglar business."

This time Kellogg laughed outright. He sat up with a new spirit in his manner. "You mean you'd steal to get money?"

"Oh, well ..." Duncan smiled a trace sheepishly. "I can't think of anything hardly I wouldn't do to get it."

"Very well, my son. Now attend to uncle." Kellogg leaned across the table, fixing him with an enthusiastic eye. "Here, have a smoke. I'm going to demonstrate high finance to your debased intelligence." He thrust the cigarette case over to Duncan, who helped himself mechanically, his gaze held in wonder to Kellogg's face.

"Fire when ready," he assented.

"I know a way," said Kellogg slowly, "by which, if you'll discard a scruple or two, you can be worth a million dollars--or thereabouts--within a year."

Duncan held a lighted match until it singed his fingertips, the while he stared agape. "Say that again," he requested mildly.

"You can be worth a million in a year."

"Ah!" Duncan nodded slowly and comprehendingly. He turned aside in his chair and raked a second match across the sole of his shoe. "Let him rave," he observed enigmatically, and began to smoke.

"No, I'm not dippy; and I'm perfectly serious."

"Of course. But what'd they do to me if I were caught?"

"This is not a joke; the proposition's perfectly legal; it's being done right along."

"And I could do it, Harry?"

"A man of your calibre couldn't fail."

"Would you mind ringing for Robbins?" Duncan asked abruptly.

"Certainly." Kellogg pressed a button at his elbow. "What d'you want?"

"A straight-jacket and a doctor to tell which one of us needs it."

Kellogg, chagrined as he always was if joked with when expounding one of his schemes, broke into a laugh that lasted until Robbins appeared.

"You rang, sir?"

"Yes. Put those decanters over here, and some glasses, please."

"Yes, sir."

The man obeyed and withdrew. Kellogg filled two glasses, handing one to Duncan.

"Now be decent and listen to me, Nat. I've thought this thing over for--oh, any amount of time. I'll bet anything it will work. What d'you say? Would you like to try it?"

"Would I like to try it?" A conviction of Kellogg's earnestness forced itself upon Duncan's understanding. "Would I--!" He lifted his glass and drained it at a gulp. "Why, that's the first laugh I've had for a month!"

"Then I'll tell you--"

Duncan placed a pleading hand on his forearm. "Don't kid me, Harry," he entreated.

"Not a bit of it. This is straight goods. If you want to try it and will follow the rules I lay down, I'll guarantee you'll be a rich man inside of twelve months."

"Rules! Man, I'll follow all the rules in the world! Come on--I'm getting palpitation of the heart, waiting. Tell it to me: what've I got to do?"

"Marry," said Kellogg serenely.

"Marry!" Duncan echoed, aghast.

"Marry," reaffirmed the other with unbroken gravity.

"Marry--who?"

"A girl with a fortune.... You see, I can't guarantee the precise size of her pile. That all depends on luck and the locality. But it'll run anywhere from several hundred thousand up to a million--perhaps more."

Duncan sank back despondently. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Harry," he said dully; "you had me all excited, for a minute."

"No, but honestly, I mean what I say."

"Now look here: do you really think any girl with a million would take a chance on me?"

"She'll jump at it."

Duncan thought this over for a while. Then his lips twitched. "What's the matter with her?" he inquired. "I'm willing to play the game as it lies, but I bar lunatics and cripples."

"There's no particular her--yet. You can take your pick. I've no more idea where she is than you have."

"Now I know you're stark, staring, gibbering----"

"Not a bit of it. I'm inspired--that's all. I've solved your problem--you only can't believe it."

"How could I? What the devil are you getting at, anyhow?"

"This pet scheme of mine. Lend me your ears. Have you ever lived in a one-horse country town--a place with one unspeakable hotel and about twenty stores and five churches?"

"No ..."

"I have; I was born in one of 'em.... Have you any idea what becomes of the young people of such towns?"

"Not a glimmering."

"Then I'll enlighten your egregious density. ...The boys--those who've got the stuff in them--strike out for the cities to make their everlasting fortunes. Generally they do it, too."

"The same as you."

"The same as me," assented Kellogg, unperturbed. "But the yaps, the Jaspers, stay there and clerk in father's store. After office-hours they put on their very best mail-order clothes and parade up and down Main Street, talking loud and flirting obviously with the girls. The girls haven't much else to do; they don't find it so easy to get away. A few of 'em escape to boarding-schools and colleges, where they meet and marry young men from the cities, but the majority of them have to stay at home and help mother--that's a tradition. If there are two children or more, the boys get the chance every time; the girls stay home to comfort the old folks in their old age. Why, by the time they're old enough to think of marrying--and they begin young, for that's about the only excitement they find available--you won't find a small country town between here and the Mississippi where there aren't about four girls to every boy."

"It's a horrible thought ..."

"You'd think so if you knew what the boys were like. There isn't one in ten that a girl with any sense or self-respect could force herself to marry if she ever saw anything better. Do you begin to see my drift?"

"I do not. But go on drifting."

"No? Why, the demand for eligible males is three hundred per cent. in excess of the supply. Don't you know--no, you don't: I got to that first--that there are twenty times as many old maids in small country towns as there are in the cities? It's a fact, and the reason for it is because when they were young they couldn't lower themselves to accept the pick of the local matrimonial market. Now, do you see--?"

"You're as interesting as a magazine serial. Please continue in your next. I pant with anticipation."

"You're an ass.... Now take a young chap from a city, with a good appearance, more or less a gentleman, who doesn't talk like a yap or walk like a yap or dress like a yap or act like a yap, and throw him into such a town long enough for the girls to get acquainted with him. He simply can't lose, can't fail to cop out the best-looking girl with the biggest bank-roll in town. I tell you, there's nothing to it!"

"It's wonderful to listen to you, Harry."

"I'm talking horse sense, my son. Now consider yourself: down on your luck, don't know how to earn a decent living, refusing to accept anything from your friends, ready (you say) to do almost anything to get some money.... And think of the country heiresses, with plenty of money for two, pining away in--in innocuous desuetude--hundreds of them, fine, straight, good girls, girls you could easily fall in love with, sighing their lives away for the lack of the likes of you.... Now, why not take one, Nat--when you come to consider it, it's your duty--marry her and her bank-roll, make her happy, make yourself happy, and live a contented life on the sunny side of Easy Street for the rest of your natural born days? Can't you see it now?"

"Yes," Duncan admitted, half-persuaded of the plausibility of the scheme. "I see--and I admire immensely the intellect that conceived the notion, Harry. But ... I can't help thinking there must be a catch in it somewhere."

"Not if you follow my instructions. You see, having come from just such a hole-in-the-ground, I know just what I'm talking about. Believe me, everything depends on the way you go about it. There are a lot of things to contend with at first; you won't enjoy it at all, to begin with. But I can demonstrate how it can be managed so that you'll win out to a moral certainty."

Duncan drew a deep breath, sat back and looked Kellogg over very critically. There was not a suspicion of a gleam of humour in his face;

to the contrary, it blazed with the ardour of the instinctive schemer, the man who, with the ability to originate, throws himself heart and soul into the promotion of the product of his imagination. Kellogg was not sketching the outlines of a gigantic practical joke; he believed implicitly in the feasibility of his project; and so strongly that he could infuse even the less susceptible fancy of Duncan with some of his faith.

"If I didn't know you so well, Harry," said Duncan slowly, "I'd be certain you were mad. I'm not at all sure that I'm sane. It's raving idiocy--and it's a pretty damned rank thing to do, to start deliberately out to marry a woman for her money. But I've been through a little hell of my own in my time, and--it's not alluring to contemplate a return to it. There's nothing mad enough nor bad enough to stop me. What've I got to do?"

Kellogg beamed his triumph. "You'll try it on, then?"

"I'll try anything on. It's a contemptible, low-lived piece of business--but good may come of it; you can't tell. What've I got to do?"

Slipping back, Kellogg knitted his fingers and stared at the ceiling, smiling faintly to himself as he enumerated the conditions that first appealed to his understanding as essentials toward success.

"First, pick out your town: one of two or three thousand inhabitants--no larger. I'd suggest, at a hazard guess, some place in the interior of Pennsylvania. Most of such towns have at least one rich man with a marriageable daughter--but we'll make sure of that before we settle on one. Of course any suburban town is barred."

"How so?"

"Oh, they don't count. The girls always know people in the city--can get there easily. That spoils the game."

"How about the game laws?"

"I'm coming to them. Of course there isn't an open or close season, and the hunting's always good, but there are a few precautionary measures to be taken if you want to be sure of bagging an heiress. You won't like most of 'em."

"Like 'em! I'll live by them!"

"Well, here come the things you mustn't do. You mustn't swear or use slang; you mustn't smoke and you mustn't drink--"

"Heavens! are these people as inhuman as all that?"

"Worse than that. It might be fatal if you were ever seen in the hotel bar. And to begin with, you must refuse all invitations, of any sort,

whether to dances, parties, church sociables, or even Sunday dinners."

"Why _Sunday_ dinners?"

"Because Sunday's the only day you'll be invited. Dinner on week-days is from twelve to twelve-thirty, and it's strictly a business matter--no time for guests. But you needn't fret; they won't ask you till they've sized you up pretty carefully."

"Oh!..."

"Moreover, you must be very particular about your dress; it must be absolutely faultless, but very quiet: clothing sober--dark greys and blacks--and plain, but the very last word as to cut and fit. And everything must be in keeping--the very best of shirts, collars, ties, hats, socks, shoes, underwear--." Kellogg caught Duncan's look and laughed. "Your laundress will report on everything, you know; so you must be impeccable."

"I'll be even that--whatever it is."

"Be very particular about having your shoes polished, shave daily and manicure yourself religiously--but don't let 'em catch you at it."

"Would they raid me if they did?"

"And then, my son, you must work."

Kellogg paused to let his lesson sink in. After a time Duncan observed plaintively: "I knew there was a catch in it somewhere. What kind of work?"

"It doesn't make any difference, so long as you get and hold some job in the town."

"Well, that lets me out. You'll have to sic some other poor devil on this glittering proposition of yours. I couldn't hold a job in--"

"Wait! I'll tell you how to do it in just a minute."

"I don't mind listening, but--"

"You'll cinch the whole business by going to church without a break. Don't ever fail--morning and evening every Sunday. Don't forget that."

"Why?"

"It's the most important thing of all."

"Does going to church make such a hit with the young female Jasper--the Jasperette, as it were?"

"It'll make you more solid than anything else with her popper and

mommer, and that's very necessary when you're a candidate for their ducats as well as their daughter. You must work and you must go to church."

"That can't be all. Surely you can think of something else?"

"Those are the cardinal rules--church and work until you've landed your heiress. After that you can move back to civilisation.... Now as soon as you strike your town you want to make arrangements for board and lodging in some old woman's house--preferably an old maid. You'll be sure to find at least half a dozen of 'em, willing to take boarders, but you want to be equally sure to pick out the one that talks the most, so that she'll tell the neighbours all about you. Don't worry about that, though, they all talk. When you've moved in, stock up your room with about twenty of the driest-looking books in the world--law books look most imposing; fix up a table with lots of stationery--pens and pencils, red and black ink and all that sort of thing; make the room look as if you were the most sincere student ever. And by no means neglect to have a well-worn Bible prominently in evidence: you can buy one second-hand at some book-store before you start out."

"I'd have to, of course. I thank you for the flattery. Proceed with the programme of the gay, mad life I must lead. I'm going to have a swell time: that's perfectly plain."

"As soon as you're shaken down in your room, make the rounds of the stores and ask for work. Try and get into the dry-goods emporium if you can: the girls all shop there. But anything will do, except a grocery or a hardware store and places like that. You mustn't consider any employment that would soil your clothes or roughen your lily-white hands."

"You expect me to believe I'd have any chance of winning a millionaire's daughter if I were a ribbon-clerk in a dry-goods store?"

"The best in the world. The ribbon-clerk is her social equal; he calls her Mary and she calls him Joe."

"Done with you: me for the ribbon counter. Anything else?"

"The storekeepers aren't apt to employ you at first; they'll be suspicious of you."

"They will be afterwards, all right. However--?"

"So you must simply call on them--walk in, locate the boss and tell him: 'I'm looking for employment.' Don't press it; just say it and get out."

"No trouble whatever about that; it's always that way when I ask for work."

"They'll send for you before long, when they make up their minds that

you're a decent, moral young man; for they know you'll draw trade. And every Sunday--"

"I know: church!"

"Absolutely.... Pick out the one the rich folks go to. Go in quietly and do just as they do: stand up and kneel, look up the hymns and sing, just when they do. Be careful not to sing too loud, or anything like that: just do it all modestly, as if you were used to it. Better go to church here two or three times and get the hang of it...."

"Here, now--"

"Nearly all the wealthy codgers in such towns are deacons, you see, and though they may not speak to you for months on the street, it's their business to waylay you after the service is over and shake hands with you and tell you they hope you enjoyed the sermon and ask you to come again. And you can bank on it, they'll all take notice from the first."

"It's no wonder Bartlett made you a partner, Harry."

"Now behave. I want you to get in right. ... If you follow the rules I've outlined, not only will all the girls in town be falling over themselves to get to you first, but their fond parents will be egging them on. Then all you've got to do is to pick out the one with the biggest bundle and--"

"Make a play for her?"

"Not on your life. That would be fatal. Your part is to put yourself in her way. She'll do all the courting, and when she scents the psychological moment she'll do the proposing."

"It doesn't sound natural, but you certainly seem to know what you're drooling about."

"You can anchor to that, Nat."

"And are you finished?"

"I am. Of course I'll probably think of more things to wise you to, before you go."

Duncan laughed shortly and tilted back in his chair, selecting another cigarette. "And you're the chap who wanted me to go to some bromidic old show to-night! Harry, you're immense. Why didn't you ever let me suspect you had all this romantic imagination in your system?"

"Imagination be blowed, son. This is business." Kellogg removed the stopper from the decanter and filled both glasses again. "Well, what do you say?"

"I've just said my say, Harry. It's amazing; I'm proud of you."

"But will you do it?"

"Everything else aside, how can I? I've got to live, you know."

"But I propose to stake you."

Duncan came down to earth. "No, you won't; not a cent. I'm in earnest about this thing: no more sponging on you, Harry. Besides--"

"No, seriously, Nat: I mean this, every word of it. I want you to do it--to please me, if you like; I've a notion something will come of it. And I believe from the bottom of my heart there's not the slightest risk if you'll play the cards as they fall, according to Hoyle."

"Harry, I believe you do."

"I do, firmly. And I'll put the proposition on a business basis, if you like."

"Go on; there's no holding you."

"You start out to-morrow and order your war kit. Get everything you need, and plenty of it, and have the bills sent to me. You can be ready inside a fortnight. The day you start I'll advance you five hundred dollars. When you're married you can repay me the amount of the advances with interest at ten per cent, and I'll consider it a mighty good deal for myself. Now, will you?"

"You mean it?"

"Every word of it. Well?"

For a moment longer Duncan hesitated; then the vision of what he must return to, otherwise, decided him. In desperation he accepted. "It's a drowning man's straw," he said, a little breathlessly. "I'm sure I shouldn't. But I will."

Kellogg flung a hand across the table, palm uppermost.

"Word of honour, Nat?"

Duncan let his hand fall into it. "Word of honour! I'll see it through."

"Good! It's a bargain." Kellogg lifted his glass high in air. "To the fortune hunter!" he cried, half laughing.

Duncan nervously fingered the stem of his glass. "God help the future Mrs. Duncan!" he said, and drank.

TRIUMPH OF MR. HOMER LITTLEJOHN

The twenty-first of June was a day of memorable triumph to me, a day of memorable events for Radville.

Only the evening previous Will Bigelow and I had indulged in acrimonious argument in the office of the Bigelow House, the subject of contention being the importance of the work to which I am devoting my declining years, to wit, the recording of _The History of Radville Township, Westerly County, Pennsylvania_; Will maintaining with that obstinacy for which he is famous, that nothing ever had happened, does happen, can or will happen in our community, I insisting gently but firmly that it knows no day unmarked by important occurrence (for it would ill become me, as the only literary man in Radville, to yield a point in dispute with the proprietor of the town tavern). Besides, he was wrong, even as I was indisputably right--only he had not the grace to admit it. We ended vulgarly with a bet, Will wagering me the best five-cent Clear Havana in the Bigelow House sample-room that nothing worth mentioning would take place in Radville before sundown of the following day.

I left him, returning to my room at Miss Carpenter's (Will and I are old friends, but I refuse to eat the food he serves his guests), warmed by the prospect of certain triumph if a little appalled by the prospect of winning the stake; and sympathising a little with Will, who, for all his egregious stubbornness, has some excuse for upholding his unreasonable and ridiculous views. He knows no better, having never had the opportunity to find out for himself how utterly absurd are his claims for the outside world. Whereas I have.

He's an adventurer at heart, Will Bigelow, a romantic soul crusted heavily with character--like a volcano smouldering beneath its lava. For many years he has managed the Bigelow House, with his thoughts apart from it, his eyes ever seeking the horizon that recedes beyond the soaring rim of our encircling cup of hills, his heart forever yearning forth to the outer world; which he erroneously conceives to be a theatre of events--as if outside of Radville only could there be things worth seeing, considering, or doing, or matters of any sort that move momentously! As long as I've known the man (and we played truant together fifty years ago--hookey, we called it then) he's had his heart set on going forth from Radville, "for to admire and for to see, for to view this wide world o'er"; always he has presented himself to me as one poised on the pinnacle of purpose, ready the next instant to dive and strike out into the teeming unknown beyond the barrier hills. But this promise he has never fulfilled. He still maintains that he will surely go--next week--after the hayin's over--as soon as the ice is in--the minute Mary graduates from High School. ... But I know he never will.

So to Will Radville is as dull as ditchwater to a teamster; to me it's as fascinating as that same ditchwater to a biologist with a microscope. I see nothing going on in the world outside of Radville more important than our daily life. Too long I have lived away from it, a stranger in strange lands, not to appreciate its relative significance in the scheme of things. It makes all the difference--the view-point: Will sees Radville from its homely heart outwards, I stand on its boundaries, a native but yet, somehow in the local esteem (by reason of my long residence in the East) an outlander. Thus I get a perspective upon the place, to Will and his ilk denied.

It seems curious that things should have fallen out thus for the two of us: that Will Bigelow, all afire with the lust for travel, should never have mustered up enterprise enough to break his home ties, whilst I whose dearest desire had always been to live no day of my allotted span away from Radville, should have been, in a manner which I'm bound presently to betray, forced out into the world; that he, the rebellious stay-at-home, cursing the destiny which chained him, should have prospered and become the man of substance he is, while I, mutinously venturing, should have returned only to watch my sands run out in poverty--what's little better.

Not that I would have you think me whining: I have enough, little but ample for my simple needs, if inadequate for my ambitions or my neighbours' necessities. My editorial work for the _Radville Citizen_ is quite remunerative, while my weekly column of local gossip for the _Westerly Gazette_ brings me in a little, and I've one or two other modest sources of still more modest income. But Radville folks are poor, many of them, many who are very dear to me for old sake's sake. There's Sam Graham.... Though I wouldn't have you understand that as a community we are not moderately prosperous and contented, comfortable if not energetic and advanced. This is not a pushing town: it has never known a boom. That I'm sure will some day come, but I hope not in my time. I have faith in the mountains that fold us roundabout; they are rich with the possibilities of coal and iron, and year by year are being more and more widely opened up and developed; year by year the ranks of flaming, reeking coke ovens push farther on beside the railway that penetrates our valley. But as yet their smoke does not foul our skies, nor does their refuse pollute our river, nor their soot tarnish our vegetation. And as I say, I hope this is not to be while I live, though sometimes I have fears: Blinky Lockwood made a fortune selling the coal that was discovered beneath his father's old farm over Westerly way, and ever since that there's been more or less quiet prospecting going on in our vicinity. I shall be sorry to see the day when Radville is other than as it is: the quiet, peaceful, sleepy little town, nestling in the bosom of the hills, clean, sweet and wholesome....

But this is rambling far from the momentous twenty-first of June, my day of triumph.

I shall try to set down connectedly and coherently the events which culminated in the humbling of Will Bigelow to the dust.

To begin with, we were early startled by the rumour that Hiram Nutt, theretofore deemed unconquerable, had been disastrously defeated at checkers in Willoughby's grocery--and that by Watty the tailor, of all men in Radville. The rumour was confirmed by eleven in the forenoon, and in itself should have provided us with a nine days' wonder.

As it happened, an event happening almost simultaneously confused our minds. At eleven-fifteen Miss Carpenter's household was thrown into consternation by the scandalous behaviour of her black cat, Caesar, who chose suddenly to terminate a long and outwardly respectable career as Miss Carpenter's familiar by having kittens under the horse-hair sofa in the parlour. Incidentally this indelicate and ungentlemanly behaviour temporarily unloosed the hinges of Miss Carpenter's reason, so that my supper suffered that evening, and for several days she wandered round the house with blank and witless eyes. Perhaps I should have warned her, for I had latterly come to suspect Caesar of leading a double life; but for reasons which seemed sufficient I had refrained.

By the noon train Roland Barnette received his new summer suit from Chicago. I did not see it till evening, but heard of it before one, since Roland donned it immediately and wore it to the bank that very afternoon. I understand it caused something very near a run on the bank; people came in to draw a dollar or so or get change and lingered to feast their outraged visions, so that Blinky Lockwood, the president, had to send Roland home to change before closing-time. He changed back, however, as soon as off duty, and spent the rest of the afternoon and evening hours in Sothern and Lee's, at the soda-fountain; which Sothern and Lee did not object to, since it drew trade.

Pete Willing established a record by getting drunk at Schwartz's bar by three in the afternoon, his best previous time being four-thirty; and Mrs. Willing chased him up Centre Street until, at the corner of Main, he blundered into the arms of Judge Scott; who ordered him to arrest and lock himself up; which Pete, being the sheriff, solemnly did, saying that it was preferable to a return to home and wife.

At five o'clock there was a dog-fight in front of Graham's drug-store.

At five-forty-five the evening train lurched in, bearing The Mysterious Stranger.

Tracey Tanner saw him first, having driven down to the station with his father's surrey on the off-chance of picking up a quarter or so from some drummer wishing to be conveyed to the Bigelow House. Only outlanders pay money for hacks in Radville; everybody else walks, of course. Naturally Tracey took The Mysterious Stranger for a drummer; he had three trunks and a heavy packing-box, so Tracey's misapprehension was pardonable. Instinctively he drove him to the Bigelow House; Will now and again makes Tracey a present of a bottle of sarsaparilla or lemon-pop, with the result that Tracey calls Tannehill, who runs the opposition hotel, a skinflint and never takes strangers there except on their express desire. The Mysterious Stranger merely asked to be driven

to the best hotel. This is not like most commercial travellers, who as a rule know where they want to go, even in a strange town, having made inquiry in advance from their brothers of the road. Tracey made a note of this, and is further on record as having observed that this stranger was rather better dressed than the run of drummers, if not so nobbily. Moreover, he was reticent under the cross-fire of Tracey's irrepressible conversation, and failed to ask the name of the first pretty girl they passed; who happened to be Angle Tuthill. Finally The Mysterious Stranger actually tipped Tracey a whole quarter for carrying his suit-case into the hotel office.

With these incitements it would have been unreasonable to expect Tracey to do otherwise than linger around for the good health of his sense of inquisitiveness, which would else have been severely sprained.

Will Bigelow was dozing behind the desk, lulled by the sound of Hi Nutt's voice in the barroom, as he explained to all and sundry just how he had inadvertently permitted Watty the tailor to best him at checkers that morning. Otherwise the office was deserted. Tracey wakened Will by stamping heavily across the floor, and Will mechanically pushed down his spectacles and dipped a pen in ink, slewing the register round for the guest's signature. He says he knew at a glance that The Mysterious Stranger was no travelling man, but this is a moot point, Tracey's memory being minutely accurate and at variance with Will's assertion.

The Mysterious Stranger was a young man, rather severely clothed in a dark suit which excited no interest in Bigelow's understanding, although I, when I saw him later, had no difficulty in realising that it had never been made by a tailor whose place of business was more than five doors removed from Fifth Avenue. He was tallish, but not really tall, and carried himself with a slight stoop which took way from his real height. Tracey says he had a way of looking at you as if he was smiling inside at some joke he'd heard a long time ago; and I don't know but that's a fairly apt description of his ordinary expression. He had a way, too, of nodding jerkily at you--just once--to show he recognised you or understood what you were driving at; at other times he carried his head a trifle to one side and slightly forward. He was a man you wouldn't forget, somehow, though what there was about him that was remarkable nobody seemed to know.

He nodded that jerky way in answer to Will Bigelow's "G'devenin'," and without saying anything took the pen and started to register. He had to stop, however, for Tracey was pressing him so close upon the right that he couldn't get any play for his elbow, and after a minute or two he asked Tracey politely would he mind stepping round to the left, where he could see just as well. So Tracey did. Then he wrote his name in a good round hand: "Nathaniel Duncan, N.Y."

"I'd like a room with a bath," he told Will: "something simple and chaste, within the means of a man in moderate circumstances."

Will thought he was joking at first, but he didn't smile, so Will explained that there was a bathroom on the third floor at the end of

the hall, though there wasn't much call for it. "I could give you a room next to that," he said, "but you wouldn't want it, I guess."

"Why not?" asked The Mysterious Stranger.

"Because," said Will, "'taint near the sample-room."

"That doesn't make any difference; I'm on the wagon."

The only sense Will could get out of that was that the young man was travelling for a buggy house and hadn't brought any samples with him.

"I thought," he allowed, "as how you'd be wantin' a place to display your samples, but of course if you're in the wagon business--"

"Oh," said Mr. Duncan, "I thought you meant the 'sample-room' over there." He nodded toward the bar. "That's what you call the dispensaries of intoxicating liquors in this part of the country, is it not?"

Will made a noise resembling an affirmative, and as soon as he got his breath explained that travelling men generally wanted a sort of a showroom next to theirs and that that was called a sample-room, too.

"But I'm not a travelling man," said The Mysterious Stranger. "So I shall have as little use for the one as the other."

"Then the room on the third floor'll do for you," said Will. "How long do you calculate on stayin'?"

"That will depend," said Mr. Duncan: "a day or so--perhaps longer; until I can find comfortable and more permanent quarters."

In his amazement Will jabbed the pen so hard into the potato beside the ink-well that he never could get the nib out and had to buy a new one.

"You don't mean to say you're thinkin' of coming here to live?" he gasped.

"Yes, I do," said the young man apologetically. "I don't think you'll find me in the way. I shall be very quiet and unobtrusive. I'm a student, looking for a quiet place in which to pursue my studies."

"Well," said Will, "you've found it all right. There ain't no quieter place in Pennsylvania than Radville, Mr. Duncan. I hope you'll like it," he said, sarcastic.

"I shall endeavour to," said the young man.

"And now may I go to my room, please? I should like to renovate my travel-stained person to some extent before dinner."

"You'll have time," said Will; "dinner's at noon to-morrow. I guess you're thinkin' about supper. That's ready now. Here, Tracey, you carry this gentleman's things up to number forty-three."

But Tracey had already gone, and such was his haste to spread the news that he forgot to take the horse and surrey back to the stable, but left it standing in front of the hotel till eight o'clock; for which oversight, I am credibly informed, his father justly dealt with him before sending him to bed.

I have never been able to understand how we failed to hear of it at Miss Carpenter's before seven o'clock. That was the hour when, having finished supper and my first evening pipe, I started down-town to the _Citizen_ office, intending to stop in at the Bigelow House on the way and confound Will with the list of the day's happenings. Main Street was pretty well crowded for that hour, I remember noticing, and most of the townfolk were grouped together on the corners, underneath the lamps, discussing something rather excitedly. I paid no particular attention, realising that between Caesar, Pete Willing, Roland Burnette's suit and the checker game, they had enough to talk about. So it wasn't until I walked into the Bigelow House office that I either heard or saw anything of The Mysterious Stranger.

Will Bigelow was in his usual place behind the desk, and looked, I thought, rather disgruntled. His reply to my "Howdy, Will?" sounded somewhat snappish. But he got out of his chair and moved round the end of the desk just as the young man came out of the dining-room door. Then Will pulled up and I realised that he was calling my attention to the stranger.

So far as I could see, he seemed an ordinary, everyday, good-looking, good-natured young man, whose naturally sunny disposition had been insulted by the food recently set before him. He wandered listlessly out upon the porch and stood there, with his hands in his pockets, looking up and down Centre Street, just then being shadowed into the warm, purple June dusk, beneath its double row of elms. We've always thought it a rather attractive street, and that night it seemed especially lively with its trickle of girls and boys strolling up and down, and the groups of grown folks on the corners, and Roland Burnette's summer suit conspicuous through Sothern and Lee's plate-glass windows; and I supposed the young man was admiring it all. But now I know him better. He felt just the same about Main Street, corner of Centre, Radville, as I should have about Broadway and Forty-second Street, New York, if you had set me down there and told me I'd got to get accustomed to the idea that I must live there. He was saying, deep down in his heart: "O _Lord_!"--with the rising inflection.

Will grabbed my arm, without saying anything, and pulled me into the bar.

"Hello!" I said, as he went round behind and opened the cigar-case, "what's up?"

He took out two boxes of the finest five-centers in town and placed them before me. "Them's up," he said. "You win. Have one."

It staggered me to have him give in that way; I had been looking forward to a long and diverting dispute. "I guess you've heard everything worth hearing about to-day's history," I said, disappointed, as I selected the least unpleasant looking of the cigars.

"No, I haven't," he said. "I didn't have to hear anything. What earned you that smoke took place right here in this office.... Here," he said, striking a match for me.

I had been trying to put the cigar away so that I might dispose of it without hurting Will's feelings, but he had me, so I recklessly poked the thing into the automatic clipper and then into my mouth. "What do you mean?" I asked, puffing.

"Come 'long outside," said Will; and we went out on the porch just in time to see Mr. Duncan going wearily upstairs to his room. "I mean," said Will, _"him"_. And then he told me all about it.

"But things like that don't happen every day," he wound up defensively. "I'll go you another cigar on to-morrow."

"No, you won't," I said indignantly; and furtively dropped the infamous thing over the railing.

I am never successful in my little attempts at deception, even in self-defence. In all candour I believe my disposition of that cigar would have gone undetected but for my notorious bad luck. Of course Bigelow's setter, Pompey, had to be asleep right under the spot where I dropped the cigar, and equally of course the burning end had to make instantaneous connection with his nerve centres, via his hide, with such effect that he arose in agony and subsequently used coarse language. Investigation naturally discovered my empty-handed perfidy. To no one else in Radville would this have happened.

On the other hand, no one else in Radville would have thrown away the cigar.

V

MARGARET'S DAUGHTER

Discomfort roused Duncan from his rest at an early hour, the morning following his arrival in Radville. I must confess that the beds in the Bigelow House are no better than they should be; in fact, according to Duncan, not so good. Duncan ought to know; he has slept in one of them, or tried to; a trial thus far to me denied. From what he has said, however, I shudder to think what will become of me should I ever lose the shelter of Miss Carpenter's second-story front and be thrown out

into a heartless world to choose between the Bigelow House and Frank Tannehill's Radville Inn....

Duncan arose and consulted the two-dollar watch which he had left on the pine washstand by the window. It was half-past seven o'clock, and that seemed early to him. He was tired and would willingly have turned in again, but a rueful glance at the couch of his night-long vigil sufficed him. He lifted a hand to Heaven and vowed solemnly: "Never again!"

As he bent over the washstand and poured a cupful of water into the china basin, thus emptying the pitcher, he was conscious of a pain in his back; but a thought cheered him. "They must have decent stables in this town," he considered, brightening. "The haymows for mine, after this."

He dressed with scrupulous care, mindful of Kellogg's parting words, the sense of which was that first impressions were most important. "All the same," Duncan thought, "I don't believe they count in a dead-and-alive place like this. There's no one here with sufficient animation to realise I'm in town." This shows how little he understood our little community. A day of enlightenment was in store for him.

Pansy Murphy was scrubbing out the office when he came down for breakfast. She is large, of what is known as a full complexion, good-hearted and energetic. His pause at the foot of the stairs, as he surveyed in dismay the seven seas of soapy water that occupied the floor, aroused her. She sat back suddenly on her heels and looked her fill of him, with her blue Irish eyes very wide, and her mouth a trap. He bowed politely. Pansy saved herself from falling over backwards by a supreme effort, scrubbed her hair out of her eyes with a very wet hand, and gave him "Good-marrin', Misther Dooncan," in a brogue as rich as you could wish for.

He started violently. "Heavens!" he said. "I am discovered!"

"Make yer moind aisy about that," Pansy assured him. "'Tis known all over town who ye arre, what's yer name, how manny troonks ye've brought wid ye, and th' rayson f'r yer comin' here."

"A comforting thought, thank you," he commented: "to awake to find one's self grown famous over-night!..."

"Now ye know," she returned, emboldened, "what it is to be a big toad in a small puddle."

"I thank you." He nodded again, with a comprehensive survey of the reeking floor. "I'm afraid I do." With which he slipped and slid over to and through the swinging wicker doors of the dining-room.

It was deserted. From the negligØe of the tables, littered with the plates and dishes, dreary survivors of a dozen breakfasts, he divined that he was the tardiest guest in the household. A slatternly young

woman in a soiled shirt-waist--the waitress--received him with great calm and waved him toward a table by the window, where an unused cover was laid. He went meekly, dogged by her formidable presence. She stood over him and glared down.

"Haman neggs," she said defiantly, "steakan nomlette."

"I'll be a martyr," he told her civilly. "Me for the steak."

She frowned gloomily and tramped away. He folded his hands and, cheered by an appetising aroma of warm water and yellow soap from the office, considered the prospect from the window by his side. Three children and a yellow dog came along and watched him do it, dispassionately reviewing his points in clear young voices. Tracey Tanner ambled into view on the other side of the street and beamed at him generously, his round red face resembling, Duncan thought, more than anything else a summer sun rising through mist. Josie Lockwood (he was to discover her name later) passed with her pert little nose ostentatiously pointed away from him; none the less he detected a gleam in the corner of her eye.... Others went by, singly or in groups, all more or less openly interested in him.

He tried to look unconscious, but with ill success. There was nothing particularly engaging in the view: the broad, dusty street lined with commonplace structures of "frame" and brick, glowing in the morning sunshine. There were, to be sure, cool shadows beneath the trees, but the suggestion was all of summer heat. There was a watering-trough and hitching-rail directly opposite, a little to one side of Hemmenway's feed-store, and there a well-fed mare stood, drooping dejectedly between the shafts of a dilapidated buggy. On the corner was a two-storey brick building with large plate-glass windows on the ground floor for the display of intimate articles of feminine apparel. The black and gold sign above proclaimed it: "The Fair. Dry Goods & Notions. Leonard & Call." Duncan considered it with grave respect. "The scene of my future activities," he observed.

By this time his audience had become too large and friendly for his endurance. He rose and retired to a less public table.

In her own good time the waitress returned with a plate, and a small oval platter in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. She placed them before him with a manner that told him plainly he could never make himself the master of her affections. The small oval platter was discovered to contain a small segment of dark-brown ham and two fried eggs swimming in grease.

Duncan questioned the woman with mute, appealing eyes.

"Steak's run out," she told him curtly.

"Leaving no address?" he inquired with forced gaiety.

A suppressed smile softened her austerity, and she turned away to hide

it. "To think," he wondered, "that a sense of humour should inhabit that!" He broke a roll and munched it gloomily, pondering this revelation. "And such humour!" he added, with justice.

After an interval the woman returned. He had refrained from the staple dish. She indicated it with a grimy forefinger.

"Please!" he begged plaintively. "I'm never very hungry in the morning."

"I guess you don't like the table here," she observed icily, clearing away.

"Do you?"

"I don't have to; I live home."

He stared. Could it be possible...?

"I know a good old one, too," he ventured hopefully. "Now here." He drew his coffee cup toward him and began to stir with energy. "You say: 'It looks like rain'; and I'll say: 'Yes, but it tastes a little like coffee.'"

She clattered away indignantly. He rose, depressed, and sighing sought the outer air.

In the course of a forenoon's stroll Radville discovered itself to him in all its squalor and its loveliness. It sits in the centre of a broad valley of rolling meadow-land, studded with infrequent homesteads, broken into rather extensive farms, threaded by a shallow silver stream that gives its all in tribute to the Susquehanna far in the south. The barrier mountains rise about it like the sides of a bowl, with a great V-shaped piece chipped out of the southern wall. This break we call the Gap; through it the railroad comes to us, through it the river escapes. The hills rear high and steep, their swelling flanks cloaked in sombre green and grey, with here and there a bald spot like a splash of ochre where there's been a landslide, climbing directly from the plain, with no foothills. A recluse, I have thought, must have chosen this spot for a town site; sickened of the world, he sought seclusion--and found it here to his heart's content. Until the coke-ovens come, following the miners, with their attendant hordes of Slovaks, Poles and Hungarians, we shall be near to God, for we shall know peace....

The town has been laid out with great rectangularity; the river divides it unequally. On the western bank is the larger community--locally, the Old Town, retaining its characteristics of sobriety, quiet and comfort; here, also, is the business centre--such business as there is. Here Duncan found homely residences sitting back from the street in ample grounds--grounds, perhaps, not very carefully groomed, but in spite of that attractive and pleasant to the eye. With one or two exceptions, none were strongly suggestive of wealth. He detected a trace of ostentation, and no taste whatever, in Lockwood's new villa (I'm told

that's the polite designation for the edifice he caused to be erected what time the plague of riches smote him and the old home on Cherry Street became too small for the collective family chest), and there was quiet dignity in the quaintly columned façade of the Bohun mansion, now occupied solely by old Colonel Bohun, lonely and testy, reputed the richest as well as the most miserable man in the county. But as to his wealth, I doubt if rumour runs by more than tradition; Blinky Lockwood's new-found hundred-thousands are growing rapidly toward the million mark, unless Blinky's a worse business man than the town takes him to be.

An old stone arch (whereon lovers linger in the moonlight) spans the stream and links the Old Town with the new, which we sometimes term the Flats, but more often simply Over There. It is a sordid huddle of dingy and down-at-the-heel tenements, housing the poorer working classes and the frankly worthless and ruffianly riff-raff of the neighbourhood. There are eight gin-mills Over There as against two sample-rooms in the Old Town, and of the local constabulary two-thirds lead exciting lives patrolling the Flats; the remaining third is ordinarily to be found dozing in the backroom of Schwartz's, and if roused will answer to the name and title of Pete Willing, Sheriff and Chief of Police.

Duncan reviewed both sides of the municipal face with fine impartiality--the Flats last; and turned back to the Old Town. "There's one thing," he communed as he reached the bridge: "If these people ever find me out they'll run me across the river--sure."

He paused there, looking up and down the valley with contemplative gaze; and it was there I found him.

As is my custom, I had devoted the earlier morning hours to the compilation of that work which is to gain for the name of Littlejohn a trifle more respect than, I fear, it owns in Radville nowadays; and afterwards, again in accordance with habit, had started out for my morning constitutional. As I was about to leave the house Miss Carpenter waylaid me and, in a voice still tremulous from the shock of yesterday, asked me to hunt up Jake Sawyer in the Flats and tell him to come and cut the grass.

I was not in the least unwilling, for the walk was not long, and the morning very pleasant--not too warm, and bright with the smiling spirit of June. I don't remember feeling more cheerful and at peace with the world than when I marched off on my mission. The cloud I might, of course, have anticipated: clouds always come, and a lifetime has taught me to be sceptical of that tale about the silver lining. And even when it came it seemed no more depressing, of no more significant moment, than the cloud shadow that scurries across a wheat-field with no effect other than to enhance the beauty of the sunshine that pursues it.

Old Colonel Bohun was the cloud-shadow of that morning. I met him turning into Main Street from Mortimer--at the head of which his mansion stands. He came down the sidewalk, but with a hint of haste in his manner: a tall old man, bending beneath the burden of his years,

his fierce old face and iron-grey hair shaded as always by the black slouch hat with the flapping brim, his rounded shoulders cloaked with the black Inverness cape he wore summer and winter. In spite of his age and evident decrepitude, he bodied forth the spirit of what he had been, and none could pass him without knowledge of his presence; he drew eyes as a magnet draws filings, and drawing, held them in respect. I doubted if there were a man in Radville who could meet the old colonel with anything but a mingling of fear and deference--with one or two exceptions. For myself I hated him heartily, and he, looking down at me from the peak of pride whereon his iron soul perched, despised me with equal intensity. So we got along famously at our infrequent encounters.

This morning I caught a flash of fire from his red-rimmed old eyes, and told myself I was sorry for whoever crossed his path before he returned to his lonely castle. It was his habit at odd intervals to foray down the village streets with one grievance or another rankling in his bosom, seeking some unlucky one upon whose head to wreak his resentment. We had come to recognise the heavy, slow tapping of his thick cane as a harbinger of trouble, even as you might prognosticate a thunderstorm from the rumbling beneath the horizon.

I saw he recognised me and gave him a civil salute, which he returned with a brusque nod and a sharper, "Good-morning, Littlejohn," as he passed. Then he swung into Main Street, paralleling my course on the opposite sidewalk, and went _thump-thumping_ along, darting quick glances hither and yon beneath his heavy brows, like some dark incarnation of perverse pride and passion.

Partly because the sight of him sensibly influenced my mood, and partly because inevitably he made me think of Sam Graham, I turned off at Beech Street, leaving him to pursue his way toward the centre of town. Graham's one-horse drug-store stood on Beech, a block south of Main. That being the least promising location in town for a business of any sort, Sam had naturally selected it when he concluded to set up shop. If Sam had ever in his life displayed any symptoms of business sagacity, Radville would never have recovered from the shock. I believe it was Legrand Gunn, our only really certificated village wit, who coined the epigram: "As useless as to take a prescription to Graham's." The implication being that Graham didn't carry sufficient stock to fill any prescription; which was largely true; he couldn't; he hadn't the money to stock up with. What little he took in from time to time went in part to the support of Betty and himself, but mainly to pay interest on his debts and buy raw materials for models of his thousand-and-one inventions. Most Radvillians firmly believed that Sam has at some time or other in his busy, worthless career invented everything under the sun, practicable or impracticable--the former always a few days after somebody else had taken out patents for the identical device. But at that time no one believed he would ever make a cent out of any one of the children of his ingenious brain; nor was I, in this respect, more credulous than any of my fellow-townsmen.

I lingered a moment outside the shop, thinking of the change that had

come over it since the death of Margaret Graham, Betty's mother. For, despite its out-of-the-way location, the shop had not always been unprofitable; while Margaret lived (my heart still ached with the memory of her name) Sam's business had prospered. She had been one of those woman who can rise to any emergency in the interest of her loved ones; the first to realise Sam's improvidence and lack of executive ability, she had taken hold of the business with a firm hand and made it pay--while she lived. It has never ceased to be a source of wondering speculation to me, that she, with her gentle training, so wholly aloof from every thought of commerce or economy, should have proven herself so thorough and level-headed a business woman. There's no accounting for it, indeed, save on the theory that she conceived it a woman's function to make up for man's deficiencies; Sam needed her, so she become his wife; he needed a manager, so she had become that also....

During Margaret's røgime, as I say, the shop had thrived. Sam had few ill-wishers in Radville; the trade came his way. Then Betty was born and Margaret died....

Most of this I have on hearsay. I left Radville shortly after their marriage and did not return until some months after Margaret's burial. By that time the shop had begun to show signs of neglect; its stock was decimated, its trade likewise. Sam was struggling with his inventions more fiercely than ever--seeking forgetfulness, I always thought. The business was allowed to take care of itself. He had always a serene faith in his tomorrows.

Now the little shop had been far distanced by the competition of Sothern and Lee. It was twenty years behind the times, as the saying is. Small, darksome, dreary and dingy, it served chiefly as a living-room for Sam, his daughter, and his cronies, as well as for his workshop. He had a bench and a ramshackle lathe in one corner, where you might be sure to find him futilely pottering at almost any hour. He owned the little building--or that portion in it which it were a farce to term the equity above the mortgage--and Betty kept house for him in three rooms above the store.

I saw nothing of him as I stepped across the street, and was wondering if he were at home when, through the small, dark panes of glass in his show windows I discerned his white old head bobbing busily over something on the rear counter. I pushed the door open and entered. He looked up with his never-failing smile of welcome and a wave of his hand.

"Howdy, Homer? Come in. Well, well, I'm glad to see you. Sit down--I think that chair there by the stove will hold together under you."

"What are you doing, Sam?" I asked.

"Fixin' up the sody fountain. 'Meant to get it working last month, Homer, but somehow I kind of forgot."

He rubbed away briskly at the single faucet which protruded above the counter, lathering it briskly with a metal polish that smelt to Heaven.

"Do much sody trade, Sam?"

He paused, passing his worn old fingers reflectively across a chin snowy with a stubble of neglected beard. "No," he allowed thoughtfully, "not so much as we used to, now that Sothern and Lee've got this new-fangled notion of puttin' ice cream in a nickel glass of sody. Most of the young folks go there, now, but still I get a call flow and then--and every little bit helps." He rubbed on ferociously for a moment. "Course, I'd do more, likely, if I carried a bigger line of flavours."

"How many do you carry?"

"One," he admitted with a sigh, "vanilly."

While I filled my pipe he continued to rub very industriously.

"Why don't you get more?"

He flashed me one of his pale, genial smiles. "I'm thinkin' of it, Homer, soon's I get some money in. Next week, mebbe. There's a man in N'York that mebbe can be int'rested in one of my inventions, Roland Barnette says. Mebbe he'd be willin' to put a little money in it, Roland says, and of course if he does, I'll be able to stock up considerable."

I sighed covertly for him. He rubbed, humming a tuneless rhythm to himself.

"Roland's goin' to write to him about it."

"What invention?" I asked, incredulous.

Sam put down his bottle of polish and came round the counter, beaming; nothing pleases him better than an opportunity to exhibit some one of his innumerable models. "I'll show you, Homer," he volunteered cheerfully, shuffling over to his work-bench. He rasped a match over its surface and applied the flame to a small gas-bracket fixed to the wall. A strong rush of gas extinguished the match, and he turned the flow half off before trying again. This time the vapour caught and settled to a steady, brilliant flame as white as and much softer than acetylene.

"There!" he said in triumph. "What d'ye think of that, Homer?"

"Why," I said, "I didn't know you had an acetylene plant."

"No more have I, Homer."

"But what is that, then?" I demanded.

"It's my invention," he returned proudly.

"I've been workin' on it two years, Homer, and only got it goin' yestiddy. It's going to be a great thing, I tell you."

"But what _is_ it, Sam?"

"It's gas from crude petroleum, Homer. See ..." he continued, indicating a tank beneath the bench which seemed to be connected with the bracket by a very simple system of piping, broken by a smaller, cylindrical tank. "Ye put the oil in there--just crude, as it comes out of the wells, Homer; it don't need refinin'--and it runs through this and down here to this, where it's vaporised--much the same's they vaporise gasoline for autymobile engines, ye know--and then it just naturally flows up to the bracket--and there ye are."

"It's wonderful, Sam," said I, wondering if it really were.

"And the best part of it is the economy, Homer. A gallon will run one jet six weeks, day in and out. And simple to install. I tell ye--"

"Have you got it patented yet?"

"Yes, siree! took out patents just as soon as it struck me how simple it 'ud be--more than two years ago. Only, of course, it took time to work it out just right, 'specially when I had to stop now and then 'cause I needed money for materials. But it's all right now, Homer, it's all right now."

"And you say Roland Barnette's writing to some one in New York about it?"

"Yes; he promised he would. I explained it to Roland and he seemed real int'rested. He's kind, very kind."

I was inclined to doubt this, and would probably have said something to that effect had not a shadow crossing the window brought me to my feet in consternation. But before I could do more than rise, Colonel Bohun had flung open the door and stamped in. He stopped short at sight of me, misguided by his near-sighted eyes, and singled me out with a threatening wave of his heavy stick.

"Well, sir!" he snarled. "I've come for my answer. Have you sense enough in your addled pate to understand that, man? I've come for my answer!"

"And may have it, whatever it may be, for all of me," I told him.

His face flushed a deeper red. "Oh, it's only you, is it, Littlejohn? I took you for that fool Graham, in this damned dark hole. Where is he?"

I looked to Graham and he followed the direction of my gaze to the

work-bench, where Sam stood with his back to it, his worn hands folded quietly before him. He seemed a little whiter than usual, I thought; and perhaps it was only my fancy that made him appear to tremble ever so slightly. For he was quite calm and self-possessed--so much so that I realised for the first time there was another man in Radville besides myself who did not fear old Colonel Bohun.

"I'm here, colonel," he said quietly. "What is it you wish?"

The colonel swung on him, shaking with passion. But he held his tongue until he had mastered himself somewhat: a feat of self-restraint on his part over which I marvel to this day.

"You know well, Graham," he said presently. "You got my letter--the letter I wrote you a week ago?"

"Yes," said Sam, with a start of comprehension. "Yes, I got it."

"Then why the devil, man, don't you answer it?"

Sam's apologetic smile sweetened his face.

"Why," he said haltingly--"I'm sure I meant no offence, but--you see, I'm a very busy man--I forgot it."

"The hell you forgot it. D'ye expect me to believe that, man?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to."

Bohun was speechless for a moment, stricken dumb by a second seizure of fury. But again he calmed himself.

"Very well. I'll swallow that insolence for the present--"

"It wasn't meant as such, I assure--"

"Don't interrupt me! D'you hear? ... I've come for my answer. Yes, I've come down to that, Graham. If you can't accord me the common courtesy of a written reply--I've come to hear it from your mouth."

Sam nodded thoughtfully. "Mebbe," he said, "you forgot you have failed to accord me the common courtesy of any sort of a communication whatever for twenty years, Colonel Bohun. Even when my wife, your daughter, died, you ignored my message asking you to her funeral...."

"Be silent!" screamed the colonel. "Do you think I'm here to bandy words with you, fool? I demand my answer."

"And as for that," continued Sam as evenly as if he had not been interrupted, "your proposition was so preposterous that it could have come only from you, and deserved no answer. But since you want it formally, sir, it's no."

For a moment I feared Bohun would have a stroke. The back of the chair I had just vacated and his stick alone supported him through that dumb, terrible transport. He shook so violently that I looked momentarily to see the chair break beneath him. There was insanity in his eyes. When finally he was able to articulate it was in broken gasps.

"I don't believe it," he stammered. "It's a lie. I don't believe it. It's madness--the girl wouldn't be so mad. ..."

"What is it, father?"

I don't know which of us three was the more startled by that simple question in Betty Graham's voice; Sam, at all events, showed the least surprise; the old colonel wheeled toward the back of the store, his jaw dropping and his eyes protruding as though he were confronted with a ghost. As, in a way, he was: even I had been struck by that strange, heartrending similarity to her mother's tone; and even I trembled a little to hear that voice, as it seemed, from beyond the grave.

Betty stood at the foot of the staircase; alarmed by the noise of the colonel's raging, she had stolen down, unheard by any of us. And in that moment I realised as never before that the girl had more of her mother in her than lay in that marvellous reproduction of Margaret Graham's voice. As she waited there one detected in her pose something of her mother's quiet dignity, in her eyes more than a little of Margaret's tragedy. Of Margaret's beauty I saw scant trace, I own; but in those days my eyes were blinded by the signs of overwork and insufficient nourishment that marred her young features, by the hopeless dowdiness of her garments.

Abruptly she moved swiftly to her father's side and slipped her hand into his. "What is it, father?" she repeated, eyeing Colonel Bohun coldly.

I thought Sam's eyes filled. His lips trembled and he had to struggle to master his voice. He smiled through it all, tenderly at his girl, but there was in that smile the weakness of the child grown old, the dependence of the man whose womanfolk must ever mother him.

"Why, Betty," he said, tremulous--"why, Betty, your grandfather here has been kind enough to offer to take you and educate you and make a lady of you, and--and we were just talking it over, dear, just talking it over."

"Do you mean that?" she flung at Bohun.

He straightened up and held himself well in hand. "Is it the first you have heard of it?"

"Yes." She looked inquiringly at her father.

"Why didn't you tell her?" Bohun persisted harshly. "Were you afraid?"

"No." Sam shook his head slowly. "I wasn't afraid. But it was unnecessary.... You see, Betty, Colonel Bohun is willing to do all this for you on several conditions. You must leave me and never see me again; you mustn't even recognise me should we meet upon the street; you must change your name to Bohun and never permit yourself to be known as Betty Graham. Then you must--"

"Never mind, daddy dear," said the girl. "That is enough. I know now--I understand why you never told me. It's impossible. Colonel Bohun knew that when he made the offer, of course; he made it simply to harass you, daddy. It's his revenge...."

She looked Bohun up and down with a glance of contempt that would have withered another man, poor, wan, haggard little maid of all work that she was.

"And that's your answer, miss?" he snapped, livid with wrath.

"I would not," she told him slowly, "accept a favour from you, sir, if I were starving...."

Bohun drew himself up. "Then starve," he told her; and walked out of the shop.

I gaped after his retreating figure. It seemed impossible, incredible, that he should have taken such an answer without yielding to a fit of insensate passion. And I was still marvelling when I heard Graham saying in a broken voice: "Betty! Betty, my little girl!"

Then I, too, went away, with a mist before my eyes to dim the golden grace of June.

VI

INTRODUCTION TO MISS CARPENTER

On my way back from the Flats I discovered Duncan sitting on the wall of the bridge, moodily donating pebbles to the water. His attitude suggested preoccupation with unhappy reflections, a humour from which the sound of my footsteps roused him. He looked up and caught my eye with an uncertain nod, as though he half recognised me--presumably having casually noticed me at the Bigelow House the previous evening.

"Good-morning," said I cheerfully, with a slight break in my stride intended craftily to convey the impression that I was not altogether averse to a pause for gossip.

He said "Good-morning," sombrely.

"A pleasant day," I observed spontaneously, stopping.

"Yes," he agreed. "By the way, have you a match about you?"

I searched my pockets, found a box and handed it over.

"I've been perishing for a ..." He slid his fingers into a waistcoat pocket, as one who should seek a cigarette-case; but the hand came forth empty. He bit his remark off abruptly, with a blank look in his eyes which was promptly succeeded by an expression of deepest chagrin. He got up and with a little bow returned the box.

"I forgot," he said, apologetic.

"I'm afraid I can't help you out," said I.

"Oh, that's all right. I'd just forgotten that I don't smoke."

I pretended not to notice his disconcertion.

"You're to be congratulated; it's a shameful waste of time and money."

"A filthy habit," said he warmly.

"Indeed, yes," I chanted, finding my pipe and tobacco pouch.

He caught my twinkle as I filled and lighted, and looked away, the shadow of a smile lurking beneath his small, closely clipped moustache.

"I beg your pardon," he said a moment later, regarding me with more interest, "but--do you live here?"

"Certainly. Why?"

"I was sure of it," he replied soberly. "But don't you feel a bit lonesome, sometimes?"

"Not in the least. Radville's one of the most interesting places on this side of the footstool." He sighed. "Indeed," I insisted, "you won't feel any more lonely after you've lived here a while, than I do now, Mr. Duncan."

He opened his eyes at my acquaintance with his name, but jerked his head at me comprehendingly.

"To be sure," he said. "You would know. But I'm only beginning to realise what it feels like to be a marked man."

"I hear you intend to make Radville your permanent residence, Mr. Duncan?"

"It's part of the system," he said obscurely. "It may prove a life sentence."

"Don't you think you'll like it here?"

"Oh, I'm strong for Radville," he declared earnestly. "It's all to the merry ... I beg your pardon."

I stared curiously to see him colour like a school-girl. "What for?"

"My mistake, sir; I forgot myself again. I don't use slang."

"Oh!" I commented, wondering. He was beginning to puzzle me.

In the pause the air began to rock with the heavy clanging of the clock in the Methodist Church steeple.

"That's noon," I said. "We'll have to cut along: dinner's ready."

Duncan immediately replanted himself firmly upon the parapet. "I know it," he said with some indignation.

Again bewildered, I hesitated, but eventually advanced: "Our ways run together, Mr. Duncan, as far as the Bigelow House. My name is Littlejohn--Homer Littlejohn."

He rose again to take my hand and assured me he was glad to make my acquaintance. "But," he added morosely, "I'll be damned if I go back to that hotel before dinner's over.... Great Scott! I forgot again. I don't swear!"

"Have you any other unnatural accomplishments?" I inquired, chuckling.

"I'm so full of 'em I can hardly stick," he assented gloomily. "I don't drink or smoke or swear or play pool or cards, and on Sundays I go to church."

I laughed outright. "You've come to the right place for such exemplary virtues to be fully appreciated, Mr. Duncan."

"That's all right," he said with a return of his indignation, "but it wasn't in the bargain that I should starve to death. Do you realise, Mr. Littlejohn," he continued, warming, "that you behold in me a young man in the prime of health actually on the point of wasting visibly away to a shadow of my former hardy self? It's a fact: I am. For the past two days I've had nothing to eat except railway sandwiches and coffee and the kind of fodder they pitchfork you at the Bigelow House. And I came here with a mind coloured with rosy anticipations of real old-fashioned country cooking. It's an outrage!"

"Look here," said I: "why not come home with me for dinner? I'll be glad to have you, and Miss Carpenter won't mind your coming, I'm sure."

He got up with alacrity. "Those are the first human words I've heard in Radville, sir! I accept with joy and gratitude. Come--lead me to it!"

Now, Miss Carpenter doesn't like her meals delayed; so I would have been inclined to hasten this Mr. Duncan; but he saved me the trouble.

"Miss Carpenter?" he asked without warning, as we hurried up Main Street.

"My landlady, Mr. Duncan."

"She takes boarders? An old maid?" he persisted eagerly.

"An elderly spinster; boarders are her distraction as well as a source of income."

"Do you think she'd take me in, Mr. Littlejohn?"

"I'm sure of it. There's a vacant room ..."

"Does she talk?"

"Moderately."

"Not a regular walking newspaper--no?"

"Not exactly--"

"Then I'm afraid it's no use," he sighed.

I glanced up at his face, but it was inscrutable.

"You--you want a landlady who talks?" I gasped, incredulous.

"It's one of the rules," he said, again obscurely.

I could make nothing of him. And had I any right to introduce to Hetty Carpenter a guest who came without credentials and talked more or less like a lunatic at large?

"Mr. Duncan--" I began, uncomfortable.

"Don't say it," he anticipated me. "I know you think I'm crazy--but I'm not. You would think so, naturally, because you're the only man here who's ever lived away from Radville long enough--not counting those who went to the World's Fair--"

"How did you know?"

"Bigelow told me last night; said you'd be glad to meet somebody from New York. I hope he's right. I'm glad, personally.... You see--May I request that you regard this as confidential?"

"Yes--yes!"

"I've come to Radville to make my fortune."

The confession smote me witless: I could only gape. He nodded confirmation, with a most serious mien. At length I found strength to articulate. "From New York--?"

"Yes. It's a new scheme. You see, Mr. Littlejohn, matters have come to such a state that a city-bred boy practically doesn't stand any show on earth of making good in the cities; your country-bred boys crowd him to the wall, nine times out of ten. They invade us in hordes, fresh from the open, strong, vigorous, clear-headed, ambitious.... What chance have we got? ... I've been figuring it out, you see, and I've come to the conclusion that it's my only salvation to get back to the country and improve some of the opportunities--the golden opportunities--that your boys have neglected, overlooked, in their mad desire to invade the commercial centres of the country."

He seemed very much in earnest; I was watching him as closely as I might without making my scrutiny offensive; and there seemed to be the ring of conviction in his voice, while the expression of his eyes indicated concentrated thought. And how was I to know, then, that the concentration was due to the necessity of invention?

"You follow me, Mr. Littlejohn?"

"I was here first," I corrected. "Still, there's more in what you say than perhaps you realise."

"If I'd made this discovery originally I'd agree with you, sir. But, quite to the contrary, it was pointed out to me by one of the shrewdest business minds in the United States--a man who'd been a country boy to begin with. And I've come to the conclusion that he's right."

"So you're here."

"Here I am."

"And what do you propose doing?"

"I'm reading law, Mr. Littlejohn; that I shall continue. In the meantime, I shall keep my eyes open. At any day, at any amount, the opportunity may present itself, the opportunity I'm looking for."

"Probably you're right," I assented, impressed, as we turned a corner.

A young woman in a very attractive linen gown was strolling toward us, quite prettily engaged with a book which she read as she walked, her fair young head bowed beneath a sunshade which tinted her face becomingly. She gave me a shy smile and a low-voiced greeting as we passed. Only my knowledge of the young woman prevented me from being blinded by her engaging appearance.

"That," said I, when we were out of earshot, "shows you what a furore a good-looking young man can create in a town like this. Josie Lockwood has put on her best bib-and-tucker to go walking in this afternoon, on the off-chance of meeting you, Mr. Duncan."

"Flattery note," he commented. "Who's Josie Lockwood?"

"Daughter of Blinky Lockwood, the richest man in Radville."

"Ah!" he said cryptically.

We had come to Miss Carpenter's. I opened the gate for him, but he stood aside, refusing to precede me. And courtesy in the young folk of to-day warms my old heart.

He had as much for Hetty Carpenter. Within an hour he had insinuated himself into her good graces with a deftness, an ease, that astounded. Within three hours he was established, bag and baggage, in her very best room.

And thirty minutes after she had helped Duncan unpack, Hetty had to run downtown to buy a spool of thread.

VII

A WINDOW IN RADVILLE

A jealous secret, which has never heretofore been divulged, is responsible for the prosperity of the Radville Citizen--at least, in very great measure. As the discoverer of this recipe for circulation, I have kept it carefully locked in my guilty bosom for many a year, and if I now betray it I do so without scruple, for the Gazette is now established firmly in a groove of popularity from which you'd find it hard to oust the paper. So here's letting the cat out of the bag:

The policy of the Citizen has long been to devote its columns mainly to the exploitation of what is known in newspaper terminology as "the local story." Of the news of the great outside world we're parsimonious, recognising the fact that the coronation of King Edward VII. is a matter of much less import to our community than the holocaust which was responsible for the destruction of Sir Higginbottom's new hen-house. Similarly a West Indian tornado involving losses running up into hundreds of thousands of dollars sinks into relative insignificance as compared with the local weather forecast and its probable effect on crops not worth ten thousand; while the enforced abdication of the Sultan of Turkey gets a "stick" (a space in a newspaper column about as long as your forefinger, if you have a small hand) as contrasted with the column and a half assigned to the death of

old Colonel Bohun.

Now, naturally, a paper in a small country town can't afford a large and hustling staff of enthusiastic reporters; and very probably the _Citizen_ would overlook many items and stories of burning local interest were it not for the fact that the population has been cunningly made to serve in a reportorial capacity without either pay or its own knowledge. We literally get our local news by wireless; and from dawn to dark there's a constant supply of it on tap.

It's this way: our editorial rooms are in the second storey of a building overlooking Court House Square. The lower floor is occupied by the Post Office, and in front of the Post Office are a hitching-post and two long, weather-scarred benches, while just across the road--I mean street--on the boundary of the square proper--is a near-bronze drinking-fountain and watering-trough erected from the proceeds of several fairs given by the local branch of the W. C. T. U. Naturally, indeed inevitably, all Radville gravitates to the Post Office, bringing the news with it, and stops to discuss it on the steps or the benches or by the fountain; and the acoustics are admirable. With a window open and scratch-pad handy, the keen-eared scribe at his desk in our offices can hardly fail to pick up every scrap of town information between sunrise and dusk.... Of course, in winter the supply's not so good. Winter before last we all suffered with colds acquired through keeping the windows open; and last winter our circulation fell off surprisingly through keeping them closed. This winter we contemplate cutting a trap-door through the floor for the ostensible purpose of ventilation.

And thus it was that I managed to hear much of Mr. Duncan while I myself was engaged in formulating an estimate of the young man. He engaged the popular imagination no less than mine own, although I was more intimately associated with him--as a fellow-resident at Hetty Carpenter's. My professional duties making their habitual demands upon my time, I saw, it may be, less of him than many of our people. Certainly I learned less of his ways from first-hand knowledge. But from my desk (it's the nearest to the window right above the Post Office door) I was enabled to keep a pretty close line upon his habits and movements, during the first fortnight of his stay in Radville.

At home I saw him with unvarying regularity at meal-times and less frequently after supper. Between whiles he seemed to observe a fairly regular routine: in the morning, after breakfast, he walked abroad for his health's sake; in the afternoon and evening he sequestered himself in his room for the pursuit of his legal studies. About the genuineness of these latter I was long without a question: having been privileged to inspect his room I found it redolent of an atmosphere of highly commendable application. His writing table was a model of neatness, and his store of legal treatises impressed one vastly. That no one, not even Hetty Carpenter, ever saw the room without remarking the open volume of "The Law of Torts," with its numerous pages painstakingly spaced by slips of paper by way of bookmarks, is an attested fact. That it was always the same volume is less widely known.

Less directly (that is to say, via my window) I learned of him compendiously from sources which would have been anonymous but for my long acquaintance with the voices of the townspeople.... I write these pages at my desk at home and, if truth's to be told, somewhat surreptitiously; but with these voices ringing in my memory's ear I seem still to be sitting at my erstwhile desk by the window, looking out over Court House Square, chewing the rubber heel of my pencil the while I listen. It's summer weather and there's a smell in the air of dust and heat; the square simmers and shimmers in unclouded sunshine, its many green plots of grass a trifle grey and haggard with dust, the flagstaff with its two flanking cannon by the bandstand in the middle wavering slightly in the haze of heat; there are two rigs, a farm-wagon and a buckboard, hitched to the post below, and some boys are squirting water on one another by holding their hands over the lips of the fountain across the way. Immediately opposite, on the far side of the square, the Court House rises proudly in all the majesty of its columned front and clapboarded sides; farther along there's the Methodist Church, very severe, with its rows of sheds to one side for the teams of the more rural members. Behind them all bulk our hills, dim and purple against the overwhelming blue of the sky. It's very quiet: there are few sounds, and those few most familiar: the raucous war-cry of a rooster somewhere on the outskirts of town; an intermittent thudding of hoofs in the inch-deep dust of the roadway; Miles Stetson wringing faint but genuine shrieks of agony from his cornet, in a room behind the Opery House on the next street; periodically a shuffle of feet on the sidewalk below; less frequently the whine of the swinging doors at Schwartz's place; above it all, perhaps, the shrill but not unpleasant accents of Angie Tuthill as she pauses on the threshold downstairs and injects surprising information into the nothing-reluctant ears of Mame Garrison.

" ... He's got six suits of clothes, three for summer and three for winter, and two others to wear to parties--one regular full-dress suit and another without any tails on the coat that he told Miss Carpenter was a dinner-coat, but Roland Barnette says he must've meant a Tuxedo, because nobody wears that kind of clothes except at night; so how could it be a dinner-coat?... And Miss Carpenter told Ma he's got twelve striped shirts and eight white ones and dozens of silk socks and two dozen neckties and handkerchiefs till you can't count and...."

Mame punctuates this monologue with a regular and excusable "My land!" and the young voices fade away into the mid-summer afternoon quiet. I am free to resume my interrupted flight of fancy, but I refrain. The atmosphere is soporiferous, hardly conducive to editorial inspiration, and I find the commingled flavours of red-cedar, glue and rubber quite nourishing.

Presently Dr. Mortimer, the minister, comes down the street in company with his deacon, Blinky Lockwood. They are discussing someone in subdued tones, but I catch references to a worthy young man and the vacancy in the choir.

Josie Lockwood rustles into hearing with Bessie Gabriel in tow. Josie

is rattling volubly, but with a hint of the confidential in her tone. She insists that: "Of course, I never let on, but every time we meet I can just feel him looking and...."

Bessie interposes: "Why, Tracey Tanner's just crazy for fear he'll take on with Angie."

I can see Josie's head toss at this. "I bet he don't know what Angie Tuthill looks like. That's too absurd..."

"Absurd" is Josie's newest word. It's a very good word, too, but sometimes I fear she will wear it threadbare. It closes her remarks as the two girls dart into the Post Office, and there is peace for a time; then they emerge giggling, and I hear Josie declare: "I'd get Roland Barnette to do it, but he's so jealous. He makes me tired."

Bessie's response is inaudible.

"Well," Josie continues, "I'm simply not going to send them out until I meet him. Father said I could give it a week from Saturday, but I won't unless--"

Bessie interrupts, again inaudibly.

"Of course I could do that, but ... if I just said 'Miss Carpenter and guests' that nosey old Homer Littlejohn'd think I meant him too, and if I only said 'guest' it'd look too pointed. Don't you think so?"

To my relief they pass from hearing, and I feel for my pipe for comfort. Anyway, I never did like Josie Lockwood.... Smoking, I meditate on the astonishing power of personality. Here is Mr. Nathaniel Duncan no more than a fortnight in our midst (the phrase is used callously, as something sacred to country journalism) and, behold! not yet has the town ceased to discuss him. The control he has over the local mind and imagination is certainly wonderful: the more so since he has apparently made no effort to attract attention; rather, I should say, to the contrary. Quiet and unassuming he goes his way, minding his own business as carefully as we would mind it for him, with all the good will in the world, if only we could find out what it is. But we can't leave him alone....

Tracey Tanner interrupts my musings.

"Hello!" he twangs, like a tuneless banjo.

"Lo, Tracey." This lofty and blase greeting can come from none other than Roland Barnette.

"Where you goin'?"

"Over to the railway station."

"What for?"

"To give you something to talk about. I'm going to send a telegram to a friend of mine in Noo York."

"Aw, you ain't the only one can send telegrams. Sam Graham sent one just now."

"_He_ did!"

"Uh-huh. I was sort of hangin' round, when he came in, and I seen him send it myself."

"Sam Graham telegraphing! Do you know; who to, Tracey?" Roland's superiority is wearing thin under contact with his curiosity. This surprising bit of news makes him distinctly more affable and inclined to lower himself to the social level of the son of the livery-stable keeper.

As for myself, I am inclined to lean out of the window and call Tracey up, lest he get out of hearing before I hear the rest of it. Fortunately I am not thus obliged to compromise my dignity. The two are at pause.

"Gimme a cigarette 'nd I'll tell you," bargains Tracey shrewdly. "Lew Parker told me after Sam'd gone."

The deal is put through promptly.

"He was telegraphin' to--Got a match?"

For once I am in sympathy with Roland, whose tone betrays his desire to wring Tracey's exasperating neck.

"Aw, he was only telegraphing to Gresham an' Jones for some sody water syrups."

"Where'd he get the money?" There's fine scorn in Roland's comment.

"I dunno, but he handed Lew a five-dollar bill to pay for the message."

"Well, if Sam Graham's got any money he'd better hold on to it, instead of buying sody-water syrups. I guess Blinky Lockwood'll get after him when he finds it out. He owes Blinky a note at the bank and it's coming due in a day or two and Blinky ain't going to renew, neither."

"Sam seemed cheerful 'nough. Anyhow, it ain't my funeral."

I have now something to think about, indeed, and am more than half inclined to stroll up to Graham's and find out what has happened, on my own account, when the voices of Hi Nutt and Watty the tailor drift up to me. The cronies are coming down for their regular afternoon session on the Post Office benches--a function which takes place daily, just as soon as the sun gets round behind the building, so that the seats are

shaded. And I pause, true to the ethics of journalism; it's my duty not to leave just yet.

Surprisingly enough these two likewise are discussing Sam Graham. At least I can deduce nothing else from Hiram's first words, though their subject is for the moment nameless.

"Yes, sir; he's the poorest man in this town."

"Yes," Watty quavers; "yes, I guess he be."

"An' he's got no more business sense _into_ him than God give a goose."

"No, I guess he ain't."

"Why, look at the way things has run down at his store since Margaret died. She kept things a-runnin' while she was alive."

"Yes, she was a fine woman, Margaret Bohun was."

"An' they ain't no doubt about it, Sam had money into the bank when she died. But ever sinst then it's been all go out and no come in with him. He keeps fussin' and fussin' with them inventions of his, but no one ever heard tell of his gettin' anything out of 'em."

"And what'd he do with all the money he had when Margaret died?"

"Spent it, what he didn't lend and give away and lose endorsin' notes for his friends and then havin' to pay 'em. An' speakin' of notes, I heard Roland Barnette say, t'other day, that old Sam had a note comin' due to the bank, an' Blinky wasn't goin' to renew it any more."

"Course Sam can't pay it."

"Certainly he can't. I was in his store day before yestiddy an' they wasn't nobody come in for nothin' while I was there. He don't do no business to speak of."

"How long was you there, Hi?"

"From nine o'clock to noon."

"What doin'?"

"Nuthin'; jes' settin' round."

"I seen him to-day goin' into the bank. Guess he must've gone to see Lockwood 'bout that note."

"Well, I don't envy him his call on Blinky Lockwood none."

"Mebbe he went in to deposit his coupons," Watty chuckled.

Hiram snorted and there was silence while he filled and lit his pipe.

"I hearn tell this mornin'," he resumed, "that Josie Lockwood's goin' to give a party next week."

"Yes, I hearn it too. Angie Tuthill was talkin' 'bout it to Mame Garrison up to Leonard and Call's. She said they was goin' to have the biggest time this town ever see. Goin' to decyrate the grounds with lanterns an' have ice cream sent from Phillydelphy, and cakes, too. Can't make out what's come into Blinky to let that gal of his waste money like that."

"I figger," says Hiram after a sapient pause, "she must be gettin' it up for thet New York dood."

"Duncan?"

"Uh-huh."

"I didn't know he was 'quainted with the Lockwoods."

"I didn't know he was 'quainted with nobody."

"Nobody 'ceptin' Homer Littlejohn an' Hetty Carpenter, an' they don't seem to know much about him. I call him darn cur'us. Hetty says he allus a-settin' in his room, a-studyin' an' a-studyin' an' a-studyin'."

"He goes walkin' mornin's, Hetty told me."

"Wal, he don't come downtown much. Nobody hardly ever sees him 'cept to church."

Hiram ponders this profoundly, finally delivering himself of an opinion which he has never forsaken. "I claim he's a s'picious character."

"Don't look to me as though he knew 'nough to be much of anythin'."

"Wal, now, if he's a real student an' they ain't no outs 'bout him, what in tarnation's he doin' here? Thet's jest what I'd like to have somebody tell me, Watty."

"Hetty sez he sez he wants a quiet place to study."

Hiram snorts with scorn. "Oh, fid-del! You don't catch no Noo York young feller a-settlin' down in Radville unless he's crazy or somethin' worse."

"Tain't no use tellin' Hetty Carpenter thet." "No; if anybody sez a word agin him she shets 'em right up."

"Tain't only Hetty, but all the wimmin's on his side."

"That's proof enough to me he ain't right." "Wimmin," says Watty, as the result of a period of philosophical consideration, "is all crazy about clothes. When a feller's got good clothes you can't make them see no harm into him, no matter what he is. I pressed some of Duncan's last Satiddy. I never see clothes--such goods and linin's. They was made for him, too--made by a tailor on Fifth Avenue, Noo York. I fergit the name now."

"Wal, Roland Barnette sez they ain't stylish. He sez they're too much like an undertaker's gitup."

"Wal, Roland oughter know. He's the fanciest dressed-up feller in the county."

"Yes, I guess he be."

The subject apparently languishes, but I know that it still occupies their sage meditations; and presently this is demonstrated by Hiram, who expectorates liberally by way of preface.

"When this cuss Duncan fust come here," he says with a self-contained chuckle, "ev'rybody but me figgered he had stacks of money. Guess they be singin' a different tune, now, sinst he's been goin' round askin' for work."

This is news to me, and I sit up, sharing Watty's astonishment.

"Be he a-doin' thet, Hiram?"

"That's what he's been a-doin'."

"Funny I missed hearin' about it."

"He only started this mornin'. He went to Sothern and Lee's and Leonard and Call's and Godfrey's--'nd then I guess he must 'ev quit discouraged. They wouldn't none of them give him nothin'. Leastways, thet's what they said after he'd gone out. He didn't give anybody a reel chance to say anythin'. I was in Leonard and Call's and he came in an' asked for a job, but the minute Len looked at him he turned right round and slunk out without a-waitin' for Len to say a word." Hiram smoked in huge enjoyment of the retrospect. "He's the curiosest critter we ever had in this town."

"Yes," agrees Watty, "I guess he be."

At this juncture comes an interruption; Tracey Tanner returns, hot-foot. Either he has been running, or his breathlessness is due to excitement. Before the two upon the bench he pauses in agitated glee, a bearer of tremendous tidings.

"Hello," he pants.

"Now, you Tracey Tanner," Hiram cuts in sharply, "you run 'long an'

don't be a-botherin' round. Seems like a body never can git a chance to rest, with you children allus a-buttin' in--"

"Aw, shet up," says Tracey dispassionately. "I only wanted to tell you the news."

Watty quavers: "What news, Tracey?"

"Well," says the boy, "I'll tell you, Watty, but I wouldn't 've told him after what he said."

"But what's the news, Tracey?" There is suspense in the iteration.

"Well, seein's it's you, Watty--"

"You Tracey Tanner, you run 'long and stop your jokin'!" interrupts Hiram with authority.

"Tain't no joke; it's news, I'm tellin' you. Sa-ay, what d'ye think, Watty?"

"Yes, Tracey, yes? What is it, boy?"

"Thet--Noo--York--dood," drawls Tracey, "is a-workin' for Sam Graham!"

A dramatic pause ensues. I rise and find my coat.

"Tracey Tanner," shrills Hiram, "be you a-tellin' the truth?"

"Kiss my hand and cross my heart and vow Honest Injun, I seen him up there just now in the store, Watty, tendin' the sody fountain."

"Wal," says Hiram, rising, "I don't believe a word of it, but if it's true we better be goin' round to see, Watty, 'cause it ain't a-goin' to last long. He won't stay after he finds out Sam ain't got no money to pay his wages with."

VIII

THE MAN OF BUSINESS IN EMBRYO

There's no questioning the fact that two weeks of Radville had driven Duncan to desperation; on the morning of the fifteenth day he wakened in his room at Miss Carpenter's and lay for a time abed staring vacantly at the gaudily papered ceiling, not through laziness remaining on his back, but through sheer inertia. The prospect of rising to ramble through another purposeless, empty day appalled his imagination; it had been all very well when the humour of his project intrigued him, when the village was a novelty and its inhabitants "types" to be

studied, watched, analysed and classified with secret amusement; but now he felt that he had already exhausted its possibilities; he was a foreigner in thought and instinct, had as little in common with Radvillians as any newly imported Englishman would have had. In plain language, he was bored to the point of extinction.

"Why," he reflected aloud, "it doesn't seem reasonable, but I'm actually looking forward to the delirious dissipation of church next Sunday!

"Me?..."

"If Kellogg could only see me now!"

He laughed mirthlessly.

"I must have done something to deserve this in my misspent life..."

"Wonder if nothing ever happens here?... I'd give a whole lot, if I had it, for a good rousing fire on Main Street--the Bigelow House, for choice..."

"And it's got me to the point of drooling to myself, like those fellows you read about who get lost in the desert..."

"Come! Get out of this! And, my boy, remember to 'count that day lost whose low descending sun sees nothing accomplished, nothing done.'..."

"Probably misquoted, at that."

Sullenly he rose and dressed.

He was late at the breakfast and silent and reserved throughout that meal. Poor Miss Carpenter thought him dissatisfied and hung round his chair, purring with a solicitude that almost maddened him. As soon as possible he made his escape from the house.

The walk he indulged in that morning took him in a wide circle: south on the road to the Gap, then eastwards, crossing the railroad and the river, north through a smiling agricultural region, east to the Flats, and so across the stone bridge to the Old Town once more. He was trudging up Street toward Centre shortly after eleven--hot, a little tired, and utterly disgusted. The exercise, instead of exhilarating, had depressed him; the quickened flow of blood through his veins, the vigour of the clean air he inhaled, demanded of him action of some sort; and he had nothing whatever to do with himself all afternoon save drowse over "The Law of Torts."

Recognition of Leonard and Call's familiar shop-front fired him with a spirit of adventure and enterprise. He stopped short, thoughtfully rubbing his small moustache the wrong way, his vision glued to the embarrassingly candid window displays.

"It'd be an awful thing for me to do...."

"Think of yourself, man, jumping counters in and out amongst all those--those _Things!_ like a lunatic monkey performing on a Monday morning's clothes line!..."

He thought deeply, and sighed. "It ain't moral...."

"But it's one of the rules, it must be did. Henry said a ribbon clerk was a social equal...."

"Come, now! No more shennanigan! Brace up! Be a man!..."

"A man? That's the whole trouble: I am a man; I've got no business in a place like that."

He turned and moved away slowly. But the idea had him by the heels. He struggled against a growing resolution to return. Then enlightenment came to him suddenly. He paused again, grappling with this amazing revelation of self.

"Great Scott! Harry was right, damn him! He said this place would reconstruct me from the inside out and vice versa, and by jinks! it has. I actually _want_ to work!..."

"Can you beat that--_me_!"

He swung back to Leonard and Call's, mentally reviewing his instructions.

"Let's see. I was to wait at least a month, to let the shopkeepers get accustomed to the sight of me.... _Hmm_.... Harry certainly has a cute way of expressing his thought.... But it can't be helped; I can't wait. If I do, I'll throw up the job...."

"I'm to walk in and say, politely: '_I'm looking for employment. If at any time you should have an opening here that you can offer me, I shall endeavour to give satisfaction. Good-day_'..."

"But be careful not to press it. Just say it and get right out...."

With the air of a man who knows his own mind he pulled open the wire screen-door and strode in.

Two minutes later he emerged, breathing hard, but with the glitter of determination in his eye.

"I wouldn't 've believed I could get away with it. Here goes for the next promising opening."

He headed for Sothern and Lee's drug-store.

"Wonder what that fellow would have said if I'd had the nerve to wait

and listen...."

In the drug-store he experienced less difficulty in making his speech and exit; he flattered himself that he accomplished both gracefully, even impressively. And indeed you may believe he left a gaping audience behind him. So likewise at Godfrey's notions and stationery shop.

As he emerged from the latter the resonant clamour of the Methodist Church clock drove him home for dinner, hungry and glowing with self-approbation. At all events, no one had refused him: he had not been set upon and incontinently kicked out. He felt that he was getting on.

"Now this afternoon," he mused, "I'll wind up the job. By night everyone in town will know I want work."

But if he had thought a moment he would have realised that he might have spared himself the trouble; the consummation he so earnestly desired was already being brought about by resident and recognised, if unofficial, agents for the dissemination of news.

It was two o'clock or thereabouts, I gather, when, shaping his course toward Radville's commercial centre, Duncan hesitated on the corner of Beech Street, cocking an incredulous eye up at the weather-worn sign which has for years adorned the side of Tuthill's grocery: a hand indicating fixedly:

THIS WAY TO GRAHAM'S DRUG STORE

"Two druggists in Radville!" he mused. "Is it possible?... Then it's Harry's mistake if the scheme fails; he said this was a one-horse country town, but I'm blest if it isn't a thriving metropolis! Two!... Here, I'm going to have a look."

He turned up Beech and presently discovered the object of his quest, a two-storey building of "frame," guiltless of the ardent caress of a paint-brush since time out of mind. On the ground floor the windows were made up of many small square panes, several of which had been rudely mended. Through them the interior glimmered darkly. In the foreground stood a broken bottle, shaped like a mortuary urn and half full of pink liquid. Beside it reposed a broken packing-box in which bleary camphor-balls nestled between torn sheets of faded blue paper. Of these a silent companion in misery stood on the far side of the window: a towering pagoda-like cage of wire in which (trapped, doubtless, by means of some mysterious bait known only to alchemists) three worn but brutal-looking sponges were apparently slumbering in exhaustion. Back of these a dusty plaster cast of a male figure lightly draped seemed to represent the survival of the fittest over some strange and deadly patent medicine. The recessed door bore an inscription in gold letters, tarnished and half obliterated:

AM GRAHAM
RUGS & CHEM C LS

R DESCRIPTION CAREFULLY C POUNDED

"Looks like the very place for one of my acknowledged abilities," said Duncan. He turned the knob and entered, advancing to the middle of the dingy room. There, standing beside a cold and rusty stove whose pipe wandered giddily to a hole in the farthest wall (reminding him of some uncouth cat with its tail over its back), he surveyed with the single requisite comprehensive glance the tiers of shelves tenanted by a beggarly array of dingy bottles; the soda fountain with its company of glasses and syrup jars; the flanking counters with their broken show-cases housing a heterogenous conglomeration of unsalable wares; the aged and tattered posters heralding the virtues of potent affronts to the human interior--to say naught of its intelligence; the drab walls and debris-littered flooring.

A slight grating noise behind him brought Duncan round with a start. At a work-bench near the window sat a white-haired man garbed baggily in an old crash coat and trousers. His head was bowed over something clamped in a vise, at which he was tinkering busily with a file. He did not look up, but, as his caller moved, inquired amiably: "Well?"

"Good-morning," stammered Duncan; "er--I should say afternoon."

"So you should," Sam admitted, still fussing with his work. "Anything you want?"

Duncan swallowed hard and mastered his confusion. "Would it be possible for me to speak to the proprietor a moment?"

"I should judge it would. Go right along." Sam filed vigorously.

"Might I ask--are you Mr. Graham?"

"Yes, sir; that's me."

The filing continued stridently. Duncan moved closer. There was scant encouragement to be gathered from Graham's indifferent attitude; yet his voice had been pleasant, kindly.

"I--I'm looking for employment," said Duncan hastily. "If--"

"Employment!"

Graham dropped his tools with a clatter and faced round. For a moment his eyes twinkled and a wintry smile lightened his fine old features.

"Well, I declare!" he said, rising. "You must be the stranger the whole town's been talkin' about."

"If at any time," Duncan pursued hastily, "you should have an opening here that you can offer me, I shall endeavour to give satisfaction. Good-day, sir." And he made for the door.

"Eh, just a minute," said Graham. "Are you in a hurry?"

Duncan paused, smiling nervously. "Oh, no--only I mustn't press it, you know--just say it and get right--I mean I don't want to take up your valuable time, sir."

Graham chuckled. "Guess the folks haven't been talking much to you about me," he suggested. "You seem to have a higher opinion of the value of my time than anybody else in Radville."

"Yes, but--that is to say--"

"But if you're really looking for a job, I'd like to give you one first rate."

Duncan started toward him in breathless haste. "You--you'd like to!--You don't mean it!"

"Yes," Graham nodded, smiling with enjoyment of his little joke. It was harmless; he didn't for a moment believe that Duncan really needed employment; and on the other hand it tickled him immensely to think that anyone should apply to him for work.

"Well," said Duncan, staring, "you're the first man I ever met that felt that way about it."

Sam's amusement dwindled. "The trouble is," he confessed--"the trouble is, my boy, my business is so small I don't need any help. There isn't much of anything to do here."

"That's just the sort of a place I'd like," said Duncan impulsively. Then he laughed a little, uneasily. "I mean, I'm willing to take any position, no matter how insignificant. I mean it, honestly."

"This might suit you, then--"

"I wish you'd let me try it, sir."

"But you don't understand." Graham was serious enough now; there wasn't any joke in what he had to say. "To tell you the truth, I can't afford it. When your pay was due, I'm afraid I shouldn't have any money to give you."

Duncan dismissed this paltry consideration with a princely gesture. "I don't mind that part," he insisted. "Mr. Graham, if you'll teach me the drug business I'll work for you for nothing."

He said it earnestly, for he meant it just a bit more seriously than he himself realised at the moment; and I'm glad to think it was because Sam's serene and gentle, guileless nature had appealed to the young man. He had that in him, that instinct for decency and the right, that made him like this simple, sweet and almost childish old man at sight--like him and want to help him, though he was hardly conscious of

this and believed his motive rather more than less selfish, that he was grasping at this opportunity for relief from the deadly ennui that oppressed him as madly as a famished man at a crust. Indeed, the boy was eager to deceive himself in this respect, with youth's wholesome horror of sentiment.

"Between you and me," he hurried on, "it's this way: I've been here for two weeks with nothing to do but look at a book, and it's got me crazy enough to want to work!"

But still I like to think it was for a better reason, that his conduct then bore out my theory that there are streaks of human kindness and right-thinking in all of us--buried deep though they may be by many an acquired stratum of callousness and egoism: the sediment of life caking upon the soul....

But as for Sam, as soon as he recovered he shook his head in thoughtful deprecation. "Well, I swan!" he said. "I guess you must find it pretty slow down here. But"--brightening--"if you feel that way about it, I'd better take you over to Sothern and Lee's. They'd be glad to get you at the price."

"And in a week they'd think they were over-paying me," Duncan argued. "No--I've been there. Why not try me on here?"

"Well, I'm just a little bit afraid you wouldn't learn much, my boy. I don't do business enough to give you a good idea of it. Sothern and Lee get all the trade nowadays."

"But look here, sir: don't you think if I came in here perhaps we could build up the business?"

"No, I'm afraid not," Graham deprecated, pursing his lips and rubbing the white stubble of his beard with a toil-worn thumb.

Duncan eyed him in bitter humour. "No, of course not. You're right--but somebody must have tipped you off."

Graham paid little heed, whose mind was bent upon his own parlous circumstances. "I haven't got capital enough to stock up the store," he explained; "that's the real trouble. Folks have got into the habit of going to the other store because I'm out of so many things."

"Well, to be sure," said Duncan, a little dashed; "you can't expect to do business unless you've got things to sell...."

"I don't expect it, my boy," Sam assented dolefully. "'Twouldn't be in reason.... You see," he added, hope lightening his gloom, "I'm working on an invention of mine, and if that should work out I'd get some money and be able to get a fresh stock. Then I'd be glad to have you."

Duncan brushed this impatiently aside. "How much business are you doing here now?"

"Some days"--Graham reckoned it on his fingers--"I take in a dollar or two, and some days... nothing.... There's my sody fountain," he said with a jerk of a thumb toward it: "got that fixed up a little while ago, and it's bringing in a little. Not much. You see, I need more syrups. I've only got vanilly now."

"Soda water!" Duncan jumped at the idea. "Hold on! All the girls round here drink soda, don't they?"

"Oh, yes," said Graham abstractedly.

The thought infused new life into the younger man's waning purpose. "Mr. Graham, I wish you'd let me come in here for a while. I don't care about wages."

Graham lifted his shoulders resignedly. "Well, my boy, it don't seem right, but if you really want to work here for nothing, I'll be glad to have you; and if things look up with me, I'll be glad to pay you."

Abruptly he found his hand grasped and pumped gratefully.

"That's mighty good of you, Mr. Graham. When can I start?"

"Why... whenever you like."

In a twinkling Duncan's hat and gloves were off. "I'd like to, now," he said. "Where can we get more syrups?"

"Unfortunately... I'll have to buy them."

"How much?" Duncan's hand was in his pocket in an instant.

"Oh, no, you mustn't do that." Sam backed away in alarm. "I couldn't allow it, my boy. It's good of you, but..."

"Either," Nat told himself, "I'm asleep or someone's refusing to take money from me." He grinned cheerfully. "Oh, that's all right," he contended aloud. "I'll draw it down as soon as we begin to sell soda." He selected a bill from his slender store. "Will five dollars be enough?"

"Oh, yes, but it wouldn't be right for me to--"

But by this time Duncan was pressing the bill into his hand.

"Nonsense!" he insisted. "How can we build up trade without syrup?"

"But--but--"

"And how can I learn the business without trade?" He closed Graham's unwilling fingers over the money and skipped away.

Sighing, Graham gave over the unequal argument. "Well, if you're

satisfied, my boy.... But I'll have to write to Elmiry for it."

"Telegraph."

"Telegraph!" Graham laughed. "That'd kill Lew Parker, I guess."

"Who's he?"

"Telegraph operator and ticket agent."

"Well, he won't be missed much. Telegraph and tell 'em to send the goods C.O.D. Please, Mr. Graham. We want to get things moving here, you know; we've got to build up the business. We'll put out some signs and ... and ... well, we'll get the people in the habit of coming here somehow. You'll see!"

He raked the poverty-stricken shelves with a calculating eye, all his energy fired by enthusiasm at the prospect of doing something. Graham watched him with kindling liking and admiration. His old lips quivered a little before he voiced his thought.

"You--you know, my boy, you've got splendid business ability," he asserted with whole-souled conviction.

Duncan almost reeled. "What?" he cried.

"I was just saying, you have wonderful business ability."

"You're the first man that ever said that. I wonder if it's so."

"I'm sure of it."

"Well," said Nat, chuckling, "I'll write that to my chum. He'll--"

"Oh, I can tell," Graham interrupted. "Now, I ... Well, you see, I've been a failure in business. So far as that goes, I've been a failure in everything all my life."

Duncan stared for a moment, then offered his hand. "For luck," he explained, meeting Graham's puzzled gaze as his hand was taken.

Wondering, Graham shook his head; and gratitude made his old voice tremulous. He put a hand over Duncan's, patting it gently.

"I want you to know, my boy, that I appreciate..." His voice broke.

"It's mighty kind of you to buy the syrup--very kind--"

"Nothing of the sort; it's just because I've got great business ability." Duncan laughed quietly and moved away. "We'll want to clean up a bit," said he; "got a broom? I'll raise the dust a bit while you're out sending that wire."

"You'll find one in the cellar, I guess, but--your clothes--"

"Oh, that's all right. Where's the cellar?"

"Underneath," Graham told him simply, taking down a battered hat from a hook behind the counter.

"I know; but how do I get there?"

"By the steps; you go through that door there into the hall. The steps are under the stairs to our rooms. I live above the store, you see."

"Yes.... Good-bye, Mr. Graham."

"Good-bye, my boy."

Duncan watched the old man move slowly out of sight, then with a groan sat down on the counter to think it over. "It wouldn't be me if I didn't make a mess of things somehow," he told himself bitterly. "Now you have gone and went and done it, Mr. Fortune Hunter. You stand a swell chance of getting away with the goods when you take a wageless job in a spavined country drug-store with no trade worth mentioning and nothing to draw it with... just because that old duffer's the only human being you've spotted in this burg!...

"Wonder what Harry would say if he heard about that wonderful business ability thing..."

"But what in thunder can we do to bring business to this bum joint?"

He raked his surroundings with a discouraged glance.

"Oh," he said thoughtfully, "hell!"

Five minutes later Ben Sperry found him in the same position, his head bent in perplexed reverie. Sperry had been travelling for Gresham and Jones, a wholesale drug-house in Elmira, more years than I can remember. His friendship for Sam Graham, contracted during the days when Graham's was the drug-store of Radville, has survived the decay of the business. He's a square, decent man, Sperry, and has wasted many an hour trying to persuade Sam to pay a little more attention to the business. I suspect he suffered the shock of his placid life when he found Sam absent and the shop in the care of this spruce, well set-up young man.

"Anything I can do for you?" chirped Duncan cheerfully, dropping off the counter as Sperry entered.

"No-o; I just wanted to see old Sam. Is he upstairs?"

"No, Mr. Graham's not in at present," Duncan told him civilly.

Sperry wrinkled his brows over this problem. "You working here?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'll be hanged!"

"Let us hope not," said Duncan pleasantly. He waited a moment, a little irritated. "Sure there's nothing _I_ can do for you?"

"No-o," said Sperry slowly, struggling to comprehend. "Thank you just the same."

"Not at all." Duncan turned away.

"You see," Sperry pursued, "I don't buy from drug-stores: I sell to 'em."

Duncan faced about with new interest in the man. "Yes?" he said encouragingly.

"My card," volunteered Sperry, fishing the slip of pasteboard from his waistcoat pocket. He dropped his sample case beside the stove and plumped down in the chair, to the peril of its existence. "I don't make this town very often," he pursued, while Duncan studied his card. "Sothern and Lee are the only people I sell to here, but I never miss a chance to chin a while with old Sam. So, having half an hour before train time, I thought I'd drop in."

"Mr. Graham doesn't order from your house, then?"

"Doesn't order from anybody, does he?"

"I don't know; I've just come here. He'll be sorry to have missed you, though. He's just stepped out to wire your house--I gather from the fact that it's in Elmira; he mentioned that town, not the firm name--for some syrups."

"You don't mean it!" Sperry gasped. "What's struck him all of a sudden? He ain't put in any new stock for ten years, I reckon."

"Well, you see," Duncan explained artfully, "I've persuaded him, in a way, to try to make something out of the business here. We're going to do what we can, of course, in a small way at first."

Sperry wagged a dubious head. "I dunno," he considered. "Sam's a nice old duffer, but he ain't got no business sense and never had; you can see for yourself how he's let everything run to seed here. Sothern and Lee took all his trade years ago."

"Yes, I know; that's why he needs me," said Duncan brazenly. In his soul he remarked "O Lord!" in a tone of awe; his colossal impudence dazed even himself. "But don't you think he could get back some of the trade if the store was stocked up?"

"No doubt about that at all," Sperry averred; "he'd get the biggest part of it."

"You think so?"

"Sure of it. You see, everybody round here likes Sam, and Sothern and Lee have always been outsiders. They'd swing to this shop in a minute, just on account of that. Fact is, I wasted a lot of talk on our firm a couple of years ago, trying to make our people give him some credit, but they couldn't see it. He owed them a bill then that was so old it had grown whiskers."

"And still owes it, I presume?"

"You bet he still owes it. Always will. It's so small that it ain't worth while suing for----"

"Look here, Mr. Sperry, how much is this bill with the whiskers?"

"About fifty dollars, I think," said the travelling man, fumbling for his wallet. "I'm supposed to ask for payment every time I strike town, you know, so I always have it with me; but I haven't had the heart to say a word to Sam for a good long time.... Here it is."

Duncan studied carefully the memorandum: "To Mdse, as per bill rendered, \$47.85." "I wonder..." he murmured.

"Eh?" said Sperry.

"I was wondering:... Suppose you were to tell your people that there's a young fellow here who'd like to give this store a boom.... Say he wants a little credit because--because Mr. Graham won't let him put in any cash----"

"Not a bit of use," Sperry negatived. "I would, myself, but the house--no."

"But suppose I pay this bill----"

"Pay it? You really mean that?"

"Certainly I mean it." Duncan produced the wad of bills which Kellogg had furnished him the night before his departure from New York. Thus far he had broken only one of the five-hundred-dollar gold certificates, and of that one he had the greater part left; living is anything but expensive in Radville.

"I'm beginning to understand that I was cut out for an actor," he told himself as he thumbed the roll with a serious air and an assumed indifference which permitted Sperry to estimate its size pretty accurately.

"That's quite a stack of chips you're carrying," Sperry observed.

Duncan's hand airily wafted the remark into the limbo of the negligible. "A trifle, a mere trifle," he said casually. "I don't generally carry much cash about me. Haven't for five years," he added irrepressibly. He extracted a fifty-dollar certificate from the sheaf, and handed it over.

"I'll take a receipt, but you needn't mention this to Mr. Graham just now."

"No, certainly not." Sperry scrawled his signature to the bill.

"And about that line of credit?----"

"Well, with this paid, I guess you could have what you needed, in moderation. Of course----"

"My name is Duncan--Nathaniel Duncan." Sperry made a memorandum of it on the back of an envelope. "Any former business connections?"

"None that I care to speak about," Duncan confessed glumly.

Sperry's face lengthened. "No references?"

It took thought, and after thought courage; but Duncan hit upon the solution at length. "Do you know L. J. Bartlett & Company, the brokers?"

"Do I know J. Pierpont Morgan?"

"Then that's all right. Tell your people to inquire of Harry Kellogg, the junior partner. He knows all about me."

Noting the name, Sperry put away the envelope. "That's enough. If he says you're all right, you can have anything you want." He consulted his watch. "Hmm. Train to catch.... But let's see: what do you need here?"

Duncan reviewed the empty shelves, his face glowing. "Pills," he said with a laugh: "all kinds of pills and... everything for a regular, sure-enough drug-store, Mr. Sperry: everything Sothern and Lee carries and a lot of attractive things they don't.... Small lots, you know, until I see what we can sell."

"I see. You leave it to me; I probably know what you need better than you do. I'll make out a list this afternoon and mail it to-night with instructions to ship it at the earliest possible moment."

"Splendid!" Duncan told him. "You do that, and don't worry about our making good. I'm going to put all my time and energy into this proposition and----"

"Then you'll make good all right," Sperry assured him. "All anybody's

got to do is look at you to see you're a good business man." He returned Duncan's pressure and picked up his sample-case. "S'long," said he, and left briskly, leaving Duncan speechless.

As if to assure himself of his sanity he put a hand to his brow and stroked it cautiously. "Heavens!" he said, and sought the support of the counter. "That's twice to-day I've been told that in the same place!"...

"It's funny," he said, half dazed, "I never could have pulled that off for myself!"

IX

SMALL BEGINNINGS

Presently Duncan moved and came out of his abstraction. "I'd better get that broom," he said slowly. "The place certainly needs some expert manicuring before we get that new stock in.... By George, I really begin to believe we've got a chance to do something, after all!...

"Or else I'm dreaming...."

He opened the back door and entered a narrow and dark hallway, almost stumbling over the lowest step of a flight of stairs communicating with the upper storey. From above he could hear a clatter of crockery, sounds of footsteps, a woman singing softly.

"Graham's wife, I presume. Never struck me he might be married.... Well, I'll be quiet. If she catches me now, before we're introduced, she'll take me for a burglar."

On tiptoes he found the descent to the cellar, where by the aid of a match he discovered a floorbrush whose reasons for retirement from active employment were most evident even to his inexperienced eye. None the less nothing better offered, and he took it back with him to the shop.

Graham's tinkering was never of a cleanly sort; the floor was thick with a litter of rubbish--shavings, old nuts and bolts, bits of scrap tin and metal, torn paper, charred ends of matches: an indescribable mess. Duncan surveyed it ruefully, but with the will to do strong in him, took off his coat, turned up his trousers, and fell to. The disposition of the sweepings troubled him far less than the dust he raised; obviously the only place to put it was behind the counters.

"Nobody'll see it there," he said in a glow of satisfaction, pausing with the room half cleared. "I always wondered what they did with that sort of truck--under the beds, I suppose. Funny Graham never thought of this, himself--it's so blame' easy."

He resumed his labours, thrilled with the sensation of accomplishment. "One thing at least that I can do," he mused; "never again shall I fear starvation... so long as there's a broom handy." Absorbed he brushed away, raising a prodigious amount of dust and utterly oblivious to the fact that he was observed.

Two shadows moved slowly athwart the windows, to which his back was turned, paused, moved on out of sight, returned. It was only during a pause for breath that he became aware of the surveillance.

Straightening up, he looked, gasped and fled for the back of the store. "Heavens!" he whispered, aghast to recognise Josie Lockwood and Angie Tuthill, of whose ubiquitous shadows in his way he had been conscious so frequently within the past several days. "I _thought_ I must have made an impression.... Don't tell me they're coming in!"

Behind the counter he struggled furiously into his coat. "They are," he said with a sinking heart; "and I'll bet a dollar my face is dirty!"

Notwithstanding these misgivings, it was a very self-possessed young man, to all appearances, who moved sedately round the end of the counter to greet these possible customers. His bow was a very passable imitation of the real thing, he flattered himself; and there's no manner of doubt but that it flattered the two prettiest and most forward young women in Radville of that day.

"May I have the honour of waiting on you, ladies?" he inquired with all the suavity of an accomplished salesman.

Josie and Angie sidled together, giggling and simpering, quite overcome by his manner. A muffled "How de do?" from Angie and a half-strangled echo of the salutation from the other were barely articulate. But hearing them he bowed again, separately to each.

"Good-afternoon," said he, and waited in an inquiring pose.

"This--'this is Mr. Duncan, isn't it?" inquired Josie, controlling herself.

"Yes, and you are Miss Lockwood, if I'm not mistaken?"

Renewed giggles prefaced her: "Oh, how _did_ you know?"

"Could anyone remain two weeks in Radville and not hear of Miss Lockwood?"

The shot told famously. "How nice of you! Mr. Duncan, I want you to meet my friend, Miss Tuthill."

"I've had the honour of admiring Miss Tuthill from a distance," Duncan assured the younger woman. And, "She'll burn up!" he feared secretly, watching the conflagration of blushes that she displayed. "Just think

of getting away with a line of mush like that! Harry was right after all: this is a country town, all right."

"And--and are you working here, Mr. Duncan?" Josie pursued.

"I'm supposed to be; I'm afraid I don't know the business very well, as yet."

"Oh, that's awf'ly nice," Angle thought.

He thanked her humbly.

"We didn't expect to see you here," Josie assured him. "We just thought we'd like some soda."

"Soda!" he parroted, horrified. He cast a glance askance at the tawdry fountain. "Let's see: how d'you work the infernal thing?" he asked himself, utterly bewildered.

"Yes," Angie chimed in; "it's so warm this afternoon, we----"

"I've got to put it through somehow," he thought savagely. And aloud, "Yes, certainly," he said, and smiled winningly. "Will you be pleased to step this way?"

Out of the corners of his eyes he detected the amused look that passed between the girls. "Oh, very well!" he said beneath his breath. "You may laugh, but you asked for soda, and soda you shall have, my dears, if you die of it." He put himself behind the counter with an air of great determination, and leaned upon it with both hands outspread until he realised that this was the pose of a groceryman. "What'll you have?" he demanded genially. "Er--that is--I mean, would you prefer vanilla or--ah--soda?"

A chant antiphonal answered him:

"I hate vanilla."

"And so do I."

"Oh, don't say that!" he pleaded. "Of course you know there's--ah--vanilla and vanilla..., Ah... some vanilla I know is detestable, but when you get a really fine vintage--ah--imported vanilla, it's quite another matter--ah--particularly at his season of the year----"

His confusion was becoming painful.

"Oh, is it?" asked Josie helpfully. Her eyes dwelt upon his with a confiding expression which he later characterised as a baby stare; and he was promptly reduced to babbling idiocy.

"Indeed it is; no doubt whatever, Miss Lockwood. Especially just now, you know--ah--after the bock season--ah--I mean, when the weather is--"

is--in a way--you might put it--vanilla weather."

"But I like chocolate best," Angle pouted. And he hated her consumedly for the moment.

"Very well," Josie told him sweetly, "I'll have the vanilla."

He thanked her with unnecessary effusion and turned to inspect the glassware. There could be no mistake about the right jar, however; there was nothing but vanilla, and seizing it he removed the metal cap and placed it before the girls. With less ease he discovered a whiskey glass and put it beside the bottle, with a cordial wave of the hand.

A pause ensued. Duncan was smiling fatuously, serene in the belief that he had solved the problem: the way to serve soda was to make them help themselves. It was very simple. Only they didn't... With a start he became sensible that they were eyeing him strangely.

"You--ah--wanted vanilla, did you not?"

"Yes, thanks, vanilla," Josie agreed.

"Well, that's it," he said firmly, indicating the jar and the glass.

Josie giggled. "But I don't want to drink it clear. You put the syrup in the glass, you know, and then the soda."

"Oh, I see! You want to make a high-ba--ah--a long drink of it. Ah, yes!" He procured a glass of the regulation size. "Now I understand." A pause. "If you'll be good enough to help yourself to the syrup."

"No; you do it," Josie pleaded.

"Certainly." He lifted the whiskey-glass and the jar and began to pour. "If you'll just say when."

"What? Oh, that's enough, thank you."

"If I ever get out of this fix, I'll blow the whole shooting match," he promised himself, holding the glass beneath the faucet and fiddling nervously with the valves. For a moment he fancied the tank must be empty, for nothing came of his efforts. Then abruptly the fixture seemed to explode. "A geyser!" he cried, blinded with the dash of carbonated water and syrup in his face, while he fumbled furiously with the valves.

As unexpectedly as it had begun the flow ceased. He put down the glass, found his handkerchief and mopped his dripping face. When able to see again he discovered the young women leaning against one of the show-cases, weak with laughter but at a safe remove.

"Our soda's so strong, you know," he apologised. "But if you'll stay where you are, I'll try again."

Warned by experience, he worked at the machine gingerly, finally producing a thin, spluttering trickle. Beaming with triumph, he looked up. "I think it's safe now," he suggested; "I seem to have it under control."

Angie and Josie returned, torn by distrust but unable to resist the fascination of the stranger in our village. And there's no denying the boy was good-looking and a gentleman by birth: a being alien to their experience of men.

He had filled one glass and was tincturing it with syrup when he caught again that confiding smile of Josie's, full upon him as the beams of a noon-day sun.

"Haven't we seen you at church, Mr. Duncan?" she said prettily.

"I think, perhaps, you may have," he conceded. "I have seen you, both." The second glass (for he was determined that Angie should not escape) took up all his attention for an instant. "Do you have to go, too?" he inquired out of this deep preoccupation.

"What?"

"I mean, do you attend regularly?" he amended hastily.

"Oh, yes, of course," Josie simpered, accepting the glass he offered her. "You make it a rule to go every Sunday, don't you, Mr. Duncan?"

He permitted himself an indiscretion, secure in the belief it would pass unchallenged: "It's one of the rules, but I didn't make it."

"Did you know there was a vacancy in the choir?" Angie asked, taking up her glass.

"Choir?"

"Yes," Josie chimed in; "we were hoping you'd join. I want you to, awfully."

"We're both in the choir," Angie explained.

"And all the girls want you to join. Don't they, Angie?"

"Oh, yes, indeed; they're all just dying to meet you."

"I'll have to write and ask," he said abstractedly.

"Why, what do you mean by that?"

Josie's question struck him dumb with consternation. He made curious noises in his throat, and fancied (as was quite possible) that they eyed him in a peculiar fashion. "It's--I mean--a little trouble with my throat," he managed to lie, at length. "I must ask my physician if I

may, first."

"Oh, I see," said Josie.

"But," he hastened to change the subject, "you're not drinking, either of you. I sincerely hope it's not so very bad."

Angie replaced her glass, barely tasted. "Do you like it, Josie?"

To Josie's credit it must be admitted that she made a brave attempt to drink. But the mixture was undoubtedly flat, stale and unprofitable. She sighed, put it back on the counter, and rose to the emergency.

"Mine's perfectly lovely"--with a ravishing smile--"but it's not very sweet."

"I made them dry for you--thought you'd like 'em that way," he stammered. "Perhaps you'd like 'em better if I put a collar on 'em?"

The chorus negated this suggestion very promptly.

"Why don't you try a glass, Mr. Duncan?" Angie added with malice.

"I'm on the wagon--I mean, I don't drink at all," he said wretchedly; and was deeply grateful for the diversion afforded by the entrance of a third customer.

It was Tracey Tanner, as usual swollen with important tidings, as usual propelling himself through the world at a heavy trot. It has always been a source of wonderment to me how Tracey manages to keep so stout with all the violent exercise he takes.

"Say, Angle," he twanged at sight of her, "I've been lookin' for you everywhere. Did you hear that----"

He stopped instantaneously with open mouth as he saw Duncan behind the counter; and openmouthed he remained while the young man came round and advanced toward him, with a bland smirk accompanied by a professional bow and rubbing of hands.

"May I have the pleasure of serving you, Mr. Tanner?"

"Huh?" bleated Tracey, dumbfounded.

"Is there anything you wish to purchase?"

A violent emotion stirred in Tracey. Sounds began to emanate from his heaving chest. "N-n-no, ma'am!" he breathed explosively.

Duncan bowed again, his face expressionless. "Then will you be good enough to excuse me?" He turned precisely and made his way back to the counter.

As if released from some spell of strong enchantment by the movement, Tracey swung on his heel and lunged for the door.

"What was it you wanted to ask me, Tracey?" Angie called after him.

As the boy disappeared at a hand-gallop his response floated back: "I fergit."

"I'm afraid I must have frightened him?" Duncan said inquiringly.

"Oh, no, not at all," Josie reassured him; "he's just gone to tell everybody you're here."

"Come, Josie, we've been here ever so long." Angie moved slowly toward the door, but Josie inclined to linger.

"Don't hurry, I beg of you," Duncan interposed.

"Oh, we haven't hurried," she said with a gush of gratification that startled the man. "You'll remember what I said about the choir, won't you?"

He braced himself to take advantage of the opening. "I shall never forget it," he said impressively.

She gave him her hand. "Then good-bye."

"Not good-bye, I trust?" He retained the hand, despising himself inexpressibly.

"Oh, we'll be in again, won't we Angie?"

"Oh, yes, indeed."

"My land, Angie! What do you think? I'd almost forgotten to pay for the soda?"

"Please don't speak of it, Miss Lockwood--the pleasure--."

"But I must, Mr. Duncan. How much is it?"

Josie fingered the contents of her purse expectantly, but Duncan hung in the wind. He had no least notion what might be the price of soda water. "Two for a quarter?" he hazarded with his disarming grin.

Angle choked with appreciation of this exquisite sally. "Ain't you funny!"

"I'm afraid you're right," he conceded; "still I'd rather you didn't think so."

"It's ten cents, isn't it, Mr. Duncan?"

Josie was offering him a dime; he accepted it without question.

"Thank you, very much," said he. "Good afternoon, ladies."

He was aware of Angle's fluttering farewells on the sidewalk. Josie was lingering on the doorstep in an agony of untrained coquetry. He lowered his tone for her benefit, thereby adding new weight to his bombardment of her amateur defences.

"Remember you promised to call again."

Her giggles tore his ear-drums. "Th-thank you, I'm sure," she stammered, and fled.

They disappeared. He wandered to the chair and threw himself limply into it. "That voice!" he said stupidly. "That giggle! I've got to woo and win... _that!_..."

"It serves me right," he concluded.

The most hopeless of humours assailed him, and he yielded to it without a struggle. His attitude expressed his mood with relentless verity.

Chin sunken upon his breast, eyes fairly distilling gloom, legs stretched out carelessly before him, he sat motionless, suffocating at the bottom of a gulf of discontent. His lips moved, sometimes noiselessly, again in whispers barely audible.

"Years of this!... A matter of human endurance--no, superhuman!... If it wasn't for the bargain, I'd chuck it all and..."

"Well, the only way to forget your misery is to work, I suppose."

He pulled himself together and stood up, wondering where he had left his broom, and simultaneously stiffened with surprise, aware that he was not alone. A glance, however, established the connection between the rear door, which stood ajar, and the young woman who stood staring at him in utterest stupefaction. This, he thought, must be the woman of the voice, upstairs.

But she couldn't be Graham's wife. She was too young. Even beneath the mask of care and weariness, the all too plain evidences of privation, spiritual and mental as well as physical, that Betty wore unceasingly in those days, he could discern youth and grace and gentleness, and the nascent promise of prettiness that longed to be, to have the chance to show itself and claim its meed of deference and love. He was quick to see the intelligence in her mutinous eyes, and the sweet lines of her mouth, too often shaped in sullen mould, and no less quick to recognise that she would carry herself well, with spirit and dignity, once she were relieved of household toil and moil, once given the chance to discard her shapeless, bedraggled and threadbare garments for those dainty and beautiful things for which her starved heart must be sick with longing....

"Good Lord!" he thought, pitiful, "it's worse here than I dreamed. Old Graham must need a keeper--and this child has been trying to be that, with nothing to keep him on."

"Who are you?" the girl demanded sullenly, in a voice a little harsh and toneless. "What are you doing here? Where's my father?"

"Mr. Graham has stepped out on business," Duncan replied. "You are his daughter, I believe?"

"Yes, I'm his daughter, but----"

"My name is Nathaniel Duncan. Mr. Graham has been kind enough to take me on as apprentice, so to speak."

Her stare continued, intense, resentful, undeviating.

"You mean you're going to work here?"

"That my intention, Miss Graham." He nodded gravely.

"What for?"

"To learn the drug business."

"Oh-h!" She flung herself a pace away, impatiently. "I'm not a child, and I don't want to be talked to like one."

"I didn't mean to annoy you----"

[Illustration: "You mean you're going to work here?"]

"Well, you do. You've got no business in a run-down place like this--you with your fine clothes and your fine airs. You didn't come here to learn the drug business; you know as well as I do you've got some other motive."

There was a truth in that to sting him. He smarted under its lash, but held his temper in check because he was sorry for the girl. "Perhaps you're right," he conceded; "perhaps I have some other motive. But that's neither here nor there. I'm here, and it is my present intention to learn the drug business in your father's store."

"I don't believe you, Mister Duncan--or whatever your name is."

"I'm sorry," he said patiently.

Betty's lips twitched, contemptuous. "Well, saying you do mean to work here----"

"I do."

"Where do you think your pay's going to come from?"

"Heaven, perhaps."

"I guess you think that's funny, don't you?"

"I confess, at the moment I did. But now I realise it's probably a bitter truth."

He was too much for her, she saw, and the knowledge only served to fan her indignation and suspicions.

"You're making a mistake," she snapped. "Father can't pay you nothing."

"He'll pay me all I'm worth," said Duncan meekly.

She glared at him an instant longer, then mute for lack of a sufficiently scornful retort, turned and ran back up the steps, slamming the door behind her.

Duncan drew a rueful face, contemplating the place where she had been.

"I didn't think this was going to be a bed of roses--and it isn't," he concluded.

X

ROLAND BARNETTE'S FRIEND

Nat had a busy day or two after that, trying to set things to rights in the store for the better reception and display of the new stock. Sperry dropped him a line saying that the goods would arrive on the third day, and there was much to do to make way for it. He managed to get the shop cleaned up thoroughly with Betty's not unwilling but distinctly suspicious aid; the girl was apparently convinced that Duncan meant business, and that this would ostensibly work for her father's benefit, but she was distinctly dubious as to the *_deus ex machina_*. Duncan now and again would catch her watching him, her eyes dark with speculation; but when she detected his gaze her look would change instantly to one of hostility and defiance. He suspected that only her father's wishes prevented an open break with her; as it was he was conscious that there was no more than an armed truce between them. And he did not like it; it made him uncomfortable. He wasn't hardened enough to have an easy conscience, and Betty's open doubts as to the reason for his coming to Radville disturbed Duncan more than he would have cared to own.

For all that, they worked together steadily, and accomplished a rather sensational transformation in the appearance of the place. The floor, counter and shelves were swept, washed, dusted and garnished with

paint; that is, all but the floor received the attention of the paint-brush; Duncan managed to smuggle a quantity of oil-cloth into the shop and get it down before Graham could enter any protest: the effect approximated tiling nearly enough to brighten the room up wonderfully. Aside from this the old stock was routed out and, for the greater part, donated to the rubbish-heap. Teddy Smart, the glazier, was commissioned to repair the broken window-panes and show-cases. A can of metal polish freshened up the nickel and brass trimmings and rendered the single upright of the soda fountain almost attractive. The stove was uprooted and stored away, and its aspiring pipes dispensed with. Finally, after considerable argument, Graham consented to the removal of his work-bench to a shed in the back-yard. The model was suffered to remain, the tanks and burner being stored out of sight beneath one of the window-seats, more because Duncan considered it would be a good thing to have the light than because he understood or attached much importance to the contrivance. For that matter, he hadn't the time to listen to an exposition of its advantages, and Graham, recognising this, was content to abide his time, serene in the conviction that he would presently find in his assistant a willing and sympathetic listener.

Between spasms of work Duncan had his hands full attending to the soda fountain. Soda water being practically the only salable thing in the store, it had to serve as an excuse for the inquisitiveness of many of my fellow-citizens, to say nothing of--I should put it, but especially--their wives and daughters. The consumption of vanilly sody in those two days broke all known Radville records, and stands a singular tribute to the Spartan fortitude of Radville womanhood, particularly the young strata thereof. Duncan, after he had succeeded in taming the fountain, seemed rather to enjoy than object to dispensing sody, standing inspection and receiving adulation and nickels in unequal proportions. By the end of the second day he could not truthfully have told his friend Willy Bartlett: "The list has shrunk." It had swollen enormously. There isn't any doubt but that he had a nodding acquaintance with every pretty girl in town, as well as with most not considered pretty.

From my window in the _Citizen_ office I was able to keep a tolerably close account of events and obtain a consensus of public opinion. So far as the latter bore upon Duncan, it was divided into two rather distinct parties, one of course favouring him; and this was feminine almost exclusively. Tracey Tanner, to be sure, confessed within my hearing to a predilection for the Noo York dood, but was inclined to hedge and climb the fence when assailed by Roland's strictures. Roland, I suspect, was a wee mite jealous; he had been paying attention to--I mean, going with--Josie Lockwood for several months. Instinctively he must have divined his danger; and it's not in reason to exact admiration of the usurper from the usurped, even when the act of usurpation has not yet been definitely consummated. Roland went to the length of labelling Duncan "sissy," and professed to believe that Hiram Nutt was justified in calling him a "s'picious character"; Roland hinted darkly that Duncan knew New York no better than Will Bigelow.

"And if he did come from there," he asseverated, "I betcher he didn't leave for no good purpose."

His temper inspired me with the sapient reflection that it's a terrible thing to be in love, even if only with an old man's millions.

"There's goin' to be a real Noo Yorker here before long," Roland boasted; "he's comin' to see me on some 'special private bus'ness of ourn."

"Huh," commented Tracey, the sceptical. "What kind of a Noo Yorker'd come all the way here to see you?"

"That's all right. You'll see when he gets here. He's a pro-motor."

"A what?"

"A pro-motor, a financier." Roland pronounced it "finnan seer," thus betraying symptoms of culture and bewildering Tracey beyond expression.

"What's that?" he demanded aggressively.

"That's a feller 't can take nothing at all and incorporate it and make money out of it," Roland defined with some hesitancy.

"And that's why he's coming down here to take a look at you?" inquired Tracey, skipping nimbly round the corner.

Curiously enough in my understanding (for I own to no great faith in Roland's statements, taking them by and large) his friend from New York put in an unheralded appearance in Radville that same night, on the evening train. The Bigelow House received him to its figurative bosom under the name of W.H. Burnham. He sent for Roland promptly and treated him to a dinner at the hotel; something which I have always regarded as a punishment several sizes too large for the crime. Later, having displayed him on the streets in witness to his good faith, Roland spent the evening with Mr. Burnham mysteriously confabulating behind closed doors in the hotel. Speculation ran rife through the town until nine o'clock, and land for several days basked in the heat of public interest.

I happened accidentally to get a glimpse of Mr. Burnham after supper, although I had to miss my baked apple in order to get down town in time. He was a disappointment to some extent, although his mode of dress attracted much comment as being far more sprightly than Duncan's and less startling than Roland's. He had a self-confident air and a bit of swagger that filled the eye, but a face and a voice that detracted, the one too boldly good-looking, with eyes roving and predaceous, the other a suggestion too loud and domineering. ... I fear association with Duncan had vitiated my taste.

However that may be, Roland got an hour off at the bank the following

morning, and the pair of them, after wandering with evident aimlessness round the town, drifted as it were on the tide of hap-chance into Graham's drug-store.

Duncan was at the station, superintending the transportation of the new stock, which had come by the early local; Betty was busy with her housework upstairs; and only old Sam kept the shop.

Sam wasn't in the best of spirits. His evergreen optimism seldom withered, but in spite of all that had already been accomplished in behalf of the store, in spite of the rosier aspect of his declining fortunes and his confidence in and affection for Duncan, Sam was worried. He had been over to the bank once, even at that early hour, but Blinky Lockwood had driven out of town to see about foreclosing one of his numerous mortgages in the neighbourhood, and his note, which fell due at the bank that day, was still a weight upon Sam's mind.

Roland and Burnham found him wandering nervously round the store, alternately taking his hat down from the peg, as if minded to make a second trip to the bank, and replacing it as he realised that patience was his part. He looked older and more worn than ordinarily, and seemed distinctly pleased to be distracted by his callers.

"Why, hello, Roland!" he cried cheerfully, hanging up his hat for perhaps the twentieth time. And, "How de doo, sir?" he greeted the stranger.

"Good-morning, sir," said Burnham pleasantly.

"Say, Sam," Roland blundered with his usual adroitness, "this gentleman-----"

Burnham's hand fell heavily on his forearm and he checked as if throttled.

"What's that, Roland?" Sam turned curiously to them.

"Oh, nothin'; I was--er--just going to say that this gentleman's my friend from Noo York, Mr. Burnham. I was showin' him round the town and we just happened to look in."

"The friend you were going to write to about my burner?" inquired Sam.

"Well, I'm right glad to meet you, sir."

It was here that Roland got a look from Mr. Burnham that withered him completely. His further contributions to the conversation were somewhat spasmodic and ineffectual.

"Why, no, Mr. Graham," Burnham interposed deftly. "Mr. Barnette must've been talking of someone else he knew in New York. I----"

"Didn't know he knew more'n one there," Sam observed mildly.

Burnham's glance jumped warily to Sam's face, but withdrew reassured, having detected therein nothing but the old man's kindly and simple nature. "At all events," he continued, "I don't remember hearing anything about the matter (what did you call it? A burner, eh?) from Mr. Barnette."

"I s'pose Roland forgot," Sam allowed. "He's so busy courtin' our pretty girls, Mr. Burnham----"

"Yes, that was it," Roland put in hastily, seeing his chance to mend matters. "I did intend to write you about it, Mr. Burnham, but it kind of slipped my mind. We've had a lot of important business over to the bank recently."

"By the way, Roland, did you just come from the bank? Is Mr. Lockwood back yet?"

"No; I got off this morning. I don't think he is, Sam. Did you want to see him?"

"Well, yes," Sam admitted. "I guess you know about that, Roland."

"Mean business, sometimes, asking favours of these bankers, eh, Mr. Graham?" Burnham remarked, much too casually to have deceived anybody but old Sam.

Graham nodded, dolefully. "Yes, it is unpleasant," he admitted confidingly. "You see, there's a note of mine come due to-day, and I'm not able to take care of it or pay the interest just now...." He thought it over gravely for a moment, then brightened. "But I guess it'll be all right. Mr. Lockwood's kind, very kind."

"I'm afraid you're a little too sure, Sam," Roland contributed tactfully. "When there's money due Lockwood, he wants it, and most times he gets it or its equivalent."

"Yes," Sam assented sadly, "I guess he does, mostly."

"But," Burnham changed the subject adroitly, "what was this--burner, did you say?--that Mr. Barnette forgot to tell me about?"

"Oh, just one of my inventions, sir."

"I understand you're quite an inventor?"

Sam's smile lightened his face like sunlight striking a snow-bound field. He nodded slowly, thinking of his past enthusiasms, his hopes and discouragements. "I've spent most of my life at it, sir, but somehow nothing has ever turned out well... not so far, I mean. But I mean to hit it yet."

"That's the way to talk," Burnham cried heartily; "never give up, I say!... But tell me about some of these inventions, won't you?"

"Well"--Sam knitted his fingers and pursed his lips reflectively--"I patented a new type threshing machine, once, but I couldn't get anybody to take hold of it. You see, I haven't any money, Mr. Burnham."

"How would you like to talk it over with me, some time? I'm interested in such things--as a sort of side issue."

"Will you?" Sam's eagerness was not to be disguised.

"Be glad to. Tell me, how did you get your power?"

"From gas, sir--though coal will do 'most as well. You see, I've got this burner patented, that makes gas from crude oil--no waste, no odour nor trouble, and little expense. It'd be cheaper than coal, I thought; that's why I invented it. I could get steam up mighty quick with that gas arrangement. I use it for lighting here in the store, now."

"Do you, indeed?" Burnham's tone indicated failing interest, but such diplomacy was lost on Sam.

"If you've got time, I could show you; it's right over here."

A glance at his watch accompanied Burnham's consent to spare a few minutes. "There's a telegram I must send presently," he said. "But I'd like to see this burner, if it won't take long."

"No, not long; just a minute or two." Sam was already dragging the affair out from under the window box. "You see..."

He went on to expound its virtues with all the fond enthusiasm of a father showing off his firstborn, and wound up with a demonstration of the illuminating appliance. I'm afraid, though, he got little encouragement from Mr. Burnham. He considered the machine with a dispassionate air, it's true, and admitted its practical advantages, but wasn't at all disposed to take a roseate view of its future.

"Yes," he grudging, when Sam put a match to the jet, "that's certainly a very good light."

"All right, ain't it?" chimed Roland, enthusiastic.

"Oh, it may amount to something. It's hard to tell. Of course you know, sir," he continued, addressing Graham directly, "you've got competition to overcome."

Sam's old fingers trembled to his chin. "No-o," he said, "I didn't know that. I've got the patent---"

"Of course that's something. But the Consolidated Petroleum crowd has another machine, slightly different, which does the same work, and, I should say, does it better."

"Is--is that so?" quavered Sam. "My patent----."

"Now see here, Mr. Graham," Burnham argued, "we're practical men, both of us----"

"No; I shouldn't say that about myself," Sam interrupted. "Now you, sir----I can see you're a man who understands such things. But I----"

"Nevertheless, you must know that a patent isn't everything. You said a moment ago a man had to have money to make anything out of his inventions."

"Did I?" Sam interjected, surprised.

"Certainly you did; and dead right you are. A patent's all very well, but supposing you're up against a powerful competitor like the Consolidated Petroleum Company. They've got a patent, too. Granted it may be an infringement of yours even--what can you do against them."

"Why, if it's an infringement----"

"Sue, of course. But do you suppose they're going to lie down just because an unknown and penniless inventor sues them? Bless you, no! They'll fight to the last ditch, they'll engage the best legal talent in the country. You'll have to carry the case to the Supreme Court of the United States if you want a winning decision. And that's going to cost you thousands--hundreds of thou-sands--a million----"

"Never mind; a thousand's enough," said Sam gently. "I see what you mean, sir. It's just another case where I've got no chance."

"Oh, I wouldn't put it as strong as that-----"

"But I have no money."

"Still, you never can tell. I'll think it over, if I get time."

"Why, that's kind of you, sir, very kind."

It was at this point that Roland rose to the occasion like the noble ass he is. Roland never could see more than an inch beyond the end of his nose.

"Say, Mr. Burnham," he floundered, "don't you think you could help Sam to----"

"I think," said Mr. Burnham, with additional business of looking at his watch, "I'd like to send that wire I spoke of."

"Yes, Roland," Sam agreed meekly; "you mustn't keep your friend from his business. I'm glad you looked in, sir. You'll call again, I hope."

"Thank you," said Burnham, moving toward the door.

It was too much for Roland's sense of opportunity. He rolled in Burnham's wake, sullenly reluctant. "Say, Mr. Burnham," he exploded as they got to the door, "if you'll just offer Sam five----"

"That will do!" Roland collapsed as if punctured. Burnham turned to Graham with a wave of his hand. "I'm leaving on the afternoon train, but if I get time I may drop in again and talk things over with you. There might be something in that threshing machine you mentioned."

"I'll be glad to show you anything I've got here..."

"All right. Good-day. I'll see you again, perhaps."

This cavalier snub was lost on Sam, an essential of whose serene soul is the quality of humility. He followed them to the door, as grateful as a lost dog for a stray pat instead of a kick. "Good-day, sir. Good-day, Roland," he sped their parting cheerfully.

But it was a broken man who shut the door behind them and turned back, fingering his grey chin. There must have been a dimness in his eyes and a quiver to his wide-lipped, generous mouth.

"Perhaps Mr. Burnham was right. Only I was kind of hopin'... Now Mr. Lockwood over there..."

He shook himself to throw off the spell of depression and somehow managed to quicken again his abiding faith in the essential goodness of the world.

"Well, well! He's kind, very kind."

He began to restore his model to its hiding place, musing upon the ebb-tide in his affairs in his muddle-headed way, and in the process managed to convince himself that "it 'ud all come right."

"With this young man in here, and everythin' gettin' fixed up, and new stock comin' in ... I'm sure Mr. Lockwood'll see it the right way ... for us.... He's kind, very kind."

Thus it was that he presently called up the stairs in a very cheerful voice: "Betty, are you pretty near through up there?"

The girl's weary voice came down to him without accent: "Yes, father, almost."

"Well, then, you keep an eye on the store, please. I'm goin' to step out for a minute."

"Yes, father."

"And if--if anybody asks for me, I'll most likely be down to the depot, with Mr. Duncan."

He didn't mention that he contemplated calling on Lockwood, because he feared it might worry Betty. ... As if a woman doesn't always understand when things are going wrong!

Betty knew, or rather divined. And she had no hope, no faith such as made Sam what he was. She came down the steps listlessly, overborne by her knowledge of the world's wrongness. The glance with which she comprehended the renovated shop was bitter with contempt. What was the worth of all this? Nothing good would come of it; nothing good came of anything. Life was drab and dreary, made up of weary, profitless years and months and weeks and days, to each its appointed disappointment.

Only her sense of duty sustained her. She owed something to old Sam for the gift of life, dismal though she found it. He needed her; what she could do for him she would. I have always thought that her affection for her father was less filial than maternal. He seemed such a child, she--so very old! She mothered him; it was her only joy to care for him. Her care was constant, unflinching, omniscient. In return she got only his love. But it was almost enough--almost, not quite, dearly as she prized it. There were other things a girl should have--indeed, must have, if her life were to be rounded out in fulness. And these, she understood, were forever denied her: apples of Paradise growing in her sight, heartrending in their loveliness so far beyond her reach....

Sighing, she went to work. In work only could she forget.... The soda glasses needed cleaning, and the syrup jars replenishing (for the new order of syrups had come in the previous evening).

After a time, to a tune of pounding feet, Tracey Tanner pranced into the shop with all the graceful abandon of a young elephant feeling its oats. His face was fairly scarlet from exertion and his eyes bulging with a sense of importance. The girl looked up without interest, nodding slightly in response to his breathless: "Lo, Betty."

"Father's gone out," she said, holding a glass to the light, suspicious of the lint from her dish towel.

"I know--seen him down the street." The boy halted at the counter, producing a handful of square envelopes. "Note for you from the Lockwoods, Betty," he panted. "Josie ast me to bring it round."

Betty put down her glass in consternation. From the Lockwoods?"

"Uh-huh." Tracey offered it, but she withheld her hand, dubious.

"For me, Tracey?"

"Uh-huh. It's a invitation. I got four more to take." He thrust it into her reluctant fingers. "Got five, really, but one of 'em's for me."

"An invitation, Tracey!"

"Yeh. Hope you have a good time when it comes off." Already he was bouncing toward the door. "Goo'-bye."

"But what is it, Tracey?"

"Aw, it tells in the invitation. S'long."

"From the Lockwoods!" she whispered.

Suddenly she tore it open, her hands unsteady with nervousness.

The envelope contained a square of heavy cardboard of a creamy tint with scalloped edges touched with gold. On the face of the card a round and formless hand had traced with evident pains the information:

Miss Josephine Mae Lockwood

Requests the Pleasure of your Company at a Lawn Fœte and Dance to be held at the residence of her Parents, Mr. & Mrs. Geo. Lockwood, Saturday July 15, at 8 p. m. R.S.V.P.

The envelope fluttered to the floor while the card was crushed between the girl's hands. For a moment her face was transfigured with delight, her eyes blank with rapturous visions of the joys of that promised night.

"Oh!... it 'ud be grand!..."

Then suddenly the light faded. Her eyes clouded, her face settled into its discontented lines. She stuffed the card heedlessly into the pocket of her dingy apron, and took up another glass.

"But I can't go; I've got nothin' to wear...."

XI

BLINKY LOCKWOOD

She was scrubbing blindly at the same glass when, a quarter of an hour later, Blinky Lockwood strode into the store, his right eye twitching more violently than usual, as it always does in his phases of mental disturbance--as when, for instance, he fears he's going to lose a dollar.

Lockwood is that type of man who was born to grow rich. He inherited a farm or two in the vicinity of Radville and the one over Westerly way, to which I have referred, and ... well, we've a homely paraphrase of a noted aphorism in Radville: "Them as has, gits." Lockwood had, to begin

with, and he made it his business to get; and, as is generally the case in this unbalanced world of ours, things came to him to which he had never aspired. Fortune favoured him because he had no need of her favours; the discovery of coal under his Westerly acres was wholly adventitious, but it made him far and away the richest man in Radville--with the possible exception of old Colonel Bohun's traditional millions.

In person he is as beautiful as a snake-fence, as alluring as a stone wall. Something over six feet in height, he walks with a stoop (one hand always in a trouser-pocket jingling silver) that materially detracts from his stature. His face, like his figure, is gaunt and lanky, his nose an emaciated beak; his mouth illustrates his attitude toward property--is a trap from which nothing of value ever escapes; his eyes are small and hard and set close together under lowering brows. He's grizzled, with hair not actually white, but grey as the iron from which his heart was fashioned. Aside from these characteristics his principal peculiarity is a nervous twitching of the right eye which has earned him his sobriquet of Blinky. Legrand Gunn said he contracted the affliction through squinting at the silver dollar to make sure none of its milling had been worn off. ... I have never known the man to wear anything but a rusty old frock coat, black, of course, and black and shiny broadcloth trousers, with a hat that has always a coating of dust so thick that it seems a mottled grey.

He grunts his words, a grunt to each. He grunted at Betty when he saw her.

"Where's your father?"

She put down her glass and dish-rag. "I don't know, sir."

"Don't know, eh?" he asked in an indescribably offensive tone.

"I think he went to the bank to see you."

"Oh, he did, eh? Did he have anything for me."

The girl took up another glass. "I don't know, sir," she said wearily.

"I'm afraid not."

"Well, if he didn't there's no use see in' me. It won't do him any good."

"I guess he knows that," she returned with a little flash of spirit.

Lockwood looked her up and down as if he had never seen her before, then summarised his resentful impression of her attitude in an open sneer. "Does, eh? Well, that's a good thing; saves talk."

She contained herself, saying nothing. He glared round the place, remarking the improvements.

"You don't do no business here, not to speak of, do ye?"

"No," she admitted without interest, "not to speak of."

"Then what's the good of all this foolishness, fixing up?"

"I don't know."

"Costs money, don't it?"

"I guess so."

"And that money belongs to me."

"It's Mr. Duncan's doing. Father ain't paying for it. He can't."

"What's he doin', then? Sittin' round foolin' with his inventions, ain't he?"

"Yes."

"What's he inventin' now?"

"I don't know much about it." She pointed to the model beneath the window. "That's the last thing, I guess."

Blinky snorted and stamped over to the window, stooping to peer at the machine. "What's the good of that?" he demanded, disdainful; and without waiting for her response went on nagging. "Foolishness! That's what it is. Why don't you tell him not to waste his time this way?"

"Because he likes it," said Betty hopelessly. "It's the only thing that makes life worth while to him. So I let him alone."

"What difference does that make? It don't bring him in nothin', does it?"

"No ..."

"Nor do any good?"

"No."

"No, siree, it don't. He'd oughter stop it. What does he do with them things when he gets 'em finished?"

"Patents them."

"And then what?"

"Nothin' that I know of."

"That's it; nothing--nor ever will. Well, he's been getting money from me for those patents--I thought at fust there might be somethin' in

'em--but he won't any more. I'd oughter had more sense."

A little colour spotted the girl's sallow cheeks. "He'd never ha' got money from you if he hadn't thought he could pay it back," she told Blinky hotly.

"No, nor if I hadn't thought he could----"

She interjected a significant "Huh!" He broke off abruptly, pale with anger.

"Well, I want to see him, and I want to see him before noon," he snapped. "I'm goin' over to the bank, an' if he knows what's good for him he'll come there pretty darn quick."

"I'll try to find him for you; he must be somewhere round," she offered.

"Well, you better. I ain't got much patience to-day."

He swung on one heel and slouched out, as Betty turned to go upstairs. Presently she reappeared pinning on her sad little hat, and left the store.

It was upwards of an hour before she returned, walking quickly and very erect, with her head up and shoulders back, her eyes suspiciously bright, the spots of colour in her cheeks blazing scarlet, her mouth set and hard, the little work-worn hands at her sides clenched tightly as if for self-control. Even old Sam, who had returned from the depôt after missing Blinky at the bank--even he, blind as he ordinarily was, saw instantly that something was wrong with the child.

"Why, Betty!" he cried in solicitude as she flung into the store--"Betty, dear, what's the matter?"

For an instant she seemed speechless. Then she tore the hat from her head and cast it regardlessly upon the counter. "Father!" she cried. "Father!"--and gulped to down her emotion. "Can you get me some money?"

"Money? Why, Betty, what--?"

Her foot came down on the floor impatiently. "Can you get me some money?" she repeated in a breath.

"Well--er--how much, Betty?" He tried to touch her, to take her to his arms, but she moved away, her sorry little figure quivering from head to feet.

"Enough," she said, half sobbing--"enough to buy a dress--a nice dress--a dress that will surprise folks--"

"But tell me what the matter is, Betty. Wanting a dress would never upset you like this."

She whipped the cracked and crumpled card from her pocket and pushed it into his hand. "Look at that!" she bade him, and turned away, struggling with all her might to keep back the tears.

He read, his old face softening. "Josie Lockwood's party, eh? And she's sent you an invitation. Well, that was kind of her, very kind."

She swung upon him in a fury. "No, it was not kind. It was mean... It was mean!"

"Oh, Betty," he begged in consternation, "don't say that. I'm sure--"

"Oh, you don't know... I heard the girls talking in the post-office-- Angle Tuthill and Mame Garrison and Bessie Gabriel... I was round by the boxes where they couldn't see me, but I could hear them, and they were laughing because I was invited. They said the reason Josie did it was because she knew I didn't have anything to wear, and she wanted to hear what excuse I'd make for not going. Ah, I heard them!"

"Oh, but Betty, Betty," he pleaded; "don't you mind what they say. Don't--"

"But I do mind; I can't help mindin'. They're mean." She paused, her features hardening. "I'm going to that party," she declared tensely: "I'm goin' to that party and--and I'm goin' to have a dress to go in, too! I don't care what I do--I'm goin' to have that dress!"

Sam would have soothed her as best he might, but she would neither look at nor come near him.

"We'll see," he said gently. "We'll see. I'll try--"

She turned on him, exasperated beyond thought. "That only means you can't help me!"

"Oh, no, it doesn't. I'll do what I can--"

"Have you got any money now?"

He hung his head to avoid her blazing eyes. "Well, no--not at present, but here's this new stock and--."

"That doesn't mean anything, and you know it. You owe that note to Mr. Lockwood, don't you? And you can't pay it?"

"Not to-day, Betty, but he'll give me a little more time, I'm sure. He's kind, very kind."

"You don't know him. He's as mean--as mean as dirt--as mean as Josie."

"Betty!"

"Then if you did get any money you'd have to give it to him, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, but--I'm sure--I think it'll come all right."

"Ah, what's the use of talkin' that way? What's the use of talkin' at all? I know you can't do anything for me, and so do you!"

Sam had dropped into his chair, unable to stand before this storm; he stared now, mute with amazement, at this child who had so long, so uncomplainingly, shared his poverty and privations, grown suddenly to the stature of a woman--and a tormented, passionate woman, stung to the quick by the injustice of her lot. He put out a hand in a feeble gesture of placation, but she brushed it away as she bent toward him, speaking so quickly that her words stumbled and ran into one another.

"I can't understand it!" she raged. "Why is it that I have to be more shabby than any other girl in town? Why is it that the others have all the fun and I all the drudgery? Why is it that I can't ever go anywhere with the boys and girls and laugh and--and have a good time like the rest do?..."

Sam bent his head to the blast. In his lap his hands worked nervously. But he could not answer her.

"It ain't that I mind the cookin' and doin' the housework and--all the rest--but--why is it you can never give me anything at all? Why must it be that everyone looks down on us and sneers and laughs at us? Why is it that half the time we haven't got enough to eat?... Other men manage to take care of their families and give their children things to wear. You've got only us two to look after, and you can't even do that. It isn't right, it isn't decent, and if I were you I'd be ashamed of myself--!"

Her temper had spent itself, and with this final cry she checked abruptly, with a catch at her breath for shame of what she had let herself say. But, childlike, she was not ready to own her sorrow; and she turned her back, trembling.

Sam, too, was shaken. In his heart he knew there was justification for her indictment, truth in what she had said. And he was heartbroken for her. He got up unsteadily and put a gentle hand upon her shoulder.

"Why, Betty--I--I--"

A dry sob interrupted him. He pulled himself together and forced his voice to a tone of confidence. "Just be a little patient, dear. I'm sure things will be better with us, soon. Just a little more patience--that's all... Why, there was a gentleman here this morning, from Noo York City, talkin' about an invention of mine."

The girl moved restlessly, shaking off his hand. "Invention!" she echoed bitterly. "Oh, father! Everybody knows they're no good. You've

been wastin' time on 'em ever since I can remember, and you've never made a dollar out of one yet."

He bowed to the truth of this, then again braced up bravely. "But this gentleman seemed quite interested. He's over to the Bigelow House now. I think I'll step over and have a talk with him--"

"You'd much better go and have a talk with Blinky Lockwood," she told him brutally. "He's waitin' for you at the bank, and said he wasn't goin' to wait after twelve o'clock, neither!"

"Wel-I, perhaps you're right. I'll go there. It's after twelve, but..." He started to get his hat and stopped with an exclamation: "Why, Nat! I didn't know you'd got back!"

Duncan was at the back of the store, clearing the last remnants of the old stock from the shelves. "Yes," he said pleasantly, without turning, "I've been here some time, cleaning up the cellar, to make room for the stuff that's coming in. I came upstairs just a moment ago, but you were so busy talking you didn't notice me."

He paused, swept the empty shelves with a calculating glance, and came out around the end of the counter. "Everything's in tip-top shape," he said. "I checked up the bill of lading myself, and there's not a thing missing, not a bit of breakage. Mr. Graham," he continued, dropping a gentle hand on the old man's shoulder, "you're going to have the finest drug-store in the State within six months. With the stuff that Sperry has sent us we can make Sothern and Lee look like sixty-five cents on the dollar.... We're going to make things hum in this old shop, and don't you forget it." He laughed lightly, with a note of encouragement. But he avoided Graham's eyes even as he did Betty's. He could not meet the pitiful look of the former, any more than that stare of hostility and defiance in the latter.

"It's good of you, my boy," Graham quavered. "I--but I'm afraid it won't---"

"Now don't say that!" Duncan interposed firmly. "And don't let me keep you. I think you said you were going out on business? And I'll be busy enough right here."

And without exactly knowing how it had come about, Graham found himself in the street, stumbling downtown, toward the bank.

When he had gone, Duncan would have returned to the shelves for a final redding-up. He desired least of all things an encounter with Betty in her present frame of mind, and he tried his level best to seem as one who had heard nothing, who was only concerned with his occupation of the moment. But from the instant that she had been made aware of his presence Betty had been watching him with smouldering eyes, wondering how much he had heard and what he was thinking of her. The keen repentance that gnawed at her heart, allied with shame that an alien should have been private to her exhibition, half maddened the child.

With a sudden movement she threw herself in front of Duncan, thrusting her white, drawn face before his, her gaze searching his half in anger, half in morose distrust.

"So you were listening!"

"I'm sorry," he said uncomfortably.

She drew a pace away, holding herself very straight while she threw him a level glance of unqualified contempt.

"I didn't mean to hear anything," he argued plaintively. "I was in the room before I understood, and by the time I did, it was too late--you had finished."

"Oh, don't try to explain. I--I hate you!"

He held her eyes inquiringly. "Yes," he said in the tone of one who solves a puzzling problem, "I believe you do."

She looked away, shaking with passion. "You just better believe it."

"But," he went on quietly, "you don't hate your father, too, do you, Miss Graham?"

She swung back to meet his stare with one that flamed with indignation.

"What do you mean by that, Mr. Duncan?"

"I mean," he said, faltering in where one wiser would have feared to venture--"I'm going to give you a bit of advice. Don't you talk to your father again the way you did just now."

"What business is that of yours?"

"None," he admitted fairly. "But just the same I wouldn't, if I were you."

"Well, you ain't me!" she cried savagely. "You ain't me! Understand that? When I want advice from you, I'll ask for it. Until I do, you let me alone."

"Very well," he replied, so calmly that she lost her bearings for a moment. And inevitably this, emphasising as it did all that she resented most in him--his education, wit, address, his advantages of every sort--only served further to infuriate the child.

"Oh, I know why you talk that way," she said, rubbing her poor little hands together.

"Do you?" he asked in wonder.

"Yes, I do--you!..."

Suddenly she found words--poverty-stricken words, it's true, but the best she had wherewith to express herself. And for a little they flowed from her lips, a scalding, scathing torrent. "It's because you go to church all the time and try to look like a saint and--and try to make out you're too religious for anything, and like to hear yourself givin' Christian advice to poor miserable sinners--like me. You think that's just too lovely of you. That's why you said it, if you want to know. ... Folks wonder what you're doing here, don't they? Guess you know that--and like it, too. It makes 'em look at you and talk about you, and that's what you like. _I_ could tell 'em. You're only here to show off your good clothes and your finger-nails and the way you part your hair and--and all the other things you do that nobody in Noo York would pay any attention to!"

He faced her soberly, attentively. She was a little fool, he knew, and making a ridiculous figure of herself. But--his innate honesty told him --she was right, in a way; she had hit upon his weakest point. He was in Radville to "show off," as she would have said, to make an impression and ... to reap the reward thereof. The way she spoke was ludicrous, but what she said was mostly plain truth. He nodded submissively.

"A pretty good guess at that," he acknowledged candidly.

"Yes, it is, and I know it, and you know it. ... Oh, it's easy enough to give advice when you've got plenty of money and fine clothes and ... but..."

"I understand," he said when she paused to get a grip upon herself and find again the words she needed. "You needn't say any more. The only reason I said what I did was because I'm strong for your father and ... well, I wanted to do you a good turn, too."

"I don't want any of your good turns!"

"Then I apologise."

"And I don't want your apologies, neither!"

"All right, only ... think over what I said, some time."

"I had a good reason for saying what I did."

"I know you had."

"You know I had!" She looked at him askance. She had been on the point of relenting a little, of calming, of being a bit ashamed of herself. But his quiet acquiescence rekindled her resentment. "How do you know? You!" she said bitterly.

"Because I'm not what you think I am, altogether."

"I guess you're not," she observed acidly.

"But I don't mean what you mean. I mean you think I'm conceited and rich and don't know what trouble is. Well, you're mistaken. I've been up against it the worst way for five years, and I know just how it feels to see other people getting up in the world when you're at the bottom of the heap with no chance of squirming out--to know that they have things you haven't got any chance of getting. I've been through the mill myself. Why, I've kept out of the way for days and days rather than let my prosperous friends see how shabby I was. Many's the time I've dodged round corners to avoid meeting men I knew would invite me to have dinner or luncheon or a drink--of soda--or something, for fear they'd find out that I couldn't treat in return. Many a time I've gone hungry for days and weeks and slept on park benches ... until an old friend found me and took me home with him."

The ring of sincerity in his manner and tone silenced the girl, impressed her with the conviction of his absolute sincerity. The tumult in her mind quieted. She eyed him with attention, even with interest temporarily untinged with resentment. And seeing that he had succeeded in gaining this much ground in her regard, Duncan dared further, pushing his advantage to its limits.

"But it's your father I wanted to talk about," he hurried on. "I'd bet a lot he knows more than any other man in this town; and besides, he's a fine, square, good-hearted old gentleman. Anybody can see that. Only, he's got one terrible fault: he doesn't know how to make money. And that's mighty tough on you--though it's just as tough on him. But when you roast him for it, like you did just now ... you only make him feel as miserable as a yellow dog ... and that doesn't help matters a little bit. He can't change into a sharp business crook now; ... he's too old a man. ... Before long he ... he won't be with you at all and ... when he's gone you'll be sore on yourself ... sure! ... if you keep on throwing it into him the way I heard you. ... And that's on the level."

He paused in confusion; the role of preacher sat upon him awkwardly, a sadly misfit garment. He felt self-conscious and ill at ease, yet with a trace of gratulation through it all. For he felt he'd carried his point. He could see no longer any animus in the pale, wistful little face that looked up into his--only sympathy, understanding, repentance and (this troubled him a bit) a faint flush of dawning admiration. Presently she grew conscious of herself again, and looked aside, humbled and distressed.

"I--I won't do it again," she faltered, twisting her hands together.

"Bully for you!" he cried, and with an abrupt if artificial resumption of his business-like air turned away to a show-case--to spare her the embarrassment of his regard.

"I didn't think," said the voice behind him; "I didn't mean to--"

something happened that almost drove me wild and..."

"I know," he said gently.

After a bit she spoke again: "I'll go up and get dinner ready now."

"That's all right," he returned absently. "I'll tend the store."

He heard her footsteps as she crossed to the door and opened it. There followed a pause. Then she came hurriedly back. He faced about to meet her eyes shining with wonder.

"I wanted to ask you," she said hastily, "if--was it this friend you spoke about--that found you in the park--who set you on the road to fortune?"

"That's what he said," Duncan answered, twisting his brows whimsically.

XII

DUNCAN'S GRUBSTAKE

Like almost all business Radville, Duncan went home for his midday meal. It wasn't much of a walk from Sam Graham's store to Miss Carpenter's, and he didn't mind in the least.

On this particular day he was sincerely hungry, but he had much to think about besides, and between the two he just bolted his food and made off, hot-foot for the store, greatly to the distress of his landlady.

Naturally, knowing nothing about Sam's note, although he knew Pete Willing by sight as the sheriff and town drunkard in one, it didn't worry him at all to discover that gentleman tacking toward the store as he hurried up Beech Street, eager to get back to his job. The first intimation that he had of anything seriously amiss was when he entered, practically on Pete's heels.

Pete Willing is the best-natured man in the world, as a general rule; drunk or sober, Radville tolerates him for just that quality. On only two occasions is he irritable and unmanageable: when his wife gets after him about the drink (Mrs. Willing is an able-bodied lady of Irish descent, with a will and a tongue of her own, to say nothing of an arm a blacksmith might envy) and when he has a duty to perform in his official capacity. It is in the latter instance that he rises magnificently to the dignity of his position. The majesty of the law in his hands becomes at once a bludgeon and a pandemonium. No one has ever been arrested in Radville, since Pete became sheriff, without the entire community becoming aware of it simultaneously. Pete's voice in

moments of excitement carries like a cannonade. Legrand Gunn said that Pete had only to get into an argument in front of the Bigelow House to make the entire disorderly population of the Flats, across the river, break for the hills. (This is probably an exaggeration.)

Tall, gaunt, gangling and loose-jointed, Duncan found Pete standing in the middle of the floor, hands in pockets and a noisome stogie thrust into a corner of his mouth, swaying a little (he was almost sober at the moment) and explaining his mission to old Sam in a voice of thunder.

"I'm sorry about this, Sam," he bellowed, "but there ain't no use wastin' words 'bout it. I'm here on business."

"But what's the matter, Sheriff?" Graham asked, his voice breaking.

"Ah, you know you got a note due at the bank, don't you?"

"Yes, but----"

"Well, it's protested. Y'un'erstand that, don't you?"

"Why, Pete!" Graham swayed, half-dazed.

"An' I'm here to serve the papers onto you."

"But--but there must be some mistake." Sam clutched blindly for his hat. "I'll step over and see Mr. Lockwood. He'll arrange to give me a little more time, I'm sure. He's always been kind, very kind."

"Naw!" Pete bawled, "Mr. Lockwood don't want to see you unless you can settle. Y'can save yourself the trouble. Y'gottuh put up or git out!"

"But, Pete--Mr. Lockwood said he didn't want to see me?"

"Yah, that's what he said, and I got orders from him, soon's I got judgment to close y'up. And that goes, see!"

"To--to turn me out of the store, Pete?" Graham's world had slipped from beneath his feet. He was overwhelmed, witless, as helpless as a child. And it was with a child's look of pitiful dismay and perplexity that he faced the sheriff.

The father who has fallen short of his child's trust and confidence knows that look. To Duncan its appeal was irresistible. He had his hand in his pocket, clutching the still considerable remains of what Kellogg had termed his grubstake, before he knew it.

"But--there must be some mistake," Graham repeated pleadingly. "It can't be--Mr. Lockwood surely wouldn't----"

"Now there ain't no use whinin' about it!" Willing roared him into silence. "Law is Law, and----" He ceased quickly, surprised to find

Duncan standing between him and his prey. "What----!" he began.

"Wait!" Duncan touched him gently on the chest with a forefinger, at the same time catching and holding the sheriff's eye. "Are you," he inquired quietly, "labouring under the impression that Mr. Graham is deaf?"

"What----!"

Duncan turned to Sam, apologetically. "He said 'what.' Did you hear it, sir?"

But by this time Pete was recovering to some degree. "What've you got to say about this?" he demanded, crescendo.

"I'll show you," Duncan told him in the same quiet voice, "what I've got to say if you'll just put the soft pedal on and tell me the amount of that note."

Pete struggled mightily to regain his vanished advantage, but try as he would he could not escape Duncan's cool, inquisitive eye. Visibly he lost importance as he yielded and dived into his pocket. "With interest and costs," he said less stridently, "it figgers up three hundred 'n' eighty dollars 'n' eighty-two cents."

There's no use denying that Duncan was staggered. For the moment his poise deserted him utterly. He could only repeat, as one who dreams: _"Three hundred and eighty dollars!..."_

His momentary consternation afforded Pete the opening he needed. The room shook with his regained sense of prestige.

"Yes, three hundred 'n' eighty dollars 'n'--say, you look a-here!----"

Again the calm forefinger touched him, and like a hypnotist's pass checked the rolling volume of noise. "Listen," begged Duncan: "if you've got anything else to tell me, please retire to the opposite side of the street and whisper it. Meanwhile, _be quiet!"_

Pete's jaw dropped. In all his experience no one had ever succeeded in taming him so completely--and in so brief a time. He experienced a sensation of having been robbed of his spinal column, and before he could pull himself together was staring in awe, while with one final admonitory poke of his finger Duncan turned and made for the soda counter, beneath which was the till. His scanty roll of bills was in his right hand, and there concealed. He stepped behind the counter (old Sam watching him with an amazement no less absolute than Pete's), pulled out the till, bent over it with an assured air, and pushed back the coin slide. Then quite naturally, he produced--with his right hand--his four-hundred-and-odd dollars from the bill drawer, stood up and counted them with great deliberation.

"One ... two ... three ... four."

He smiled winningly at Pete. "Four hundred dollars, Mr. Sheriff. Now will you be good enough to hand over that note and the change and then put yourself, and that pickle you're wearing in your face, on the other side of the door?"

Pete struggled tremendously and finally succeeded in producing from his system a still, small voice:

"I ain't got the note with me, Mr. Duncan."

"Then perhaps you won't mind going to the bank for it?"

Half suffocated, Pete assented. "Aw'right, I'll go and git it. Kin I have the money?"

"Certainly." Duncan extended the bills, then on second thought withheld them. "I presume you're a regular sheriff?" he inquired.

Very proudly Pete turned back the lapel of his coat and distended the chest on which shone his nickel-plated badge of office. Duncan examined it with grave admiration.

"It's beautiful," he said with a sigh. "Here."

Gingerly, Pete grasped the bills, thumbed them over to make sure they were real, and bolted as for his life, his coat-tails level on the breeze.

[Illustration: "Four hundred dollars, Mr. Sheriff"]

There floated back to Duncan and old Sam his valedictory: "Wal, I'll be damned!"

With a short, quiet laugh Duncan made as though to go out to the back-yard, where the new stock was being delivered, having been carted up from the station through the alley--thereby doing away with the necessity of cluttering up the store with a dØbris of packing. His primal instinct of the moment was to get right out of that with all the expedition practicable. He didn't want to be alone with old Sam another second. The essential insanity of which he had just done was patent; there was no excuse for it, and he was like to suffer severely as a consequence. But he wasn't sorry, and he did not want to be thanked.

"I'm going," he said hurriedly, "to find me a hatchet and knock the stuffing out of some of those packing-cases. Want to get all that truck indoors before nightfall, you know----"

But old Sam wasn't to be put off by any such obvious subterfuge as that. He put himself in front of Duncan.

"Nat, my boy," he said, tremulous, "I can't let this go through--I can't allow you----"

"There, now!" Duncan told him, unconcernedly yet kindly, "don't say anything more. It's over and done with."

"But you mustn't--I'll turn over the store to you, if----"

"O Lord!" Duncan's dismay was as genuine as his desire to escape Graham's gratitude. "No--don't! Please don't do that!"

"But I must do something, my boy. I can't accept so great a kindness--unless," said Graham with a timid flash of hope--"you'll consider a partnership----"

"That's it!" cried Duncan, glad of any way out of the situation.

"That's the way to do it--a partnership. No, please don't say any more about it, just now. We can settle details later. ... We've got to get busy. Tell you what I wish you'd do while I'm busting open those boxes: if you don't mind going down to the station to make sure that everything's----"

"Yes, I'll go; I'll go at once." Sam groped for Duncan's hand, caught and held it between both his own. "If--if fate--or something hadn't brought you here to-day--I don't know what would've happened to Betty and me. ..."

"Never mind," Duncan tried to soothe him. "Just don't you think about it."

Graham shook his head, still bewildered. "Perhaps," he stumbled on, "to a gentleman of your wealth four hundred dollars isn't much----"

"No," said Duncan gravely, without the flicker of an eyelash: "nothing." Then he smiled cheerfully. "There, that's all right."

"To me it's meant everything. I--I only hope I'll be able to repay you some day. God bless you, my boy, God bless you!"

He managed to jam his hat awry on his white old head and found his way out, his hands fumbling with one another, his lips moving inaudibly--perhaps in a prayer of thanksgiving.

Motionless, Duncan watched him go, and for several minutes thereafter stood without stirring, lost in thought. Then his quaint, deprecatory grin dawned. He found a handkerchief and mopped his forehead.

"Whew!" he whistled. "I wouldn't go through that again for a million dollars."

Gradually the smile faded. He puckered his brows and drew down the corners of his mouth. Thoughtfully he ran a hand into his pocket and produced the little crumpled wad of bills of small denominations, representing all he had left in the world. Smoothing them out on the counter, he arranged them carefully, summing up; then returned them to his pocket.

"Harry," he observed--"Harry said I couldn't get rid of that stake in a year!..."

"He doesn't know what a fast town this is!"

XIII

THE BUSINESS MAN AND MR. BURNHAM

It was, perhaps, within the next thirty minutes that Betty (who had been left in charge of the store while Duncan, with coat and collar off and sleeves rolled above his elbows, hacked and pounded and pried and banged at the packing-cases in the backyard) sought him on the scene of his labours.

She waited quietly, a little to one side, watching him, until he should become aware of her presence. What she was thinking would have been hard to define, from the inscrutable eyes in her set, tired face of a child. There was no longer any trace of envy, suspicion or resentment in her attitude toward the young man. You might have guessed that she was trying to analyse him, weighing him in the scales of her impoverished and lopsided knowledge of human nature, and wondering if such conclusions as she was able to arrive at were dependable.

In the course of time he caught sight of that patient, sad little figure, and, pausing, panting and perspiring under the July sun, cheerfully brandished his weapon from the centre of a widespread area of wreckage and destruction.

"Pretty good work for a York dude--not?" he laughed.

There was a shadowy smile in her grave eyes. "It's an improvement," she said evenly.

He shot her a curious glance. "_Ouch!_" he said thoughtfully.

"I just came to tell you," she went on, again immobile, "you're wanted inside."

"Somebody wants to see _me?_" he demanded of her retreating back.

"Yes."

"But who--?"

"Blinky Lockwood," she replied over her shoulder, as she went into the house.

"Lockwood?" He speculated, for an instant puzzled. Then suddenly: "Father-in-law!" he cried. "Shivering snakes! he mustn't catch me like this! I, a business man!"

Hastily rolling down his shirt-sleeves and shrugging himself into his coat, he made for the store, buttoning his collar and knotting his tie on the way.

He found Blinky nosing round the room, quite alone. Betty had disappeared, and the old scoundrel was having quite an enjoyable time poking into matters that did not concern him and disapproving of them on general principles. So far as the improvements concerned old Sam Graham's fortunes, Blinky would concede no health in them. But with regard to Duncan there was another story to tell: Duncan apparently controlled money, to some vague extent.

"You're Mr. Duncan, ain't you?" he asked with his leer, moving down to meet Nat.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Lockwood, I believe?"

"That's me." Blinky clutched his hand in a genial claw. "I'm glad to meet you."

"Thank you," said Duncan. "Something I can do for you, sir?"

"Wal, Pete Willin' was tellin' me you'd just took up this note of Graham's?"

"Not exactly; the firm took it up."

Blinky winked savagely at this. "The firm? What firm?"

"Graham and Duncan, sir. I've been taken into partnership."

"Have, eh?" Blinky grunted mysteriously and fished in his pocket for some bills and silver. "Wal, here's some change comin' to the firm, then; and here," he added, producing the document in question, "is Sam's note."

"Thank you." Duncan ceremoniously deposited both in the till, going behind the soda fountain to do so, and then waited, expectant. Blinky was grunting busily in the key of one about to make an important communication.

"I'm glad you're a-comin' in here with Sam," he said at length, with an acid grimace that was meant to be a smile.

"Oh, it may be only temporary." Nat endeavoured to assume a seraphic expression, and partially succeeded. "I'm devoting much of my time to my studies," he pursued primly; "but nevertheless feel I should be earning something, too."

"That's right; that's the kind of spirit I like to see in a young man.... You always go to church, don't you?"

"No, sir--Sundays only."

"That's what I mean. D'you drink?"

"Oh, no, sir," Duncan parroted glibly: "don't smoke, drink, swear, and on Sundays I go to church."

The bland smile with which he faced Lockwood's keen scrutiny disarmed suspicion.

"I'm glad to hear that," Blinky told him. "I'm at the head of the temp'rance movement here, and I hope you'll join us, and set an example to our fast young men."

"I feel sure I could do that," said Duncan meekly.

Lockwood removed his hat, exposing the cranium of a bald-headed eagle, and fanned himself. "Warm to-day," he observed in an endeavour to be genial that all but sprained his temperament.

Indeed, so great was the strain that he winked violently.

Duncan observed this phenomenon with natural astonishment not unmixed with awe. "Yes, sir, very," he agreed, wondering what it might portend.

"I believe I'll have a glass of sody."

"Certainly." Duncan, by now habituated to the formulae of soda dispensing, promptly produced a bright and shining glass.

"I see you've been fixin' this place up some."

"Oh, yes," said Nat loftily. "We expect to have the best drugstore in the State. We're getting in new stock to-day, and naturally things are a little out of order, but we'll straighten up without delay. We'll try to deserve your esteemed patronage," he concluded doubtfully, with a hazy impression that such a speech would be considered appropriate under the circumstances.

"You shall have it, Mr. Duncan, you shall have it!"

"Thank you, I'm sure.... What syrup would you prefer?"

"Just sody," stipulated Lockwood.

His spasmodic wink again smote Duncan's understanding a mighty blow. Unable to believe his eyes, he hedged and stammered. Could it be--? This from the leader of the temperance movement in Radville?

"I beg pardon----?"

His denseness irritated Blinky slightly, with the result that the right side of his face again underwent an alarming convulsion. "I say," he explained carefully, "just--_plain_--sody."

"On the level?"

"What?" grunted Blinky; and blinked again.

A smile of comprehension irradiated Nat's features. "Pardon," he said, "I'm a little new to the business."

Blinky, fanning himself industriously, glared round the store while Duncan, turning his back, discreetly found and uncorked the whiskey bottle. He was still a trifle dubious about the transaction, but on the sound principles of doing all things thoroughly, poured out a liberal dose of raw, red liquor. Then, with his fingers clamped tightly about the bottom of the glass, the better to conceal its contents from any casual but inquisitive passer-by, he quickly filled it with soda and placed it before Blinky, accompanying the action with the sweetest of childlike smiles.

Lockwood, nodding his acknowledgments, lifted the glass to his lips. Duncan awaited developments with some apprehension. To his relief, however, Blinky, after an experimental swallow, emptied the mixture expeditiously into his system; and smacked his thin lips resoundingly.

"How," he demanded, "can anyone want intoxicatin' likers when they can get such a bracin' drink as that?"

"I pass," Nat breathed, limp with admiration of such astounding hypocrisy.

Blinky reluctantly pried a nickel loose from his finances and placed it on the counter. Duncan regarded it with disdain.

"Ten cents more, please," he suggested tactfully.

"What for?"

"Plain sody." The explanation was accompanied by a very passable imitation of Blinky's blink.

Happily for Duncan, Blinky has no sense of humour: if he had he would explode the very first time he indulged in introspection.

"Not much," said he with his sour smile. "I guess you're jokin'.... Well, good luck to you, Mr. Duncan. I'd like to have you come round and see us some evenin'."

"Thank you very much, sir." Duncan accompanied Blinky to the door. "I've already had the pleasure of meeting your daughter, sir. She's a

charming girl."

"I'm real glad you think so," said Blinky, intensely gratified. "She seems to've taken a great shine to you, too. Come round and get 'quainted with the hull family. You're the sort of young feller I'd like her to know." He paused and looked Nat up and down captiously, as one might appraise the points of a horse of quality put up for sale. "Good-day," said he, with the most significant of winks.

"Oh, that's all right," Nat hastened to reassure him. "I won't say a word about it."

Blinky, on the point of leaving, started to question this (to him) cryptic utterance, but luckily had the current of his thoughts diverted by the entrance of Roland Barnette, in company with his friend Mr. Burnham.

Roland's consternation at this unexpected encounter was, in the mildest term, extreme. At sight of his employer he pulled up as if slapped.

"Oh!" he faltered, "I didn't know you was here, sir."

"No," said Blinky with keen relish, "I guess you didn't."

"I--ah--come over to see Sam about that note," stammered Roland.

"Wal, don't you bother your head 'bout what ain't your business, Roly. Come on back to the bank."

"All right, sir." Roland grasped frantically at the opportunity to emphasise his importance. "Excuse me, Mr. Lockwood, but I'd like to interdoos you to a friend of mine, Mr. Burnham from Noo York."

Amused, Burnham stepped into the breach. "How are you?" he said with the proper nuance of cordiality, offering his hand.

Lockwood shook it unemotionally. "How de do?" he said, perfunctory.

"I brought Mr. Burnham in to see Sam----"

"Yes," Burnham interrupted Roland quickly; "Barnette's been kind enough to show me round town a bit."

"Here on business?" inquired Lockwood pointedly.

"No, not exactly," returned Burnham with practised ease, "just looking round."

"Only lookin', eh?" Blinky's countenance underwent one of its erratic quakes as he examined Burnham with his habitual intentness.

The New Yorker caught the wink and lost breath. "Ah--yes--that's all," he assented uneasily. And as he spoke another wink dumbfounded him. "Why?" he asked, with a distinct loss of assurance. "Don't you believe

it."

"Don't see no reason why I shouldn't," grunted Blinky. "Hope you'll like what you see. Good day."

"So long ... Mr. Lockwood," returned Burnham uncertainly.

Lockwood paused outside the door. "Come 'long, Roland."

"Yes, sir; right away; just a minute." Roland was lingering unwillingly, detained by Burnham's imperative hand. "What d'you want? I got to hurry."

"What was he winking at me for?" demanded Burnham heatedly. "Have you----?"

"Oh!" Roland laughed. "He wasn't winking. He can't help doing that. It's a twitchin' he's got in his eye. That's why they call him Blinky."

"Oh, that was it!" Burnham accepted the explanation with distinct relief, while Duncan, who had been an unregarded spectator, suddenly found cause to retire behind one of the show-cases on important business.

So that was the explanation!...

After his paroxysm had subsided and he felt able to control his facial muscles, Duncan emerged, suave and solemn. Roland had disappeared with Blinky, and Burnham was alone.

"Anything you wish, sir?" asked Nat.

"Only to see Mr. Graham."

"He's out just at present, but I think he'll be back in a moment or so. Will you wait? You'll find that chair comfortable, I think."

"Believe I will," said Burnham with an air. He seated himself. "I can't wait long, though," he amended.

"Yes, sir. And if you'll excuse me----?"

Burnham's hand dismissed him with a tolerant wave. "Go right on about your business," he said with supreme condescension.

And Duncan returned to his work in the backyard. It wasn't long before he found occasion to go back to the store, and by that time old Sam was there in conversation with Burnham. Neither noticed Nat as he entered, and to begin with he paid them little heed, being occupied with his task of depositing an armful of bottles without mishap and then placing them on the shelves. The hum of their voices from the other side of the counter struck an indifferent ear while he busied himself, but presently a word or phrase caught his interest, and he found himself

listening, at first casually, then with waxing attention.

"That's part of my business," he heard Burnham say in his sleek, oleaginous accents. "Sometimes I pick up an odd no-'count contraption that makes me a bit of money, and more times I'm stung and lose on it. It's all a gamble, of course, and I'm that way--like to take a gambling chance on anything that strikes my fancy--like that burner of yours."

"Yes," Graham returned: "the gas arrangement."

"It's a curious idea--quite different from the one I told you about; but I kinda took to it. There might be something to it, and again there mightn't. I've been thinking I might be willing to risk a few dollars on it, if we could come to terms."

"Do you mean it, really?" said old Sam eagerly.

"Not to invest in it, so to speak; I don't think it's chances are strong enough for that. But if you'd care to sell the patent outright and aren't too ambitious, we might make a dicker. What d'you say?"

"Why, yes," said Graham, quivering with anticipation. "Yes, indeed, if--"

"Well?"

"If you really think it's worth anything, sir."

"Well, as I say, there's no telling; but I was thinking about it at dinner, and I sort of concluded I'd like to own that burner, so I made out a little bill of sale, and I says to myself, says I: 'If Graham will take five hundred dollars for that patent, I'll give him spot cash, right in his hand,' says I."

With this Burnham tipped back in his chair, and brought forth a wallet from which he drew a sheet of paper and several bills.

"Five hundred dollars!" repeated Graham, thunderstruck by this munificence.

"Yes, sir: five hundred, cash! To tell you the truth--guess you don't know it--I heard at the bank that they didn't intend to extend the time on that note of yours, and I thought this five hundred would come in handy, and kind of wanted to help you out. Now what do you say?"

He flourished the bills under Graham's nose and waited, entirely at ease as to his answer.

"Well," said the old man, "it is kind of you, sir--very kind. Everybody's been good to me recently--or else I'm dreamin'."

"Then it's a bargain?"

"Why, I hope it won't lose any money for you, Mr. Burnham," Sam hesitated, with his ineradicable sense of fairness and square-dealing. "Making gas from crude oil ought to--"

Duncan never heard the end of that speech. For some moments he had been listening intently, trying to recollect something. The name of Burnham plucked a string on the instrument of his memory; he knew he had heard it, some place, some time in the past; but how, or when, or in respect to what he could not make up his mind. It had required Sam's reference to gas and crude oil to close the circuit. Then he remembered: Kellogg had mentioned a man by the name of Burnham who was "on the track of" an important invention for making gas from crude oil. This must be the man, Burnham, the tracker; and poor old Graham must be the tracked....

Without warning Duncan ran round and made himself an uninvited third to the conference.

"Mr. Graham, one moment!" he begged, excited. "Is this patent of yours on a process of making gas from crude oil?"

Burnham looked up impatiently, frowning at the interruption, but Graham was all good humour.

"Why, yes," he started to explain; "it's that burner over there that--"

"But I wouldn't sell it just yet if I were you," said Nat. "It may be worth a good deal--"

"Now look here!" Burnham got to his feet in anger. "What business 've you got butting into this?" he demanded, putting himself between Duncan and the inventor.

"Me?" Duncan queried simply. "Only just because I'm a business man. If you don't believe it, ask Mr. Graham."

"He's got a perfect right to advise me, Mr. Burnham," interposed Graham, rising.

"Well, but--but what objection 've you got to his making a little money out of this patent?" Burnham blustered.

"None; only I want to look into the matter first. I think it might be--ah--advisable."

"What makes you think so?" demanded Burnham, his tone withering.

"Well," said Nat, with an effort summoning his faculties to cope with a matter of strict business, "it's this way: I've got an _idea_, he said, poking at Burnham with the forefinger which had proven so effective with Pete Willing, "that you wouldn't offer five hundred iron men for this burner unless you expected to make something big out of it, and... it ought to be worth just as much to Mr. Graham as to you."

"Ah, you don't know what you're talking about."

"I know that," Nat admitted simply, "but I do happen to know you're promoting a scheme for making gas from crude oil, and if Mr. Graham will listen to me you won't get his patent until I've consulted my friend, Henry Kellogg."

"_Kellogg!_"

"Yes. You know--of L.J. Bartlett & Company." Nat's forefinger continued to do deadly work. Burnham backed away from it as from a fiery brand.

"Oh, well!" he said, dashed, "if you're representing Kellogg"--and Nat took care not to refute the implication--"I--I don't want to interfere. Only," he pursued at random, in his discomfiture, "I can't see why he sent you here."

"I'd be ashamed to tell you," Nat returned with an open smile. "Better ask him."

Burnham gathered his wits together for a final threat. "That's what I will do!" he threatened. "And I'll do it the minute I can see him. You can bet on that, Mister What's-Your-Name!"

"No, I can't," said Nat naïvely. "I'm not allowed to gamble."

His ingenuous expression exasperated Burnham. The man lost control of his temper at the same moment that he acknowledged to himself his defeat. In disgust he turned away.

"Oh, there's no use talking to you--"

"That's right," Nat agreed fairly.

"But I'll see you again, Mr. Graham--"

"Not alone, if I can help it, Mr. Burnham," Duncan amended sweetly.

"But," Burnham continued, severely ignoring Nat and addressing himself squarely to Graham, "you take my tip and don't do any business with this fellow until you find out who he is." He flung himself out of the shop with a barked: "Good-day!"

"Well, Mr. Graham?" Duncan turned a little apprehensively to the inventor. But Sam's expression was almost one of beatific content. His weak old lips were pursed, his eyes half-closed, his finger tips joined, and he was rocking back and forth on his heels.

"Margaret used to talk that way, sometimes," he remarked. "She was the best woman in the world--and the wisest. She used to take care of me and protect me from my foolish impulses, just as you do, my boy...."

For a space Duncan kept silent, respecting the old man's memories, and

a great deal humbled in spirit by the parallel Sam had drawn. Then: "I was afraid what I said would sound queer to you, sir," he ventured-- "that you mightn't understand that I'm not here to do you out of your invention..."

"There's nothing on earth, my boy,"--Graham's hand fell on Nat's arm-- "could make me think that. But five hundred dollars, you see, would have repaid you for taking up that note, and--and I could have bought Betty a new dress for the party. But I'm sure you've done what's best. You're a business man--"

"Don't!" Nat pleaded wildly. "I've been called that so much of late that it's beginning to hurt!"

XIV

MOSTLY ABOUT BETTY

Sam Graham said to me, that night: "I don't know when so many things have happened to me in so short a time. It don't seem hardly possible it's only four days since that boy came in here asking for a job. It's wonderful, simply wonderful, the change he's made."

He waved a comprehensive hand, and I, glancing round the transformed store, agreed with him. Everything was spick and span and mighty attractive--clean and neat-looking--with the new stock in the shining cases and arranged on the glistening white shelves: not all of it set out by any means, of course, but no unplaced goods in sight, cluttering up the counters or kicking round the floor.

"The way he's worked----! You'd hardly believe it, Homer. He said he wanted to get home early so's to write a letter to a friend of his in New York, a Mr. Kellogg, junior member of L. J. Bartlett & Company, about my invention. But he insisted on leaving everything to rights for business to-morrow. And just look!"

"But I thought Roland Barnette----?" I suggested with guile. Of course I'd heard a rumour of what had happened--'most everyone in town had--and how Roland and his friend, Mr. Burnham, had sort of fallen out on the way from the Bigelow House to the train; but no one knew anything definite, and I wanted to get "the rights of it," as Radville says.

So I had dropped in at Graham's, on my way home from the office, as I often do, for an evening smoke and a bit of gossip: something I rarely indulge in, but which I've found has a curious psychological effect on the circulation of the _Citizen_--like a tonic. Sam was just at the point of closing up. He was alone, Duncan having gone home about an hour earlier, and Betty being upstairs, while (since it was quite

half-past nine) all the rest of Radville, with few exceptions (chiefly to be noted at Schwartz's and round the Bigelow House bar) was making its final rounds of the day: locking the front door, putting out the lamp in its living-room, banking the fire in the range, ejecting the cat from the kitchen and wiping out the sink, and finally, odoriferous kerosene lamp in hand, climbing slowly to the stuffy upstairs bed-chamber. Indeed, the lights of Radville begin to go out about half-past eight; by ten, as a rule, the town is as lively as a cemetery.

But I am by nature inexorable and merciless, a masterful man with such as old Sam; and it was an hour later before I left him, drained of the last detail of the day. He was a weary man, but a happy one, when he bade me good-night, and I myself felt a little warmed by his cheerfulness as I plodded up Main Street through the thick oppression of darkness beneath the elms.

After a time I became aware that someone was overtaking me, and waited, thinking at first it would be one of my people. But it wasn't long before I recognised from the quick tempo of the approaching footfalls that this was no Radvillian. There was just light enough--starlight striking down through the thinner spaces in the interlacing foliage--to make visible a moving shadow, and when it drew nearer I saluted it with confidence.

"Good-evening, Mr. Duncan."

He stopped short, peering through the gloom. "Good-evening, but--Mr. Littlejohn? Glad to see you." He joined me and we proceeded homeward, he moderating his stride a trifle in deference to my age. "Aren't you late?"

"A bit," I admitted. "I've been gossiping with Sam Graham."

"Oh...?"

"You're out late yourself, Mr. Duncan, for one of such regular, not to say abnormal, habits."

He laughed lightly. "Had a letter I wanted to catch the first morning train."

"Then you're interested in Sam's burner?"

"No, I'm not, but I hope to interest others....Oh, yes: Mr. Graham told you about it, of course.... It just struck me that if a man of Burnham's stamp was willing to risk five hundred dollars on the proposition, he very likely foresaw a profit in it that might as well be Mr. Graham's. So I've sent a detailed description of the thing to a friend in New York, who'll look into it for me."

He was silent for a little.

"Who's Colonel Bohun?" he asked suddenly.

"Why do you ask?"

"I saw him this evening. He was passing the store and stopped to glare in as if he hated it--stopped so long that I got nervous and asked Miss Lockwood (she'd just happened in for a parting glass--of soda) whether he was an anarchist or a retired burglar. She told me his name, but was otherwise inhumanly reticent."

"For Josie?" I chuckled; but he didn't respond. So I took up the tale of the first family of Radville.

"The story runs," said I, "that the Bohuns were one of the F.F.V.'s; that they sickened of slavery, freed their slaves and moved North, to settle in Radville. I _believe_ they came from somewhere round Lynchburg; but that was a couple of generations ago. When the Civil War broke out the old Colonel up there"--I gestured vaguely in the general direction of the Bohun mansion--"couldn't keep out of it, and naturally he couldn't fight with the North. He won his spurs under Lee.... After the war had blown over he came home, to find that his only son had enlisted with the Radville company and disappeared at Gettysburg. It pretty nearly killed the old man--though he wasn't so old then; but there's fire in the Bohun blood, and his boy's action seemed to him nothing less than treason."

"And that's what soured him on the world?"

"Not altogether. He had a daughter--Margaret. She was the most beautiful woman in the world...." I suspect my voice broke a little just there, for there was a shade of respectful sympathy in the monosyllable with which he filled the pause. "He swore she should never marry a Northerner, but she did; I guess, being a Bohun, she had to, after hearing she must not. There were two of us that loved her, but she chose Sam Graham...."

"Why," he said awkwardly--"I'm sorry."

"I'm not: she was right, if I couldn't see it that way. They ran away--and so did I. I went East, but they came back to Radville. Colonel Bohun never forgave them, but they were very happy till she died. Betty's their daughter, of course: Sam's not the kind that marries more than once."

Duncan thought this over without comment until we reached our gate. There he paused for a moment.

"He's got plenty of money, I presume--old Bohun?"

"So they say. Probably not much now, but a great deal more than he needs."

"Then why doesn't somebody get after the old scoundrel and make him do

something for that poor--for Miss Graham?" he asked indignantly.

"He tried it once, but they wouldn't listen. His conditions were impossible," I explained. "She was to renounce her father and take the name of Bohun-----."

"What rot!" Duncan growled. "What an old fiend he must be! Of course he knew she'd refuse."

"I suspect he did."

Duncan hesitated a bit longer. "Anyhow," he said suddenly, "somebody ought to get after him and make him see the thing the right way."

"S'pose you try it, Mr. Duncan?" I suggested maliciously, as we went up the walk.

He stopped at the door. "Perhaps I shall," he said slowly.

"I'd advise you not to. The last man that tried it has no desire to repeat the experiment."

"Who was he?"

"An old fool named Homer Littlejohn."

Duncan put out his hand. "Shake!" he insisted. "We'll talk this over another time."

We went in very quietly, lit our candles, and with elaborate care avoided the home-made burglar-alarm (a complicated arrangement of strings and tinpans on the staircase, which Miss Carpenter insists on maintaining ever since Roland Barnette missed a dollar bill and insisted his pocket had been picked on Main Street) and so mounted to our rooms. As we were entering (our doors adjoin) a thought delayed my good-night.

"By the way, did you get your invitation to Josie Lockwood's party, Mr. Duncan? I happened to see it on the hall table this evening."

"Yes," he assented quietly.

"It's to be the social event of the year. I hope you'll enjoy it."

"I'm not going."

"Not going!... Why not?"

"It's against the rules at first--I mean, business rules. I'll be so busy at the store, you know."

"Josie'll be disappointed."

"Thank you," said he gratefully. "Good-night."

Alone, I was fain to confess he baffled my understanding.

The rush of business to Graham's began the following morning: Duncan's hands were full almost from the first, and he had to relegate such matters as making final disposition of his stock and getting acquainted with it to the intervals between waiting upon customers. Old Sam must have put up more prescriptions in the next few days than he had within the last five years. Everybody wanted to take a look at the renovated store, shake Sam's hand, and see what the new partner was really like. Sothern and Lee's was for some days quite deserted, especially after Duncan took a leaf out of their book, bought an ice-cream freezer and began to serve dabs of cream in the sody. I've always maintained that our Radville folks are pretty thoroughly sot in their ways (the phrase is local), but the way they flocked to Graham's forced me to amend the aphorism with the clause: "except when their curiosity is aroused." Every woman in town wanted to know what Graham and Duncan carried that Sothern and Lee didn't, and how much cheaper they were than the more established concern; also they wanted to know Mr. Duncan. I suspect no drug-store ever had so many inquiries for articles that it didn't carry, but might possibly, or ought to, in the estimation of the prospective purchasers, as well as that at no time had Radvillians happened to think of so many things that they could get at a druggist's. People drove in from as far as twenty miles away, as soon as the news reached them, to buy notepaper and stamps--people who didn't write or receive a letter a month. Will Bigelow, even, dropped round and bought samples of the tobacco stock, from two-fors up to ten-centers--and smoked them with expressive snorts. Tracey Tanner's soda and cigarette trade was transferred bodily to Graham's from the first, and Roland Barnette gave it his patronage, albeit grudgingly, as soon as he found it impossible to shake Josie Lockwood's allegiance. I say grudgingly, because Roland didn't like the new partner, and had said so from the first. But everyone else did like him, almost without exception. His attentiveness and courtesy were not ungrateful after the way things were thrown at you at Sothern and Lee's, we declared.

Duncan certainly did strive to please. No man ever worked harder in a Radville store than he did. And from the time that he began to believe there would be some reward for his exertions, that the business was susceptible to being built up by the employment of progressive methods, he grew astonishingly prolific of ideas, from our sleepy point of view. The window displays were changed almost daily, to begin with, and were made as interesting as possible; we learned to go blocks out of our way to find out what Graham and Duncan were exploiting to-day. And daily bargain sales were instituted--low-priced articles of everyday use, such as shaving soap, tooth brushes, and the like, being sold at a few cents above cost on certain days which were announced in advance by means of hand-lettered cards in the show-windows; whereas formerly we had always been obliged to pay full list-prices. An axiom of his creed as it developed was to the effect that stock must not be allowed to stand idle upon the shelves; if there were no call for a certain line of articles, it must be stimulated. I remember that, some time along in

August, he began to worry about the inactivity in cough-syrups.

"No one wants cough-syrups in summer," he told Graham; "that stuff's been here six weeks and more. It's getting out of training. Needs exercise. Look at this bottle: it says: 'Shake well.' Now it hasn't been shaken at all since it was put on the shelves, and I haven't got time to shake it every morning. We must either hire a boy to give it regular exercise, or sell it off and get in a fresh supply for the winter. I'll have to think up some scheme to make 'em take it off our hands."

He did. Somehow or other he managed to convince us that forewarned was forearmed, that it was better to have a bottle or two of cough-syrup in our medicine chests at home than on the shelves of the drug-store, when the chill autumnal winds began to blow, especially when you could buy it now for thirty-nine cents, whereas it would be fifty-four in October.

Still earlier in his career as a business man he noticed that the local practitioners wrote their prescriptions on odd scraps of paper.

"That's all wrong," he declared. "We'll have to fix it." And by next morning the job-printing press back of the Court House was groaning under an order from Graham and Duncan's, and a few days later every physician within several miles of Radville received half a dozen neat pads of blanks with his name and address printed at the top and the advice across the bottom: "Go to Graham's for the best and purest drugs and chemicals." The backs of the blanks were utilised to request people living out of reach, but on rural free delivery routes, either to mail their prescriptions and other orders in, or have the physicians telephone them, promising to fill and despatch them by the first post.

For he had a telephone installed within the first fortnight, and the next day advertised in the Gazette that orders by telephone would receive prompt attention and be delivered without delay. Tracey Tanner became his delivery-boy, deserting his father's stables for the obvious advantages of three dollars a week with a chance to learn the business.... Sothern and Lee were quick to recognise the advantage the telephone gave Graham and Duncan, and promptly had one put in their store; but the delay had proven almost fatal: Radville had already got into the habit of telephoning to Graham's for a cake of soap, or whatnot, and it's hard to break a Radville habit.

As business increased and the stock turned itself over at a profit, Duncan began to branch out, to make improvements and introduce new lines of goods. He it was who inoculated Radville with the habit of buying manufactured candies. Up to the time of his advent, we had been accustomed to and content with home-made taffies and fudges--and were, I've no doubt, vastly better off on that account. But Duncan, starting with a line of five- and ten-cent packages of indigestible sweets, in time made arrangements with a big Pittsburgh confectionery concern to ship him a small consignment of pound and half-pound "fancy" boxes of chocolates and bonbons twice a week. And taffy-pulls and fudge parties

lapsed into desuetude.

Later, Sperry introduced him to an association of druggists, of which he became a member, for the maintenance and exploitation of the cigar and tobacco trade in connection with the drug business. They installed at Graham's a handsome show-case and fixtures especially for the sale and display of cigars, and thereafter it was possible to purchase smokable tobacco in our town.

Again, he treated Radville to its first circulating library, establishing a branch in the store. One could buy a book at a moderate price, and either keep it or exchange it for a fee of a few cents. I disputed the wisdom of this move, alleging, and with reason, that Radville didn't read modern fiction to any extent. But Duncan argued that it didn't matter. "They're going to try it on as a novelty, to begin with," he said, "and it'll bring 'em into the store for a few exchanges, at least. That's all I want. Once we get 'em in here, it'll be hard if we can't sell them something else. You'll see."

He was right.

Undoubtedly he made the business hum during those first few months; and after that it settled down to a steady forward movement. The store became a social centre, a place for people to meet. In time Tracey was promoted to be assistant and another boy engaged to make deliveries. ... And Duncan had never been happier; he had found something he could understand and, understanding, accomplish; there was work for his hands to do, and they had discovered they could do it successfully. I don't believe he stopped to think about it very much, but he was conscious of that glow of achievement, that heightening of the spirits, that comes with the knowledge of success, be that success however insignificant, and it benefited him enormously....

But this chronicle of progress has run away altogether with a desultory pen, which started to tell why Duncan didn't want to go to Josie Lockwood's party. I was long in finding out, but not so long as Duncan himself, perhaps; by which I mean to say that he was conscious of the desire not to go, and determined not to, without stopping to analyse the cause of that desire more than very superficially.

It happened, toward the close of the eventful day already detailed at such length, that as Duncan was entering the house with a load of boxed goods, he heard voices in the store--young voices, of which one was already too familiar to his ears. He paused, waiting for them to get through with their business and go; for he had no time to waste just then, even upon the heiress of his manufactured destiny. Betty was keeping shop at the time (old Sam having gone upstairs for a little rest, who was overwrought and weary with the excitement of that day) and it was Duncan's hope that she would be able to serve the customers without his assistance.

There were two of them, you see--Josie and Angle Tuthill--hunting as usual in couples; and while he waited, not meaning to eavesdrop but

unwilling to betray his whereabouts by moving, he heard very clearly their passage with Betty.

He overheard first, distinctly, Betty responding in expressionless voice: "Hello, Angie.... Hello, Josie."

There ensued what seemed a slightly awkward pause. Then Josie, painfully sweet: "Did you get the invitation, Betty?"

Betty moved into Duncan's range of vision, apparently intending to come and call him. She turned at the question, and he saw her small, thin little body and pinched face *_en silhouette_* against the fading light beyond. He saw, too, that she was stiffening herself as if for some unequal contest.

"The invitation?" she questioned dully, but with her head up and steady.

"Why," said Josie, "I sent you one. To the party, you know--my lawn feet next week."

I give the local pronunciation as it is.

"Did you?"

"I gave it to Tracey for you," persisted the tormentor. "Didn't you get it?"

Betty caught at her breath, inaudibly; only Duncan could see the little spasm of mortification and anger that shook her.

"Oh, perhaps I did," she said shortly. "I--I'll ask Mr. Duncan to wait on you."

She swung quickly out into the hallway, slamming the door behind her and so darkening it that she didn't detect Duncan's shadowed figure. And if she had meant to call him, she must have forgotten it; for an instant later he heard her stumbling up the stairs, and as she disappeared he caught the echo of a smothered sob.

He waited, motionless, too disturbed at the time to care to enter the store and endure Josie's vapid advances; and through the thin partition there came to him their comments on Betty's ungracious behaviour.

"Well!... *_did_* you ever!"

That was Angle; Josie chimed in the same key: "Oh, what did you expect from that kind of a girl?"

"*_Ssh!_* maybe he's coming!"

After a moment's silence, Josie: "Oh, come on. Don't let's wait any longer. I don't think it's healthy to drink sody so soon before dinner,

anyway."

"And, besides, we only wanted to hear--"

Their voices with their footsteps diminished. Duncan allowed a prudent interval to elapse, entered the store and began to bestow the goods he had brought in.

While he was at work the light failed. He stopped for lack of it just as Betty came downstairs.

"Hello!" he said cheerfully. "Know where the matches are?"

"Yes." She moved behind a counter and fetched him a few. "Are you 'most done?" she inquired, not unfriendly, as he took down from its bracket one of the oil lamps.

"Hardly," he responded, touching a light to the wick and replacing the chimney. "It's a good deal of a job."

"Yes..."

He replaced the lamp, and in the act of turning toward another caught a glimpse of the girl's face, pale and drawn, her eyes a trifle reddened. And with that commonsense departed from him, leaving him wholly a prey to his impulse of pity. "Oh, thunder!" he told himself, thrusting a hand into his pocket. "I might as well be broke as the way I am now." He produced the scanty remains of his "grubstake."

"Miss Graham..."

"Yes?" she asked, wondering.

"Could you get a party dress for thirty-four dollars?"

"Thirty-four dollars!" she faltered.

He discovered what small change he had in his pocket: it was like him to be extravagant, even extreme. "And fifty-three cents?" he pursued, with a nervous laugh.

"Heavens!" the girl gasped. "I should think so!"

"Then go ahead!" He offered her the money, but she could only stare, incredulous. "I'll stake you."

"Oh..._no_, Mr. Duncan," she managed to say.

"Oh, yes!" He tried to catch one of the hands that involuntarily had risen toward her face in a gesture of wonder. "Please do," he begged, his tone persuasive, "as a favour to me."

But she evaded him, stepping back. "I couldn't take it; I couldn't

really."

"Yes, you can. Just try it once, and see how easy it is," he persisted, pursuing.

"No, I can't." She looked up shyly and shook her head, that smile of her mother's for the moment illuminating her face almost with the radiance of beauty. "But I--I thank you very much--just the same."

"But I want you to go to that party..."

"You're awful' kind," she said softly, still smiling, "but I don't care to go, now. I--"

"Don't care to! Why, you were insisting on going, a little while ago."

"Yes," she admitted simply, "I know I was. But ... I've been thinking over what you said, since then, and I ... I've made up my mind I'd be out of place there."

"Out of place!" he echoed, thunderstruck.

"Yes. I've concluded I belong here in the store with father." She half turned away. "And I guess folks is better off if they stay where they belong...."

She went slowly from the room, and he remained staring, stupefied.

"You never can tell about a woman," he concluded with all the gravity of an original philosopher.

XV

MANOEUVRES OF JOSIE

Nat didn't go to the Lockwood lawn fete, and did excuse himself on the plea of being unable to leave the store. I'm afraid the young man had a faint, fond hope that Josie would be offended; but his excuse was accepted without remonstrance. And, indeed, it was at that time quite a reasonable one. Tracey had not been added to the staff, although business was booming, and Saturday night is, as everyone who has lived in a Radville knows, the busiest of the week; all the stores keep open late on Saturday--some as late as eleven--and frequently take in half the week's income between noon and the closing hour. Duncan really couldn't be spared; so it's probable that Josie cloaked her disappointment and comforted herself with the assurance that her selection of the day had been an error in judgment, of which she would not again be guilty.

But the party came off, without fail, and that on a wonderful, still, moonlit night; and everybody voted it a splendid success. The Citizen in its next issue recorded the event to the extent of a column and a half of reading matter, called it a social function, and described the gowns of the leading ladies of society present in bewildering phrases. I was not invited, but the owner of the paper was, and his wife wrote the description with the assistance of the entire editorial and reportorial force, a dictionary and some evil if suppressed language from the foreman of the composing-room. I read the proofs with an admiration strongly tinged with awe, and found it lacking in one particular only: no mention was made of Roland Barnette's first open-faced suit.

Roland had ordered it from a clothing-house in Chicago, and it arrived just in time. Having heard all about it from Roland's own lips (they dilated upon the matter to Watty the tailor, just beneath my window), I sort of hung round downtown Saturday evening in the hope of catching a glimpse of it, and was not disappointed. I was loitering in Graham's when Roland sauntered nonchalantly in at about a quarter to eight and called for a pack of "Sweets." Sam served him, and Duncan, happily for him disengaged at the moment, after one look at Roland retired precipitately behind the prescription counter--overcome, I judged from Roland's triumphant smirk, by deepest chagrin. Well, thought I, might he have been: he could never, by whatever wildest endeavour, have approximated Roland's splendour.

The coat was bob-tailed (at least, so Watty described it within my hearing) and curiously double-breasted, caught together at the waist with a single button, thus revealing a shining expanse of very stiff shirt-bosom; which creaked, for some reason. With this Roland wore a ribbed white-silk waistcoat, very brilliant low-cut patent leather shoes, and white-silk socks. The trousers were strikingly cut, as to each leg, after the physical configuration of the domestic pear, and the effect of the whole was measurably enhanced by an opera-hat--one of those tall and striking contraptions that you can shut up by pressing gently but firmly upon the human midriff and looking unconscious, but which is apt to open with a resounding report if you're not careful... I am glad to be able to report that Roland failed to commit the solecism of wearing a red string tie; his tie was a sober black, firmly knotted at the factory. I'm glad too, for the sartorial honour of Radville, that Roland knew how to wear such fixin's: that is to say, with an expression of proud defiance.

After he had departed, stepping high, Sam called me behind the counter to assist in reviving Duncan. We found him leaning upon the counter, his forehead resting upon a mortar, very red in the face and breathing stertorously; and when Sam addressed him, to learn what was the matter, he seemed unable to speak, but choked and beat the air feebly with his hands. Sam concluded he had swallowed something, and was, I think, right; he was plainly half strangled, and only recovered after we had beaten his back severely. Then he refused any explanation, beyond saying that he was subject to such seizures.

After the party the town's excitement simmered down and subsided; we had become moderately accustomed to the presence of Duncan in our midst (strange as this may sound), and for some time nothing happened germane to the fate of the Fortune Hunter.

On his part, he fell into a routine without the least evidence of discontent. He was early to rise and early to work, and rarely left the store save at meal hours and closing-up time. And in the course of our serene days, I began to notice in him an increasing interest in the affairs of the church; he seemed to look forward with a not uneager anticipation to the fixtures of its calendar. He attended with admirable regularity both morning and evening services, on Sunday, the mid-weekly prayer-meeting, and Friday evening choir practice. For in the course of time he had been won over to join the choir, and modestly discovered to our edification a barytone voice, wholly untrained but not unpleasing. Mrs. Rogers, our organist, averred his superiority to Packy Soule, whom he superseded, and was supported in this estimate by the remainder of the choir, with the exception of Roland Barnette, who helped with his reedy tenor. Josie Lockwood sang contralto and Bess Gabriel what we were informed was soprano--only Radville called it a treble. Tracey Tanner pumped the organ and puffed audibly in the pauses--a singular testimony to his devotion to Angie Tuthill, who "just sang" with the others, chiefly because she was Josie's nearest friend.

I remember that, one Sunday night after evening service, Duncan confided to me, quite seriously, "that the church thing was getting to him." He seemed somewhat surprised, to a degree indignant, as if he suspected religion of having taken an advantage of him in some roundabout, underhand way.... He wondered audibly what Harry would think if he could see him now.

He had settled down to a pretty steady correspondence with Kellogg, chiefly on business matters. Kellogg was investigating old Sam's burner, and seemed quite impressed with its possibilities. He had quarrelled with Roland's friend, Burnham, on Duncan's representations, and ordered him out of the offices of L. J. Bartlett & Company, it seemed. Later he opened up negotiations with a corporation known as the Modern Gas Company, I believe, a competitor of Consolidated Petroleum, and in due course representatives of both concerns came to Radville, examined the burner, and retired, non-committal. Then Bartlett sent a requisition for a model, and supplied the funds for making it--thus demonstrating his confidence. Sam never had such a good time in his life as when occupied with that model, and in his elation was inspired to invent two notable improvements on the machine--which were promptly patented. Then the model was despatched, receipt acknowledged, and nothing ensued for three or four months. Radville, which had been watching and wondering with open incredulity and dissatisfaction (this latter because neither Graham nor Duncan would talk about the matter), concluded that the whole business had gone up in smoke, said "I told ye so," and forgot it completely. Roland Barnette, I believe, drove the last nail in the coffin of our expectations that anything would ever

come of it, by writing to Burnham that Duncan's negotiations had failed, and inviting him to renew his offer if he thought it worth while. Presumably he didn't, for Roland received no reply, and told the town so....

I don't remember just how soon it was, but it was shortly after the formation of the firm of Graham and Duncan that the young man received his first invitation to dinner at the Lockwoods'. He accepted, of course, whether he wanted to or not, for there could be no excuse for his refusing a Sunday bid, and the Lockwoods made quite an event of it. The Soules were invited, because they were Araminta Lockwood's brother and sister-in-law, and the Godfreys came over from Westerly to grace the board as representatives of the Lockwood strain. Also Ben Lockwood attended--Blinky's first cousin and senior.

Duncan described the function in a letter to Kellogg as the time of his young life. Undoubtedly it was in certain respects singular in his experience. The entire party walked home from church through a hot August noon, with that air of chastened joy common to a gathering of relations--an atmosphere of festive gloom and funeral baked meats painfully enlivened by exhilarating jests from old Ben, who was a connoisseur of vintages when it came to jokes. Duncan wished fervently, first that he might expire; secondly, and with greater intensity of feeling, that they all might die. Minta Lockwood, he felt, was slowly but expertly greasing him with adulation--as a python prepares its prey before dining (or is it a python?)--and he knew he was presently to be swallowed alive.

They dined protractedly. The meal, consisting of baked chicken, mashed potatoes, boiled onions with cream sauce, boiled beets and green corn, followed by rhubarb pie and ice cream, was served by an independent, bony and red-faced specimen of the "help" genus. The atmosphere was stifling, with the heat of the day thickened by the steam and odour of cooked food. Duncan was seated consciously beside Josie--a circumstance of which, in fact, everyone else seemed tolerantly aware. He writhed in impotent agony, confronted alone by the consciousness he had brought this thing upon himself: it was a part of his punishment.

At the conclusion of the meal, which endured throughout two interminable hours, the elder menfolk withdrew to the garden and the lawn, where they strolled about, sleepy eyes glistening with repletion, until finally they disappeared, to each his doze. The ladies foregathered in the parlour, conversing in undertones, with significant glances and liftings of their eyebrows. Nat was left to Josie, who conducted him to the side porch, out of sight of everybody, and planted herself in the baggy hammock there. She was gay, even brilliant within her limitations, arch, naïve, coquettish, shy, petulant, by turns: animated by a sense of conquest. She supplied the major part of the conversation, chatting volubly on the thousand subjects she didn't understand, the dozen she did. In the most ingenuous manner imaginable she laid herself open to advances, not once, but a score of times; and when he failed to respond according to the code of Radville, had the wit to mask her chagrin, did she feel any: very probably she laid his

lack of responsiveness at the door of his shyness (a quality he was wholly without) and liked him the better for it.

It was on this day that she extracted from him his promise to join the choir; he acceded through apathy alone.

"I don't care whether you can sing or not," she confessed, with a look. "But I do want somebody to walk home with me that ... I like."

"That's a nice way of putting it," Duncan considered without emphasis.

"Roland Barnette's always walked home with me, but I think he's just tiresome."

"Why?" inquired the young man, with some interest.

She averted her head, plucking at the strands of the hammock. "Oh, you know," she said diffidently.

"Oh?" Nat was enlightened. "Then I'm sorry for Roland."

"Why?"

"I can't blame him, you know." He couldn't help this: the time, the place, the girl inspired, indeed incited, one to banality.

"Why?" she persisted.

"Oh, you know." He caught the intonation of her previous words precisely.

She had the grace to blush and hang her head; but he received a thrilling sidelong glance.

"Ah... aren't you awful to talk that way, Mr. Duncan?"

"Yes," he admitted meekly.

"Then you will join the choir?" she pursued, failing to fathom the meaning of that humble acquiescence. Any other boy or man of her acquaintance would have taken her remark as openly provocative.

"Oh, yes," he agreed listlessly.

"I'm so glad..."

He thanked her, but avoided her eye.

"We might's well begin to-night," she suggested presently, with diffident, downcast eyes.

"What--the choir?" He was startled. "Oh, I couldn't without a rehearsal--"

"No, I didn't mean that..."

"No?"

"I mean about Roland." She was paying minute attention to the lace insertion of her skirt. From this circumstance he divined that he was on dangerous ground, but could not, in his stupidity, understand just what made it dangerous.

"About Roland--?"

"Yes; I mean... You know what I mean, Mr. Duncan?"

"I assure you I do not, Miss Lockwood."

"About not walking home with him any more. I don't want to. I wish you'd commence to-night, instead of choir practice night. I'd much rather walk home with you."

"After evening service, you mean?" She nodded. "It'll be a great pleasure."

"Really?" She gave him her eyes now.

"Really," he assured her.

"Ah, I don't believe you mean that!"

"But indeed I do...."

It was not until nearly five o'clock that he was given a chance to escape. He had, even then, to refuse inflexibly an invitation to stay to supper.

Minta Lockwood--an expansive woman, generously convex--almost smothered him with appreciation of his thanks. She held his hand in a large, moist palm and beamed upon him, saying: "Now't you know the way, Mr. Duncan...."

"Yes," Blinky insisted, blinking roguishly, "drop in any time. Take pot luck. We're plain people, Mr. Duncan, but allus glad to see our friends. Drop in any time."

Josie accompanied him to the front gate, where etiquette required him to linger for a parting chat....

"Good-bye." The girl gave him her hand. "I'm real glad you came--at last."

"The pleasure has been all mine," insisted the gallant bromide, fishing the trite phrase desperately from the grey vacuity of his thoughts.

"You won't forget?"

"Forget what?"

"About to-night?"

"Do you imagine I could?..."

Josie returned to the family conclave, to interrupt a symposium on Duncan's qualities. He was unanimously approved, on every point. She took no part in the conversation, but listened, aglow with the pride of triumph, until old Ben chose to observe:

"He seems to've taken a right smart set for Josie."

Then she rose, blushing, and tossed her pretty, pert head. "How you all do talk!" she cried. "I'm not thinking about Mr. Duncan that way." And she left the gathering.

"You might's well begin now as later," pursued her, accompanied by chucklings; and she tossed her head, but wasn't at all displeased, be sure.

Duncan wrote to Kellogg in his room that night after church: "I don't want to sound immodest, but it looks as if you were right, old man: apparently there's nothing to it..."

"Probably I should have stayed on for supper, but I couldn't; I should have choked. As it was, my soul was curdling. Another ten minutes and I should have jumped down on the lawn and run round the house on all fours, yapping and foaming at the mouth, and have wound up by biting old Blinky..

"The worst of it all is, I know I'm ungrateful: I know they mean well. But why is it that people who mean well almost invariably grate upon your sensibilities like the screeching of a slate-pencil?"

"In this case, I suspect it's a case of when Snob meets Snob. A snob, I take it, is a fellow who holds himself your superior because he looks at things in a different way. That counts me a snob in my mental attitude toward the Lockwoods. I don't understand their conception of life--wasn't brought up to understand it. And yet I know they're not a bad sort, though they bore me to death what time I'm not laughing in my sleeve at them. Blinky, for instance, is an old screw, but he can't help that; he was born that way; and aside from the fact that money has made him snobbish toward his neighbours, he's a simple, honest, square-dealing (according to his lights) old Jasper. He's not snobbish toward me, because I've got something he admires but can't understand and never can acquire; but he's a snob of the first water when it comes to somebody like this old prince I'm working for--Graham--and his daughter. And so is Josie....

"But I mustn't say mean things about my future spouse, I presume.... That is the great trouble with your infernal scheme, Harry: it seems

to be working like a charm, and now that I've got something to do I'm not so strong for it as I was. But I gave you my word. ... Only, mind this: if the rules prescribe a perpetual course of Sunday dinners, _en famille_, it's going to break down and turn out a natural-born flivver. There are limits to human endurance, and I'm human, whatever else I am not...."

XVI

WHERE RADVILLE FEARED TO TREAD

Summer slumbered to its close, a drowsy autumn settled upon our valley, in which its traditional peace seemed but the more profound. The skies darkened to an ineffable intensity of blue; the livery of the fields was changed, green giving place to gold; the woodlands and lower slopes of our hills flamed with the scarlet of dying sumach, with the russet and orange and crimson of a foliage making merry against its moribund to-morrows; a drought parched the land, and our little river lessened to a mere trickle of water. The daylight hours became sensibly abbreviated; while they endured they were golden and warm and hazy: faint veils of purple shrouded the distances. Twilight fell early, its air sweet with the tang of dead leaves raked into heaping bonfires by the children of the town. The nights were long and cool, with a hint of frosts to come. Day dissolved into day almost imperceptibly. ...

Josie Lockwood announced that she was going away to school in New York for the winter. Pete Willing took the pledge and kept it almost a month. Will Bigelow secured time-tables and laboriously mapped out his semi-annually contemplated trip to the East: like the others destined never to come off. Tracey Tanner went to work for Graham and Duncan. The _Citizen_ gained eighteen subscribers; four old ones paid up their accounts. Babies were born, people married and died, loved and hated, lived in striving or sloth, accomplished or failed. Roland Barnette paid ostentatious attentions to Bess Gabriel, who tolerated him simply because she didn't much like Josie; but, blighted by Josie's supreme indifference, this budding passion drooped and failed by mutual consent of both parties concerned. Angie Tuthill became more conspicuously than ever the orb of Tracey's universe. Duncan walked home with Josie on two weekday evenings and twice on Sundays, and learned how to play Halma and Parcheesi, as well as how long to linger at the front gate in the gloaming, saying good-night. Eight young women of the town set their caps for him, at one time or another and... set them back again, because he was too blind to see. As a body they united with the female element in Radville in condemning Josie for a heartless flirt, and sympathising with Nat, behind his back, for being so nice and at the same time so easily taken in. Mrs. Lockwood gave a Bridge party which failed as such because Radville knew not Bridge; but everybody went and played progressive euchre, instead. The drug-store prospered in moderation, Sothern and Lee vainly

contesting its conquering campaign. And Duncan grew thoughtful.

One has more time to think unselfishly in Radville than in a great city, where there's rarely more time than enough to think of one's own concerns. And Duncan was making time to think about others--notably, Betty Graham. The girl was, as usual, shy, reticent, reserved; she kept her thoughts to herself, sharing the most intimate not even with old Sam, who would talk; but Duncan divined that she was unhappy. The easier circumstances of the family had provided her with a few simple frocks, adequate clothing which she had gone without for years, and with a sufficiency of wholesome and appetising food: with these, peace of mind should likewise have come to her, and content. But Duncan thought they hadn't. Relieved, on Tracey's engagement, of any share in the store service, she had only the housework for herself and father to occupy her; her associations with the girls of her age were distant and constrained. Usage wears into tradition in the Radvilles of our land; even with the young folks this is so; and in Betty's case, the girl had for so long been "out of it," debarred by her unfortunate circumstances from participation in the pastimes, pleasures and duties of her generation, that by common consent, unspoken but none the less absolute, she remained an outsider. You might say that she relied on her father alone for companionship. Duncan she avoided, unobtrusively but with pains; he consorted with those with whom she had nothing in common, and she would not thrust herself upon him or seem to seek his notice. Her early suspicion and sullen resentment of his intrusion into their affairs had vanished; there remained only a gnawing consciousness that to him she was little or nothing, that his vision ranged above her humble head. She was not the sort to take this ill; she was reasonable enough to believe it natural. But she would not willingly intrude upon his thoughts--who little knew how much she did occupy his leisure moments.

He saw her go and come, a wistful shadow on the borders of his occupations, self-contained, a little timid, but at the same time brave in her own quiet, uncomplaining fashion. And the distant look in those soft eyes he divined to be one of longing for that which she might not possess--the advantages that other girls had, socially and educationally, the pleasures they contrived, the attentions they received, the thousand and one slight things that make existence life for a woman. He saw her drooping insensibly day by day, growing a little paler, a shade more aloof and listless. And he became infinitely concerned for her.

He told himself he had solved the problem of her disease, but its remedy remained beyond his reach. The business was doing very well indeed, but it was still young and must be subjected to as few financial drains as possible; as it ran, there was an income sufficient to board, lodge and clothe the three of them, maintain the credit of the partnership, and now and again admit of a slight but advantageous addition to the stock or fixtures. Things would certainly be better in the course of time, but... Kellogg he would not beg another dollar of, the bank was an equally impossible resource; there wasn't a chance in a hundred that Lockwood would refuse to accommodate the growing concern

with money in reason, but the concern, individually and collectively, would never ask it of him. There remained--?

It came to pass that he left the store early one evening, excusing himself on the plea of some slight indisposition, and lost himself for the space of two hours. I mean to say, that no one knew where he went until long after. When he came home some time after ten he told me he had been for a walk....

He found himself shortly after eight at pause by the gate to the Bohun place. The night was dark and murmurous with a sibilant wind that sent the leaves drifting, softly clashing one with another. At the far end of the straight brick walk, up through the formal grounds, he could just see the glimmer of the stately columns, and, between them, to one side, a little twinkling light. The gate was closed, but he tried it and found it on the latch. He entered and scuffled up the walk, ankle deep in fallen leaves. His footfalls as he crossed the porch sounded startlingly loud by contrast; he even fancied a note of indignation in the cavernous echoes of the knocker on the front door. He waited with a thumping heart, aware that he was venturing where even fools would fear to tread.

An aged negro butler, one of the freed slaves brought from Virginia by the Bohuns, admitted him to the hall and took his card, smothering his own wonderment. For in those days nobody disturbed the silence and the peace of decay of the Bohun mansion save its master. And Duncan had long to wait in the wide, gloomy, musty hall before the servant returned.

"Cunnul Bohun will see yo', suh," he said, and ushered him into the library--a great, high-ceiled, shadowy room illuminated by a single lamp, tenanted by the old colonel alone.

Bohun received the young man standing: he was as courteous beneath his own roof as he was impossible away from it. A quaint old figure, with his grey hair tousled and his dressing-gown draped grotesquely from his shoulders, he stood by the fireplace, Duncan's card between his fingers, and bowed ceremoniously.

"Mr. Duncan, I believe?"

Nat returned the bow. "Yes, sir," he said. "Will you be good enough to pardon this intrusion, Colonel Bohun, and spare me five minutes of your time?"

The colonel nodded. "At your service, sir," he replied, and waited grimly--perhaps not unsuspecting of the nature of his visitor's errand, since he could not have been ignorant of his place in Radville.

Duncan had his own way of getting at things--generally more circuitous than now, though he struck on a tangent sufficiently acute momentarily to puzzle Bohun.

"May I inquire, sir, if you are acquainted with the firm of L.J. Bartlett & Company of New York?"

"I have heard of it, Mr. Duncan, through the newspapers."

"You know that it ranks pretty high, then, I presume?"

"I understand that such is the case."

"Then would you mind doing me the favour of writing to Mr. Henry Kellogg, the junior partner, and asking him about me?"

The colonel stiffened. "May I ask why I should do anything so uncalled-for?"

"Because it isn't uncalled-for, sir. I mean, you won't think so after I've explained."

Bohun inclined his head, searching Nat's face with his keen, bright eyes.

"You see, sir, it's this way: I want you to entrust me with a considerable sum of money, and naturally you wouldn't do that without knowing something about me."

"I incline very much to doubt that I should do it in any event, Mr. Duncan."

"Oh, don't say that. You don't know the circumstances, as yet." Nat jerked his head earnestly at the colonel. "You see, you're said to be one of the richest men in town, and I'm certainly one of the poorest, so of course I turn to you in a case like this."

"In a case like what, Mr. Duncan?" Something in the young man's manner seemed to tickle the colonel; Duncan could have sworn that the eyes were twinkling beneath the savagely knitted brows.

"Well, you must understand I'm in business here in Radville--a partner in a growing and prospering concern--ah--doing--very well, in point of fact."

"Yes?"

"But we haven't any spare capital; in fact, we haven't got any capital worth mentioning. But the business is entirely sound and solvent."

"I congratulate you, sir."

"Thank you very much.... Now I'm interested in a rather singular case: that of a young woman--a girl, I should say--daughter of my partner. She's a good girl and wonderfully sweet and fine, sir. She comes of one of the best families in these parts--"

"On her mother's side," suggested the colonel drily.

"So I'm told, sir. But she's been neglected. Circumstances have been against her. She hasn't had a real chance in life, but she ought to have it, and I'm going to see that she gets it, one way or another."

"You haven't finished?" said the colonel coldly, as he paused for breath and thought.

"Not quite, sir," said Duncan. "Good sign!" he told himself: "he hasn't ordered me thrown out yet." And he hurried on, speaking quickly in the semi-humorous style he had, more arresting to the attention than absolute gravity would have been.

"To come down to cases, sir, she ought to be sent to a good boarding-school for a few years. It'll make a new woman of her--a woman to be proud of. She's got that in her--it only needs to be brought out."

"And before you leave, sir," said the colonel with significant precision, "will you be so kind as to inform me why you think this should interest me?"

"No," said Duncan candidly; "I haven't got the nerve to. But what I wanted to propose was this: that you lend me five hundred dollars to cover the expense of the first year, on condition that I represent the money as coming from the profits of the business and, in short, keep the transaction between ourselves absolutely quiet. If you'll inquire of Mr. Kellogg he'll tell you I can be trusted to keep my word. Furthermore"--he galloped, suspecting that his time was perilously short and desiring to get it all out of his system--"I'll guarantee you repayment within a year, and that you shan't be annoyed this way a second time."

Bohun looked him over from head to foot, bowed in silence, and turning--both had stood throughout this passage--grasped a bell-rope by the chimney, and pulled it violently.

Duncan turned to the door, hat in hand, realising that he had his answer and was lucky to get away with one so mild. Only the emergency could have spurred him to the point of so outrageous an impertinence.

In the desolate fastnesses of that dreary house somewhere a bell tinkled discordantly. A moment later the white-headed darky butler opened the door.

"Suh?" he said.

Colonel Bohun essayed to speak, cleared his throat angrily, and indicated Duncan with a courteous gesture.

"Scipio," said he, "this gentleman will have a glass of wine with me."

"Yassuh!" stammered the negro, overcome with astonishment.

Bohun turned to his guest. "Won't you be seated, Mr. Duncan?" he said. "You have interested me considerably, sir, and I should be glad to discuss the matter with you."

Speechless, Duncan gasped incoherently and moved toward a chair as the servant reappeared with a tray on which was a decanter of sherry and two old-fashioned, thin-stemmed crystal glasses. He placed this on the library table, filled the glasses, and at a sign from Bohun retired.

"Sir," said the colonel, indicating the tray, "to you."

"I--I thank you, sir." Duncan lifted one of the glasses. Bohun took up the one remaining, and held it toward his guest with the gracious gesture of a bygone day.

"I hold it a privilege, sir," he said, "to drink to the only gentleman of spirit it's been my good fortune to meet this many a year."

By way of an aside, it should be mentioned that this was the first and only drink Duncan took while he lived in Radville.

XVII

TRACEY'S TROUBLES

Probably nothing ever gave rise to more comment in Radville than Betty Graham's departure to spend the winter at a boarding-school near Philadelphia. Hardly anyone knew anything about it--in fact, the rumour of it was just being noised about and contemptuously discredited on all hands--when Tracey galloped down Main Street Monday morning with the news that she had left on the early train. He himself had remained in ignorance of the impending event until requested to carry Betty's bag down to the station....

She left under convoy of a certain Mrs. Hamilton, who lived in Philadelphia and had been visiting her cousin, Mrs. Will Bigelow. Duncan had met this lady at a church sociable and, apparently, taken a liking to her; for he prevailed upon her, via Sam Graham and Will Bigelow, to see the girl safely to her school, after superintending the purchase of a suitable wardrobe in Philadelphia.

So Betty was gone--herself, I believe, no less surprised and incredulous than the rest of us.

Radville was at first stupefied, then clamorous; but there was little information to be got out of old Sam. I found him busy working on his new model and much preoccupied with that. When interrogated and given

to understand that I would not be put off, he roused a bit, but beyond being unquestionably a very happy man, seemed himself slightly dazed by the amazing circumstances. I learned from him that Nat had evidently made all his plans in advance, but had withheld his announcement of them until the Saturday prior to that Monday; and then he had fairly whirled Betty and her father off their feet and left them no time to think or to raise objections.

"There's no use at all arguing with that boy," Sam told me, with the fond smile that I was beginning to recognise as the invariable accompaniment of his thoughts about Nat; "when he says a thing must be, it must. When he first came here I told him he was a wonderful business man, and he laughed at me, but now I know he is. Why, he gave Betty a hundred dollars to buy clothes with in Philadelphia, and said he'd have more for her by Christmas, besides paying all the expenses of that school--which must be considerable. I don't see how the store's going to stand the strain--though it's doing splendidly since he came in, splendidly!--but he says it's all right, and so it must be...."

Duncan himself refused to be interviewed. He told everybody who had the impudence to mention the matter to him, that it was Mr. Graham's affair: Mr. Graham was a substantial business man, he said, and if he chose to send his daughter away to school he had a perfect right to do so. I don't believe even Josie Lockwood got more than that out of him, for if she had we would have heard of it; and Josie was unmistakably a little jealous, and undoubtedly questioned Nat.

One direct result of it all was to hasten Josie's own leave-taking. It would never do to let the Grahams eclipse the Lockwoods, you see. Josie had been talking of going to a school in Maryland, but Betty's move to a fashionable centre like Philadelphia made her change her mind; and arrangements were made by which Josie was able to go Betty one better: a young ladies' seminary in New York City itself received Josie. She left us bereaved about a week after Betty vanished from our ken, but promised to be back for the Christmas holidays--an announcement which Duncan received with expressions of chastened joy, as he did her promise to write to him regularly, in return for his covenant to respond promptly.... Betty, by the way, had made no such arrangement; but she wrote twice a week to old Sam, and I understand she never failed to include a message to Nat.

Betty was happy, she protested in every communication, and wholly content. She was getting along. The other girls liked her and she liked them (these statements being made in the order of their relative importance). Lots of them, of course, were frightfully swell (Betty annexed "frightfully" at school, by the by) and had all sorts of clothes; but Betty was perfectly content with her modest outfit, and none of the other girls seemed to mind how she dressed. They were all kind and nice, and she'd never had such a good time.... I quote these expressions from memory of Sam's digest of her letters.

Of Josie I heard less; I know that Graham and Duncan's mail seldom lacked a personal communication to Duncan, postmarked at New York; our

postmaster told me so. But Duncan was reticent, and the Lockwoods said little. I gathered an impression that Josie was not altogether happy in her new surroundings.... One inferred there was a difference between New York and Philadelphia, that one was less friendly and sociable than the other.

Josie kept her promise and came home for Christmas. She was reticent as to her impressions of the New York seminary, but seemed extremely glad to be home, notwithstanding the fact that Nat had apparently contracted no disturbing alliances with the other belles of our village. And Roland remained true--a reliable second string to Josie's bow. Roland was working hard at the bank, with an application that earned Blinky Lockwood's regard and outspoken approbation; and his Christmas raiment proved the sensation of the season. But none of us believed he had any chance against Duncan: Josie's attitude toward the latter was such that we confidently anticipated the announcement of their engagement before she went away again. But it didn't come, for some reason. We bore up under the disappointment bravely, all things considered, sustained by a very secure feeling that the proclamation couldn't be long deferred.

In passing, I should mention that Betty didn't come home once throughout the entire school term. The Christmas and Easter holidays she spent with a girl friend at her Philadelphia home.

Meanwhile, life in our town simmered gently. Things went on much as they might have been expected to. I don't recall much essential to this narrative, in the way of events; and part of the ground I've covered on earlier pages. Duncan continued to make progress: for one thing, I recall that he put in hot soda with whipped cream, which helped a lot to hold the trade regained in the summer from Sothern and Lee. And he bought a new soda fountain, a very magnificent affair, installing it in the early spring. Graham and Duncan's, in short, became a town institution: to it Radville pointed with pride....

He remained reserved, retiring, inconspicuous, and puzzling to our understanding. In his effort (never very successful) to strike off the shackles of modern slang, he fell into a way of speech that bewildered those unable to realise what an abiding sense of humour underlay it--as water runs beneath ice--more, I think, a matter of intonation and significant silences, than a mere play upon words and phrases; which, coupled with an unshakable sobriety of demeanour, furnished us with wonder and some admiration, but no resentment. We liked him pretty well and mostly unanimously: he was a good fellow, if queer; entitled to his idiosyncrasy, if he chose to keep one....

There was a certain night, by way of illustration--a bitter night, along toward the first of January--when trade was dull, as it always is after Christmas, and there was nobody in the store save Nat and Tracey. Each had their task, whatever it may have been, and each was busied with it, but of the two Tracey seemed the more restless. His ample, if low, forehead was decidedly corrugated; his always rosy face owned an added trace of scarlet--a flush of perturbation; his chubby hands were

inexpert, clumsy. He stumbled, fumbled, forgot and (in our homely phrase) flummoxed generally; his mind was elsewhere, and his hands and feet went anywhere but where they should have gone: a condition which eventually excited Duncan's attention.

He broke a long silence in the store. "What's the trouble, Tracey?"

Tracey pulled up with a stare of confusion. "I--I dunno, Mr. Duncan; I was thinkin', I guess."

"Anything gone wrong?"

"Not yet." Niobe would have made the response with a greater show of cheer.

Duncan looked up curiously, struck by the boy's tone. "Somebody been demonstrating that your doll's stuffed with sawdust, Tracey?"

"No-o, but..."

"Well?"

"Say, Mr. Duncan--" Tracey's confusion became terrific.

"Say on, Mr. Tanner."

The interjection diverted Tracey's train of thought to an inconsiderable siding. "I only called you Mr. Duncan," he said, aggrieved, "'cause you're my boss."

"That's a poor excuse, Tracey. You call Mr. Graham 'Sam,' and he's likewise your boss."

"I know. But it's diff'runt."

"I don't see it. Even Nats have their place in the cosmic system, Tracey."

"I dunno what that is, but you ain't like Sam."

"The loss is mine, Tracey. Proceed."

"But, Mr. Duncan..."

"I beg of you, speak to me as to a friend."

Tracey struggled perceptibly. The words, when they came, were blurted.

"Ah... I was only thinkin' 'bout Angie."

"Do you ever think about anything else?"

"No," Tracey admitted honestly, "not much. But I was wonderin'--"

"Well?"

"Are you stuck on Angie, Mr. Duncan?" demanded Tracey desperately.

"Great snakes! I hope not!" Duncan cast an anxious glance about him, and discovered the poster depicting the gentleman in strange attire vainly endeavouring to free his overcoat (I believe it's his overcoat) from the bench upon which a pot of glue has been spilled. He lifted a reverent hand to the card. "Tracey," he said solemnly, "I swear to you that not even that indispensable article of commerce could stick me on Angie."

The boy sighed. "Thank you, Mr. Duncan. I was only worryin' because you and Angie is singin' together in the choir, now Josie Lockwood's gone to school, an'--an' Angie's the purtiest girl in town--and I was 'fraid 't you might like her best, when Josie's away. An' I wanted to ask you to pick out s'mother girl."

Duncan chuckled silently. "Tracey," he said presently, "it strikes me you must be in love with Angie."

The boy gulped. "I--I am."

"And I think she's rather partial to you."

"Do you, really, Mr. Duncan?"

"I do. Do you want to marry her?"

"Gee! I can't hardly wait!... Only," Tracey continued, disconsolate, "it ain't no use, really. She's so purty and swell and old man Tuthill's so rich--not like the Lockwoods, but rich, all the same--an' I'm only the son of the livery-stable man, an' fat an'--all that--an'--"

"Nonsense, Tracey!" Nat interrupted firmly. "If you really want her and will follow the rules I give you, it's a cinch."

"Honest, Mr. Duncan?"

"I guarantee it, Tracey. Listen to me...." And Duncan expounded Kellogg's rules at length, adapting them to Tracey's circumstances, of course; and throughout maintained the gravity of a graven image. "You try, and you'll see if I'm not right," he concluded.

"Gosh! I b'lieve you are!" Tracey cried admiringly. "I'm just going to see how it works."

"Do, if you'd favour me, Tracey."

Tracey was quiet for a time, working with the regularity of a mind relieved. But presently he felt unable to contain himself. Gratitude surged in his bosom, and he had to speak.

"Sa-y, lis'en...."

"Proceed, Tracey."

"Say, Mist--Nat, you've treated me somethin' immense."

"Your mistake, Tracey. I haven't treated anybody since I've been here: I'm on the wagon."

"I mean just now, when we was talkin' 'bout me an' Angie. I'd--I'd like to help you the same way, if I could."

"You would?" Duncan eyed the boy apprehensively, wondering what was coming.

"Yes, indeedy, I would. An' p'rhaps I kin tell you somethin' that will."

"Speak, I beg."

"You--er--you're tryin' to court Josie Lockwood, ain't you?"

"Oh!" said Nat. "So that was it! That's a secret, Tracey," he averred.

"All right. Only, if you are, she's your'n."

"Just how do you figure that out?"

"Oh, I kin tell. She was in here to-night with Roland."

"To-night?"

"Yes, just afore you come home from prayer-meetin'. She was lookin' for you, and when she seen you wasn't here, she wouldn't wait for no soda nor nothin'. Said she had a headache an' was goin' home. Roland went with her, but she didn't want him to. You just missed seein' her."

"Heavens, what a blow!"

"But Roland's takin' her home needn't upset you none."

"Thank you for those kind words, Tracey." Nat sighed and passed a troubled hand across his brow. "You're a true friend."

"I'm tryin' to be, Nat, same's you are to me." Tracey thought this over. "But you ain't foolin' me, are you?" he asked presently. "I mean 'bout bein' a true friend?"

"Why should I?"

"Ah, I dunno. You're so cur'us, sometimes. I ain't never sure whether you mean what you're sayin' or not."

"Oh, don't say that."

"Well, I ain't the only one. Everybody in town says they don't understand you, half the time."

Duncan left his counter and moved over to that at which Tracey was occupied. His face was entirely serious, his manner deeply sympathetic. "Tracey," he said, dropping a hand on the boy's shoulder, "do you know, nothing in life is harder to bear than not to be understood?"

Tracey wrestled with this for a moment, but it was beyond him.

"Then why the hell don't you talk so's folks'll know what it's about?" he demanded heatedly.

"Because... _Hm_." Duncan hesitated, with his enigmatic smile.

"Well, because the rules don't require it."

"What d'you mean by _that_?" Tracey exploded.

Nat couldn't explain, so he countered neatly. "This is one of your Angie... evenings, isn't it, Tracey?"

"Yep, but--"

"Well, you hurry along. I'll close up the shop."

Tracey had slammed on his hat and was struggling into his overcoat almost as soon as the words were out of Nat's mouth.

"Kin I?" he cried excitedly.

"Yes," said Nat, watching the boy turn up his collar and button his overcoat to the throat, "I haven't got the heart to keep you."

"Ah, thanks, Mr. Duncan."

"But, Tracey..."

The boy paused at the door. "What?"

"Remember what I told you. Don't you make too much love. Let Angie do that."

"Gosh, that'll be the hardest rule of all for me!" A shadow clouded Tracey's honest eyes. "But I got to do it that way, anyway. I can't ask her to marry me yit. I can't afford to get married."

"It's a contrary world, Tracey, a contrary world!" sighed Nat in a tone of deepest melancholy.

"What makes you say that? You kin git married's soon's you want to."

"You think so, Tracey?"

"All you got to do's ask Josie--"

"I'm almost afraid you're right."

"Why? Don't you want to git married?"

"Well"--Nat smiled--"no. Don't believe I do. Not just now, at any rate."

"Well, you don't have to if you don't want to.... G'd-night."

"Yes, I do," Nat told Tracey's back. "The rules say so. If the girl asks me, I must."

He grimaced ruefully beneath his wisp of a moustache. "Anyhow, I've got a few months left...."

XVIII

A BARGAIN IS A BARGAIN

So the winter wore away.... And as spring drew nigh upon our valley, Duncan seemed to grow perturbed, even as he had been in the autumn before Betty went away. He was pondering another scheme for the betterment of the condition of those he cared for, and gave it ample consideration before he broached it to old Sam, after swearing him to secrecy.

He had to propose nothing more or less than an abandonment of the old Graham housekeeping quarters above the store and a removal of the _mØnage_ bodily to a vacant house on Beech Street, near the store, which could be rented, partly furnished, at a moderate rate.

To begin with (thus ran his argument) the store itself was growing too small for the volume of business it commanded. More room was needed, both for storage and laboratory purposes, to say nothing of accommodation for Sam's models and work-bench. The latter had already been moved upstairs for the winter, the shed in the backyard being too cold to work in; and the laboratory end of the business was growing at such a rate that it was crowding the prescription counter to the wall--so to speak. You see, there really wasn't a more clever analytical chemist in the northern part of the State than Sam Graham, and now that the drug-store was becoming an influence in the neighbourhood he was receiving commissions from physicians operating in districts as far as fifty miles away. So a room was needed for that branch of the business alone.

Moreover, a separate residence distinctly befitted the dignity of a man who was at once a prominent inventor and one of Radville's leading merchants (vide a "Personal" in the late issue of the Radville _Citizen_), to say nothing of the social position of his daughter--meaning Betty. And the house Duncan had his metaphorical eye upon was large enough to shelter Nat himself in addition to the Graham family. Thus they might pool their living expenses to the economical advantage of each.

Finally, it would be a great and glad surprise for Betty on her homecoming.

Graham fell in with the scheme without a murmur of dubiety or dissent. Whatever Nat proposed in Sam's understanding was right and feasible; and even if it wasn't really so, Nat would make it so.... They engaged the house and moved. Miss Ann Sophronsiba Whitmarsh, a maiden lady of forty-five or thereabouts, popularly known as "Phrony," had been coming in by the day to "do for" old Sam in the rooms above the shop. She was engaged as resident housekeeper for the new establishment, and entered upon her duties with all the discreet joy of one whose maternal instincts have been suppressed throughout her life. She mothered Sam and she mothered Nat and she panted in expectation of the day when she would have Betty to mother. Incidentally, she was one of the best housekeepers in Radville, and cooperated with all her heart with Nat in the task of making a home out of the new house. They arranged and disarranged and rearranged and discarded old furniture and bought new with almost the abandon of a newly married couple fitting out their first home.... It was surprising what they managed to accomplish with it; when they were finished, there wasn't a prettier nor a more home-like residence in all Radville--and Phrony Whitmarsh was Nat's slave, even as Miss Carpenter had been. She gave him all the credit for everything praiseworthy about the place: and with some reason; for, as a matter of fact, he had spared himself not at all in the business of scheming and contriving to make the new home suitable for the reception of Betty Graham....

It's interesting when one has come to my time of life, to sit and speculate on the singular mental blindness of mortal man, such as that which kept Nat unaware of the real, rock-bottom reason why he was working so hard on the Beech Street house. I daresay the young idiot thought his motives as much selfish as anything else--told himself that he wanted a comfortable home--and this was his way of securing one--and all that rot. At all events, he told me as much, quite seriously--seemed to believe it himself; and this, in spite of the fact that Miss Carpenter had done everything imaginable to make him comfortable....

Josie Lockwood came home again for the Easter holidays, but didn't return to finish her term in the New York school. Just why, we never discovered: the Lockwoods furnished us with no really satisfying explanation; they said that Josie didn't like New York, but I've always doubted that, especially since Josie married and insisted on moving straightway to that metropolis. I suspect she didn't get along with

the class of young women with whom she was thrown at school, and I'm pretty certain she was uneasy about Nat all the time she was so far away from him. Anyway, she elected to remain in Radville and keep the young man dancing attendance on her day in and out. Which he did, as in duty bound; he liked the game less and less all the time, but Kellogg held his promise....

It was during this period, between the Easter vacation and the end of the spring school term, that Roland Barnette's animosity toward Duncan became virulent. Looking back, I can recall the symptoms of his waxing hostility--as, for instance, the evening he spent in the _Citizen_ office, poring over back files of our exchanges. That seemed innocent enough at the time, a harmless freak on the part of the young man, and no one paid much attention to it; but it led to great things, in the end, and incidentally did Duncan a service which probably could have been accomplished through no other agency. This, however, is something that Roland doesn't realise to this day; and I'm inclined to doubt if you could ever make him understand it.

Josie, of course, was prompt to oust Angie Tuthill from her place in the choir. After that she sang with Nat on Friday nights as well as Wednesdays and twice per Sunday. Between whiles she was a pretty constant patron of the store. There was no longer the least doubt in the collective mind of the town as to the inclination of Josie's affections. Nat himself gave evidence of his appreciation of the gravity of the situation, managing by some admirable diplomacy to evade the issue until the very last moment. But with the three--Roland, Nat, and Josie--so involved, we sensed a storm below the horizon, and awaited its breaking, if not with avidity, at least with quickened apprehension.

The culmination came the day before Betty was to return--a day late in May, I remember, and a Friday at that.

It began along toward evening. Duncan, alone in the store, was busy behind the prescription counter. The day had been humid, warm and sultry, and the doors and windows were open. The air was bland and still, and sound travelled easily. He could hear the musical clanking of hammers in Badger's smithy, on the next block, the deep-throated _hoot-toot_ of the late afternoon train as it rushed down the valley, sounds of fierce altercation from the home of Pete Willing near by, a boy rattling a stick along palings down on Main Street.... But he did not hear anybody enter the store: absorbed with his task, he thought himself quite alone until a well-kenned voice reached his ear.

"Well!" it said, unctuous with appreciation of the sight of him.
"_Old_ Doctor Duncan!"

He let the pestle fall from his hand and jumped as if he had been stuck with a pin. His jaw dropped and his eyes bulged. "Great Scott!" he cried; and in a twinkling was round the counter, throwing himself into the arms of a man whom he hailed ecstatically: "Harry, by all that's wonderful!" He fairly danced with delight. "Henry Kellogg, Esquire!"

he cried, holding him at arms' length and looking him over. "What in thunderation are you doing here?"

Kellogg freed himself, only to seize both Nat's hands and squeeze them violently. "Wanted to see you," he replied, beaming. "On my way to Cincinnati on business--thought I'd drop off for a night and size you up. My, but it's good to get a look at you! How are you?"

"Me? Look at me--picture of health. Harry, you've made a new man of me." Duncan pranced round his friend in a mild frenzy. "No booze--no smokes--no swears--work! I feel like a two-year-old: I could do a Marathon without turning a hair. Watch me kick up my heels and neigh!" He paused for breath. "And you?"

"Fine as silk--but you've got it on me, Nat, physically. You're a sight to heal the blind."

"And listen!" Nat crowed: "I'm a business man. Didn't you believe it? Pipe my shop!"

Kellogg checked to obey the admonition of Duncan's gesticulations, and took a long look round the store. "Gad!" said he. "I'm blown if it isn't true! It was hard to credit your letters. But it's great, old man. I congratulate you, with all my heart."

"Just wait and I'll tell you all about it. But first tell me how long you're going to be here."

"Well, I plan to hang around with you a couple of days. My business in the West isn't pressing."

"Good!"

"Which is the least worst hotel?"

"There ain't no such thing in the whole giddy town.... No, none of that hotel stuff, now I I'm going to put you up--and I'll do it in style, too. I wrote you about taking a new place for the Grahams?"

"Yes, and I'm mighty keen to meet 'em. The girl here?"

"Betty? No; she's coming home to-morrow. But Graham himself is upstairs in the laboratory. Take you up in a minute, but not before I've had a good look at you."

Kellogg found himself a chair. "Well," he inquired, twinkling, "how's the scheme working out? Are you really living up to all the rules?"

"Every singletary one."

"You have got a strong constitution.... Even prayer-meetings?"

"The church thing? Honest, Harry, I own

it."

"Bully for you, Nat. But how does it work? Was I right?"

"I should say you were. It's so easy it's a shame to do it. If this thing ever should get into the papers there'd be a swarm of city men lighting out for the Rube centres so thick you wouldn't be able to see the sky."

"I knew it! Trust your Uncle Harry." Kellogg waited a time for further particulars, but Duncan seemed stuck; his transports of the few minutes just gone were sensibly abated; and the sidelong look he gave Kellogg was both uneasy and rueful--apprehensive, indeed. So Kellogg had to pump for news. "And you've made a strong play for the fond affections of Lockwood's daughter?"

"Certainly not!"

"Not--?"

"You forget your rules." Nat grinned, whimsical. "I let her to make a play for me."

"Of course. My mistake.... But how has it worked?"

"Oh! immense." Duncan's tone, however, was wholly destitute of enthusiasm. He stuck his hands in his trousers' pockets and half turned away from his friend, looking out of the window.

Kellogg smiled secretly. "You mean you've won her already?"

"Oh, there's nothing to it," said Duncan, shaking his head and meaning just the exact opposite of what his words conveyed, for of such is our modern slang.

"Then you're engaged?" Kellogg had understood perfectly, you see.

"No, not _yet_. I've got two months left--almost."

"So you have. And since she's so strong for you, there's no hurry: let her take her time."

"I only wish she would." Duncan removed one hand from the pocket the better to tug at his moustache. "It's got beyond that--to the point where I have to keep dodging her."

"You don't mean it! That's splendid." Kellogg got up and slapped Nat's shoulder heartily. "But don't overdo the dodging. She might get her back up."

"Not she. She'd eat out of my hand, if I'd let her. You don't understand."

"What's the matter, then? Aren't you strong for her?"

"I wish I were."

"But why? Is there another----?"

"No." Nat shook his head, honestly believing he was telling the truth.

"Only ... I don't look at things the way I did once."

"Just what do you mean by that?"

Nat, squaring himself to face Kellogg, was very serious, now, and troubled. "See here, Harry," he said: "do you really want me to carry out the rest of the agreement?"

"Most certainly I do. Why not?"

"Because I'm pretty well fixed here. The business is making good--and so am I. It won't be long before I can pay you back, with interest, as we agreed, without having to marry that poor girl and ... and draw on her money to make good to you."

"You want to go back on our agreement?" demanded Kellogg, with a show of disappointment and disgust.

"Yes and no. I won't break faith with you, if you insist, but I'd give a lot if you'd let me off--let me pay back what you advanced and cry quits.... When you outlined this scheme I was down and three times out--willing to take a chance at anything, no matter how contemptible. Now... well, it's different."

"Good heavens! You don't mean you'd be willing to live here?"

Nat smiled, but not mirthfully. "I don't know," he hesitated; "I'm afraid I'm beginning to like it."

"You, Nat?" Kellogg's amazement was unfeigned. "You, ready to spend your life here slaving away in this measly store?"

Duncan grunted indignantly. "Hold on, now. Don't you call this a measly store. There isn't a more complete drug-store in the State!"

"Do you hear that?" Kellogg appealed vehemently to the universe at large. "Is it possible that this is Nat Duncan, the fellow who hated work so hard he couldn't earn a living?... Gad, I believe I've arrived just in time!"

"In time for what?"

"To save you from yourself, old man. Here's the heiress you came here to cop out, ready and anxious, everything else coming your way and ... and you're more than half inclined to back out.... You make me tired."

"I suppose I must. But I can't help it. I can't make you see how the thing looks to me. You know--I've written you all about everything--what this place has meant to me. Until I came here I never realised it was in me to make good at anything. But here I have; I'm doing so well that I'd actually have some self-respect if I wasn't bound to play this low-down trick on Josie Lockwood. I've worked and succeeded and been of some service to people who were worth it----"

"Who? Sam Graham?"

"He and his daughter----"

"Oh, his daughter!"

"Now get that foolish idea out of your head; there's nothing in it. Betty's just a simple, sweet little girl, who's had a pretty hard time and never a real chance in life--until I managed to give it to her. And I'd feel pretty good about that if ... Oh, there's no use talking to you!"

"No; go on; you're very entertaining." Kellogg laughed mockingly.

"Well, I have tried to keep to the terms of our understanding; I singled out this Lockwood girl and worked all the degrees--didn't say much, you know--no love-making--just let her catch me looking sadly at her once in a while..."

"That's the way to work it."

"Yes, that's the way," Nat assented gloomily. "But the longer I keep it up the meaner I feel and... I wish you'd agree to call it off. ... These Rubes at first struck me as being nothing but a lot of jay freaks, but when I got to know them I realised they were just as human as we are. I like them now and... on the level, I'm getting kind of stuck on church.... As for work, why, I eat it up!"

Kellogg laughed with delight "Nat," he cried, "my poor crazy friend, listen to me: This working and church-going and helping old Graham is all very noble and fine, and I'm glad you've done it. This drug-store is a monument to the business ability that I always knew was latent in you. And clean living hasn't done you any harm.... But now you're due to come down to earth. This place pays you a neat profit. Well and good! That's all it'll ever do. It's new to you now and you like the novelty and you're having the time of your life finding out you're good for something. But pretty soon it'll begin to stale on you, and before long you'll find yourself hating it and the town--and then you'll be back where you started. Now, I'm going to hold you to our bargain for your own sake. If you're stuck on the town and the work you can keep right on just as well after you're married; but when you do begin to tire of it, you'll want that fortune to fall back on and do what you like with. Don't let this chance slip--not on your life!"

"But," Nat argued feebly, "think of the injustice to the girl. From

the way I've behaved since I struck this burg she thinks I'm closely related to the saints."

"Very well, then; I'll concede a point. If you really think you're taking a mean advantage of her, when she proposes to you tell her all about yourself--just the sort of a chap you've been. You needn't mention our agreement, however. Then if she wants to drop you, I'll have nothing to say."

"Thank you for nothing," said Duncan bitterly. "A bargain's a bargain. I gave you my word of honour I'd go through with this thing, and I'll stick to it. But I tell you now, I don't like it."

"Oh, I know how you feel, Nat. But I know that some day you'll come to me and say: 'Harry, if you had let me back out, I'd never have forgiven you.'"

"All right," said Nat impatiently. "I presume you know best."

"You can bet I do. And now I'd like to meet old Graham."

"I'll take you right up--no, I can't. Here comes a customer. But you just go through that door and upstairs; he'll be in the laboratory--the front room--and he knows all about you. I'll join you just as soon as Tracey gets back."

XIX

PROVING THE PERSPICUITY OF MR. KELLOGG

A customer came and went, and then Nat noticed that twilight was beginning to darken the store. Though the hour wasn't late and the evenings were long at that season, the windows faced the east, and there were huge, overshadowing elms outside--just then heavy with luxuriant foliage; so dusk was always early in the room.

It was one of Nat's axioms that a store, to be successful, should be always brilliantly lighted. It was a bit expensive, perhaps, but in the long run it paid. For that reason he installed electric light as soon as he felt the business could afford it.

Now he moved to the windows and switched on the bulbs behind the huge glass jars filled with tinted water. Returning, he was about to connect up the remainder of the illuminating system, when Josie, entering, stayed him. Later he was glad of this.

"Nat..."

He knew that voice. "Why, Josie!" he exclaimed in surprise, swinging

about to discover her standing on the threshold--very dainty and fetching, indeed, in one of the summery frocks she had brought back from New York.

She moved over to him, holding out her hand. He took it with disguised reluctance. "Where's Tracey?" she asked with a look that first held his eyes, then reviewed the store.

"This is his afternoon off," Nat reminded her.

"Then you're all alone?" she deduced archly.

"Oh, quite...."

"I'm so glad." She sighed and dropped into a chair by the soda-water counter. "I wanted to see you--to talk to you alone."

He bit his lip in his annoyance, shivering with a presentiment. "What about, Josie?"

"About Wednesday night--after prayer meeting. Why didn't you wait for me?"

"Why--ah--I had to get back to the store, you know--there were some cheques to be made out and sent off, and I'd forgotten them. Besides," he added on inspiration, "you were talking with Roland and I didn't want to interrupt you."

"So you left me to go home with him?"

"Why, what else--"

"You're making me awful' unhappy." Her voice trembled.

"_I_, Josie?"

"Yes. You knew I didn't want to walk home with Roland."

"How could I know that?"

"I should think you ought to know it, Nat, unless you're blind. Besides, I told you once."

"True," he fenced desperately, "but that was a long time ago; and how could I be sure you hadn't changed your mind? Besides, you know, I mustn't monopolise you. If I do...."

"Well?" she inquired sweetly as he paused on the lip of a break.

"Why, if I do--ah--"

"If you're afraid people will talk about us, seeing us so much together, you needn't worry. They're doing that now."

"Why, Josie!"

"Yes, they are. We've been going together so long, and then suddenly you don't seem to care about--care to be alone with me at all. This is the first chance I've had to talk to you, when there wasn't somebody else round, for I don't know how long. And even now you don't seem glad to see me."

"You should _know_ I am...."

"You don't act like it."

"It's so unexpected," he muttered wretchedly.

"You didn't really think I wanted Roland Barnette to go home with me Wednesday night, did you, Nat?"

"It seemed so, but ... that's all right. Why shouldn't you?"

She turned to him, trembling a little. "Must I tell you, Nat?"

"O, no!" he cried in dismay. "Please don't----!"

"I see I must," she persisted. "You're so blind. It----"

"Josie, don't say anything you'll be sorry for," he entreated wildly.

"I can't help it: I've got to. It was--it was because I wanted to be with you.... There!" she gasped, frightened by her own forwardness.

"Now I've said it!"

Duncan grasped frantically at straws. "But you don't really mean it, Josie: you know you don't," he floundered. "You're just saying that because you--you have such a kind heart and--ah--don't want to hurt me--ah--because----"

She stemmed the flood of his protestations with a hand on his arm.

"Nat," she said gently, looking up into his face, "would it make you happy to know I really meant it?"

"Why--ah--why shouldn't it, Josie?"

"Then please believe me, when I say it."

"But I do believe it. I..." He stammered and fell still.

"Because I do like you, Nat, very much, and--and it's very hard for me to know that folks think I'm pursuing you and that you're trying to avoid me."

"Josie!" he exclaimed reproachfully.

"Well, that's the way it looks," she affirmed plaintively. "You don't want it to, do you?"

"Why, no; of course I don't."

"Then why don't you stop it?" She watched his face, her manner coy and yielding. "Nat," she said in a softer voice, "if you like me as well as I like you----"

He moved away a pace or two. "Ah, child!" he said, with a feeling that the term was not misapplied, somehow, "you don't know what you're saying."

"Yes, I do." She pouted. "I don't believe you... care anything about me."

"Oh, Josie, please----"

"Well, anyway, you've never told me so." She turned an indignant shoulder to him.

"How could I?"

"Why couldn't you?"

"But don't you see that I shouldn't, Josie?" He turned back to her side, looked down at her, pleaded his defence with the fire of desperation.

"Just think: you are an only daughter." Just what this had to do with the case was not plain even to him. "An only daughter," he repeated-- "ah--not only your father's only daughter, but your mother's only daughter. Your father--ah--is my friend. How unfair it would be to him."

But the girl interrupted with decision. "But papa wants you to... He told me so."

He could only pretend not to understand. "But consider, Josie: you are rich, an heiress: I'm a poor man. Would you like it to be said I was after your money?"

"No one would dare say such a thing," she asserted with profound conviction.

"Oh, yes, they would. You don't know the world as I do. And for all you know, they might be right. How do you know that-----"

"Nat!" A catch in her voice stopped him. "Don't say such horrid things! I could tell: a woman always can. I know you would be incapable of such a thing. Papa knows it, too. No one has ever got ahead of papa, and _he_ says you are a fine, steady, Christian man, and he would rather see me your wife than any-----"

"Josie!"

The interjection was so imperative that she was silenced. "Why, what, Nat?" she asked, rising.

"The time has come," he declared; "you must know the truth."

"Oh, Nat!"

"I'm not what you think me," he continued, dramatic.

"Oh, Nat!"

"Nor what your father thinks me, nor what anybody else in this town thinks me. I'm not a regular Christian--it's all a bluff: I didn't know anything about a church till I came here. I smoke and I drink and I swear and I gamble, and I only cut them all out in order to trick you into caring for me!"

"Oh, Nat, I don't believe it."

"Alas, Josie!" he protested violently, "it's true, only too true!"

"But you did it to win my love, Nat?"

"Ye-es." He saw suddenly that he had made a fatal mistake.

"Then, Nat, I will be your wife in spite of all!"

He found himself suddenly caught about the neck by the girl's arms. His head was drawn down until her cheek caressed his and he felt her lips warm upon his own.

"Josie!" he gasped.

"Nat, my darling!"

With a supreme effort he pulled himself together and embraced the girl.

"Josie," he said earnestly, "I--I'm going to try to be a good husband to you.... And that," he concluded, sotto voce, "wasn't in the agreement!"

She held him to her passionately. "Dearest, I'm so glad!"

"It makes me very happy to know you are, Josie," he murmured miserably. And to himself, while still she trembled in his embrace: "What a cur you are!... But I won't renege now; I'll play my hand out on the square, with her...."

Upon this tableau there came a sudden intrusion. The back door opened and Graham came in, Kellogg at his heels. It was the voice of the latter that told the two they were discovered: a hearty "Hello! What's

this?" that rang in Nat's ears like the trump of doom.

In a flash the girl disengaged herself, and they were a yard apart by the time that Graham, blundering in his surprise, managed to turn on the lights at the switchboard. But even in the full glare of them he seemed unable to credit his sight.

"Why, Nat!" he quavered, coming out toward the guilty pair. "Why, Nat...!"

Duncan took a long breath and Josie's hand at one and the same time. "Mr. Graham," he said coolly, "I'm glad you're the first to know it. Josie has just ask--agreed to be my wife."

Old Sam recovered sufficiently to take the girl's hand and pat it. "I'm mighty glad, my dear," he told her. "I congratulate you both with all my heart."

"And so will I, when I have the right," Kellogg added, smiling.

"Oh, I forgot." Nat hastened to remedy his oversight. "Josie, this is my dearest friend, Mr. Kellogg; Harry, this is Miss Lockwood."

Josie gave Kellogg her hand. "I--I," she giggled--"I'm pleased to meet you, I'm sure."

"I'm charmed. I've heard a great deal of you, Miss Lockwood, from Nat's letters, and I shall hope to know you much better before long."

"It's awful' nice of you to say so, Mr. Kellogg."

"And, Nat, old man!" Kellogg threw an arm round Duncan's shoulder. "I congratulate you! You're a lucky dog!"

"I'm a dog, all right," said Nat glumly.

"But we mustn't disturb these young people, Mr. Kellogg," Graham broke in nervously.

"They'll--they'll have a lot to say to one another, I'm sure; so we'll just run along. I'm taking Mr. Kellogg up to the house, Nat. You'll follow us as soon as you can, won't you?"

"Yes--sure."

"I've got some news for you, too, that'll make you happy."

"Never mind about that; it'll keep till supper, Mr. Graham." Kellogg laughed, taking the old man's arm. "Good-bye, both of you--good-bye for a little while."

"Good-bye..."

"Wasn't that terrible!" Josie turned back to Nat when they were alone. "I think it was real mean of Mr. Graham to turn on all the lights that way," she simpered. "Somebody else might've seen."

"Yes," agreed the young man, half distracted; "but of course I daren't turn them off again."

"Never mind. We can wait." Josie blushed.

"I'll just sit here and wait--we can talk till Tracey comes, and then you can walk home with me."

"Yes, that'll be nice," he agreed, but without absolute ecstasy.

Fortunately for him, in his temper of that moment, Pete Willing reeled into the shop, two-thirds drunk, with his face smeared with blood from a cut on his forehead.

"Scuse me," he muttered huskily. "Kin I see you a minute, Doc?"

He reeled and almost fell--would have fallen had not Duncan caught his arm and guided him to a chair. "Great Scott, Pete!" he cried. "What's happened to you?"

"M' wife..." Pete explained thickly.

XX

ROLAND SHOWS HIS HAND

"Perhaps I'd better go." Josie, fluttering with alarm and a little pale, went quickly to the door.

Duncan followed her a pace or two. "I can't leave just now," he stammered.

"I don't mind one bit. I don't want to be in the way. I'll telephone from home.... Good-night, dearest!" On tiptoes she drew his face down to hers and kissed him. "I'm so happy..."

Half dazed, Nat stared after her until her lightly moving figure merged with the shadows beneath the trees and was lost. Then, with a sigh, he turned back to Pete.

The sheriff had undoubtedly suffered at the hands of that militant person, Mrs. Willing. "Great Scott!" Duncan exclaimed as he examined the two-inch gash in his head. "That's a bird, Pete."

"M' wife done it," Willing muttered huskily. "Sh' threw side 'r th' house at me, I think."

"Wife, eh?" The coincidence smote Duncan with redoubled force. He shivered "Well, she certainly gave it to you good." He went behind the counter to prepare a dressing for the wound, which, if wide, was neither deep nor serious and gave him little concern for Pete.

The latter ruminated on the event, breathing stertorously, while Duncan was fixing up a wash of peroxide. "She'll kill me some day," he announced suddenly, with intense conviction in his tone.

"Oh, don't say that...."

Opposition roused Pete to a fury of assertion. "Yes, she will, sure!" he bawled. Then his emotion quieted. "But I'd 'bout as soon be dead's live with her, anyway."

"_Um_." Nat got some absorbent cotton and adhesive plaster. "Been drinking again, hadn't you?"

"Yesh," Pete admitted with a leer of drunken cunning. "But she druv me to it." He was quiet for a moment. "Mish'r Duncan," he volunteered cheerfully, "you ain't got _no_ idee how lucky y'are y'aint married."

"Is that so?" Nat returned with the dressings.

"No idee'tall." Pete surrendered his head to Nat's ministrations. "'Nd I hope y' won't never have."

"But I'm going to be married, Pete."

The sheriff assimilated this information and became abruptly intractable. He jerked his head away and swung round in his chair to argue the matter.

"Oh, no!" he expostulated. "Don't, Mish'r Duncan. Don't never do it. Take warnin' from me."

"But I'm engaged, Pete."

"Maksh no diff'runsh--break it off." His voice rose to a howl of alarm. "F'r Gaw's sake, break it off!--now, before it's too late! Do anythin' rather'n that: drink--lie--steal--murder--c'mit suicide--don't care what--only _keep single!_" "Here," said Duncan, laughing, "sit back there and let me'tend to your head." He began to wash the wound with the peroxide. "There: that'll sting a bit, but not long.... But suppose, Pete, I'd get a lot of money by marrying?"

"No matter how mush y'get, 'tain't enough!"

"I'm inclined to think you're about right, Pete."

"You bet I'm right. I'm married 'nd _I know_."

Nat finished dressing the cut, smoothed down the ends of the adhesive tape, and stood back. "That's all right, now. Go home, wash your face, and sleep it off. Let me see you sober in the morning."

"Huh!" Pete chuckled derisively. "Ain't goin' home t'night."

"You've got to get some sleep: that's the only way for you to straighten up."

"Well," agreed Pete, rising, "then I'll go over to the barn 'nd sleep with the horse."

"Aren't you afraid he'll step on you?" asked Nat, amused.

"Maybe he will," Pete replied fairly, "but I'd ruther risk that 'n m' wife."

He swerved and lurched toward the door. "Thanks, doc, 'nd g'night," he mumbled, and incontinently collided with Roland Barnette.

Roland was working under a full head of steam, apparently; his naturally sanguine complexion was several shades darker than the normal, and he was seething with repressed emotion--excitement, anticipated triumph, jealousy, envy and hatred: all centring upon the hapless head of Nat Duncan. Plunging along with his head down, his thoughts wholly preoccupied with his grievance and its remedy, he bumped into Willing and cannoned off, recognising him with an angry growl. The result of this was to stay Pete's departure; he grasped the frame of the door and steadied himself, glaring round at the aggressor.

"Lo, Roland," he said, focussing his vision. "Whash masser?"

Roland disregarded him entirely. "Say, you!" he snorted, catching sight of Nat. "I want to see you."

"Oh?" Nat drawled exasperatingly. He had never had much use for Roland, and now with hidden joy he read the signs of passion on the boy's inflamed countenance. Happy he would be, thought Nat, if Roland were to be delivered into his hands that night. He owed the world a grudge, just then, and needed nothing more than an object to wreak his vengeance upon. "Well, I'll stake you to a good long look," he added sweetly.

"Ah-h! don't you try to be so funny; you might get hurt."

Pete seemed to be suddenly electrified by Roland's matter. "Here!" he interposed. "Whajuh mean by that?" And relinquishing his grasp on the door, he reeled between the two and thrust his face close to Roland's. "Who're you talkin' to, an'way?" he demanded, truculent.

Nat stepped forward quickly and grabbed Pete's arm. "That's all right, Pete," he soothed him. "Don't get nervous. Roly won't hurt anybody."

The diminutive stung Roland to exasperation. "Why, damn you----!" he screamed, and promptly became inarticulate with rage.

"Ah! ah! ah!" Nat wagged a reproving forefinger. "Naughty word, Roly! Careful, or you'll sour your chewing gum."

"Now, say! Do you think----"

At this juncture Pete drowned his words with an incoherent roar, having apparently reached the conclusion that the time had now arrived when it would be his duty and pleasure to eat Roland alive. Nat saved the young man by the barest inch; he grappled with Pete and drew himself aside just in time.

"Steady, Pete!" he said quietly. "Steady, old man. Let Roland alone."

"Awrh, I ain't 'fraid of him!" spluttered Pete.

"Neither am I. Get out, won't you, and leave him to me."

"Aw'right." Pete became more calm. "I'll leave him 'lone, but all the same I wan' it 'stinctly un'erstood I kin lick any man in town 'ceptin' m' wife. G'night, everybody."

He gathered himself together and by a supreme effort lunged through the door and into the deepening dusk.

"Well, Roly?" Nat asked, turning back.

His ironic calm gave Roland pause. For a moment he lost his bearings and stammered in confusion. "I come in to tell you that me and you's apt to have trouble," he concluded.

"Oh? And are you thinking of starting it?"

"You bet I'll start it, and I'll start it damn' quick if you don't leave Josie Lockwood alone."

"So that's the trouble, is it?" commented Nat thoughtfully.

"Yes, that's the trouble. From now on I want you to let her alone, and you'll do it, too, if you know what's best for you."

A suggestion of menace in his manner, unconnected with any hint of physical correction, caught Nat's attention. He frowned over it.

"Just what do you mean by this line of talk?" he inquired blandly, stepping nearer.

"I'll tell you what I mean." Roland clenched both fists and thrust his chin out pugnaciously. "I'd been a-goin' steady with Josie Lockwood for more'n a year before you come here and thought that, on account of her money, you could sneak in and cut me out...."

"Was her money the reason you were after her, Roly?"

"What----?" The question brought Roland momentarily up in the wind. "Tain't none of your business if it was!" he snapped, recovering. "But here's what I'm gettin' at." He tapped his breast-pocket with a sneer of bucolic triumph. "Just about ten months ago," he continued meaningly, "they was a cashier skipped out of the Longacre National Bank in Noo Yawk, and they ain't got no track of him yet."

So this was why Roland had been so assiduous a student of the back files in the Citizen office!

"Indeed?"

"Yes, indeed. I had my suspicions all along, but didn't say nothin', but just to-day I got a description of him, and the description just fits, Mr. Mortimer Henry."

"Just fits Mr. Mortimer Henry? But what has that----?"

"Ah, don't you try to seem too darn' innocent," Roland snarled. "You can't fool me!"

A light dawned upon Nat, and laughter flooded his being, although outwardly he remained imperturbable--merely mildly curious. But his fingers were itching.

"So you think I'm the absconding cashier, eh, Roly?"

"You keep away from Josie 'r you'll find out what I think." Nat's placidity deceived Roland, who drew the wholly erroneous conclusion that he had succeeded in frightening his rival, and consequently dared a few lengths further in his tirade. "Why, if I was to go to Mr. Lockwood and tell him you're Mortimer Henry, alias Nat Duncan----"

Duncan's temper suddenly snapped like a taut violin string.

"That will do," he said icily. "That will be all for this evening, thanks."

"Ah... Are you going to quit chasin' after Josie?"

"I'll begin chasing after you if you don't clear out of here."

"You better agree----"

[Illustration: "Betty!"]

Just there the storm burst. Ten seconds later Roland, with a confused impression of having been kicked by a mule, picked himself up out of the dust in the middle of the street and stared stupidly back at the store. Nat was waiting in the doorway for a renewal of hostilities, if any such there were to be. Seeing, however, that Roland had apparently sated his appetite for personal conflict, he picked up a dark object at his feet and held it out.

"Here's your hat, Roly," he called.

Roland spat out a mouthful of dust and swore beneath his breath. "Throw it out here," he replied prudently.

Tossing him the hat, Nat turned contemptuously. "Come in again, any time you want to apologise," he shouted over his shoulder, as an afterthought.

He paused in the middle of the store and felt of his necktie. It proved to be a little out of place, but otherwise he was as immaculate as was his wont. He reviewed the encounter and laughed quietly.

"There's no cure for a fool," he mused....

The telephone bell roused him from his reverie. He went over to the instrument, sat down, and put the receiver to his ear.

"Hello?" he said.... "Oh, hello, Josie! ... What's that?... That's right, but I'm not used to it yet, you know.... Well, I'll try again. Now--ready?"

He schooled his voice to a key of heartrending sentiment: "Hello, darling.... How's that? ... Told your father? Told him what?... Oh, about the engagement! Was he angry? ... Oh, he wasn't, eh? What did he say? ... Wasn't that nice of him!..."

Conscious of a slight noise in the store he looked up. A young woman had just entered. She paused just inside the door, smiling at him a little timidly.

Without another word to his fiancée Nat put down the telephone and hooked up the receiver.

"Betty!" he cried wonderingly.

XXI

AS OTHERS SAW HIM

If Nat's cry of recognition had been wondering, it was no less one of

delight. The surprise he felt was perfectly natural; Betty wasn't to have returned until the morrow, and was therefore the last person he had expected to see when he looked up from the telephone desk. But it was the change in the girl that most stirred him: the change he had prophesied, planned for, anticipated eagerly throughout the long seven months of her absence; to have his expectations so wonderfully fulfilled, and more than fulfilled, pleased him beyond expression. And it's curious to speculate upon the fact that he fancied his greatest pleasure came from the knowledge that old Sam would be so overjoyed....

It was really only a paraphrase of the old story of the grub and the butterfly. The little, starveling drudge who had found him in the store, that first day, had completely vanished; it was as if she had never been. In her place he discovered a girl all grace and loveliness, her slender figure ripening into gracious womanhood; a girl of mind and heart and understanding, all fire and tenderness; demure, intelligent, with a pretty pose of independence and sureness of herself moderated by modesty and reserve. Her travelling dress of sober colouring and severe lines became her bewitchingly. Beneath the brim of her dainty hat, with veil thrown back, her dark hair waved back, glossy with the sheen of perfect well-being, from a face serenely charming--the more so for her slightly deepened flush; and the eyes that shone into Nat's danced with the light of enjoyment, bred of his supreme astonishment....

"Nat, I'm so glad to see you again!"

He was speechless.

She laughed, put down her suit-case, and moved toward him, offering him both her hands. He took them, stammering.

"It's such a surprise, Betty----!"

"I knew it would be. I just couldn't wait, Nat, when I found I could get here by the night train instead of tomorrow morning. I haven't been home, you know, but I couldn't resist the temptation to stop in here and see--what the store looked like after all these months. Besides, I thought that you or father----" Her eyes fell and she faltered, withdrawing her hands.

By now he had himself in hand. "Why," he laughed, "you nearly took my breath away. Even now I can hardly believe it..."

"Believe what, Nat?" she asked quickly.

"That you're the same little Betty Graham. I never saw such a change."

"It's a change for the better, isn't it, Nat?" she asked with a smile half wistful.

"I should think it was. It's just marvellous!"

"Did I seem so very awful, then?"

"Nonsense. You know you didn't, only, now..."

"Then you think father will be pleased?"

"If he isn't, I'm blind!"

She looked away, embarrassed, and touched by his interest and his feeling. "And does it make you a little proud, Nat?"

"Proud!" he exclaimed blankly.

"Because you know you've done it all. If there's any improvement in Betty Graham to-day, it's because of you. If it hadn't been for you----"

"Never in the world; you don't know what you're talking about, Betty. Nobody but yourself could have brought about this change. It had to be in you before it could come out. You know that."

She shook her head very decidedly, seating herself on one of the chairs by the soda-fountain. "Oh, no," she contradicted calmly and sincerely.

"Why, Nat, don't you suppose I have any memory? You began making me a better girl the very first day we met here in the store, by the things you said to me. And ever since I've been watching you, while you were making life a Heaven for father and me, and thinking that if I were a man I'd try to be as near like you as I could."

"Oh, don't say that," he pleaded wretchedly.

"It's true.... And when you sent me away to school I promised myself I'd try to repay you for the sacrifice you must be making for me; that I'd follow your example as nearly as ever I could; that I'd work hard and try to treat people the way you do--kindly, Nat, and considerately, and bravely and tenderly and honestly----"

He dropped into a chair near her and buried his head in his hands.

"Don't!" he begged huskily. "Please, Betty, don't!"

But she wouldn't stop, little guessing how she was racking his heart in her innocent desire to make him understand how deeply she appreciated all he had done for her. "And, O Nat, it's worked so wonderfully! It's made all the girls at school like me, and it's made me understand and like everybody else better; and now, what's ten thousand times the best of all, you notice an improvement the minute you see me! And I--I never was so happy in all my life." She bent forward and took one of his hands, patting it softly. "Nat, I think you're the very best man in the whole world!"

"Don't!" he groaned. "Don't, for Heaven's sake!"

"Oh, I know, Nat--I know you don't like me to say this, but I must, just the same, tell you the truth about yourself. It's so splendid to

live the life you do. You're all unconscious of it, but I want you to realise it and know that I do, too. You've made everybody love you and..."

But confusion silenced her, and she gently replaced his hand. For several moments neither spoke. Then Nat broke the tension with a short, hard laugh.

"That's right," he said inscrutably; "that was the idea...."

"Nat, what do you mean?"

He turned to her. "Betty, does it make you--feel that way toward me?"

She coloured divinely. "Why, Nat, of course ... Why, everyone..."

"That's why I came here, Betty," he pursued, blind to her embarrassment. "I came here with the idea... of getting married...."

He was staring gloomily at the floor and could not see the light that dawned upon the girl's face. Absorbed in the struggle with his conscience he had no least suspicion of how his words were affecting her. He knew only that he must somehow make a confession to her, that to own her regard and gratitude on the terms that then existed between them was utterly intolerable.

"You never guessed that, did you?"

"No," she breathed brokenly. "No, Nat, I--"

"Well, it's the truth and...." He rose and moved away. "But I can't tell you just now--not now...."

"No, not now, Nat." Betty, too, got up. "I think I'd better go home and see father--I mustn't forget--" she faltered, half blinded by the mist of the happiness before her eyes.

"No--wait." She stopped to find his gaze full upon her; for the first time he comprehended that she had not understood, that, worst of all, she had misunderstood. "I must tell you," he blurted desperately, "I must."

Instinctively she moved a step toward him. He hung his head.

"To-night, Betty--this evening, just a little while ago, I became engaged to Josie Lockwood."

She stood as if petrified throughout a wait that seemed to both interminable. Then he heard her catch her breath sharply. He looked up, frightened, but she was smiling steadily into his face. Somehow he found her hand in his.

"Oh, Nat dear," she said, "I'm so glad for you.... I wish you all the

happiness in the world. I ... Good-night."

The hand slipped out of Nat's. He did not move, but waited there with his empty palm outstretched, despair in his eyes and hell in his heart, while she walked quietly from the store.

After some time he awoke to the knowledge that she was gone.

"Blithering fool!" he growled. "Why didn't I know I loved her like this?" He took a turn to and fro, distracted. "And now I've made a mess of everything! Good Lord! what can I do? I must do something or go mad!" He swung round behind the soda-fountain counter and seized a bottle. "I know what! The rules are off! I can have a drink! I can have two drinks! I can have a million drinks if I want 'em!"

Pouring a generous dose of raw whiskey into the glass he lifted it to his lips and threw back his head. But the heavy bouquet of the liquor was stifling in his nostrils, and the first mouthful of it almost choked him. In a fury he flung the glass from him, so that it crashed and splintered upon the floor. "Great Heavens!" he cried. "I don't like the stuff any more.... But"--his gaze fell upon the cigar case--"I can have a smoke. That'll help some!"

With feverish haste he snatched a cigar from the nearest box, gnawed off one end, and thrusting the other into the alcohol lighter, puffed vigorously. But to his renovated palate the potent fumes of the tobacco were no less repugnant than the whiskey had been. Half strangled, he plucked the cigar from his mouth and stamped on it.

"Oh," he cried wildly, "I'll be--I'll be damned!"

He paused, staring vacantly at nothing. "And even that doesn't do any good! God help me, I've forgotten how to swear!"

To him, in this overwrought state, came Tracey, lumbering cheerfully in, his mouth shaped for a whistle. At sight of Nat he pulled up as if hit by a club.

"Evenin', Mister Duncan. What's the matter?"

By an effort Nat brought his gaze to bear upon the boy and comprehended his existence.

"Ain't you feeling well, Mr. Duncan?"

"No--rotten!"

"What's the matter?"

"_ Nothing_!" Nat shouted ferociously.

"Anything I kin----"

"_No_!"

At that instant Kellogg appeared. "Hello, Nat! What's been keeping you? I came down to bring you home to supper."

"Go to blazes with your supper! Keep away from me! Don't talk to me! I don't want anything to do with you, d'you understand? You and your confounded systems have got me into all this----"

He caught sight of his hat abruptly, ceased talking, grabbed the hat and jammed it on his head, muttering; then started on a run for the door.

"But what's the matter?" demanded Kellogg, thunderstruck. "Here! Hold on! Where are you going?"

"To the only place I can get any consolation--church!"

XXII

ROLAND'S TRIUMPH

But at the doorstep of the Methodist Church Nat hesitated. The building was dimly lighted, for it was choir practise night, and the door was ajar; but he couldn't bring himself to enter. He would not long have peace and quiet in which to think, there; presently would come Angle and Josie and Roland and...

"I couldn't stand it; I'd probably murder Roland...."

"Besides, I've no right there--an impostor--a contemptible low-lived pup like me!..."

"Why the thunderation did I ever allow myself to be persuaded to come here? Why was I ever such a fool?..."

"How could I be such a fool?..."

He was walking, now, striding swiftly through the silent village streets, meeting few wayfarers and paying them no heed, whether they knew and greeted him or not. His entire consciousness was obsessed by regret, repentance and remorse. He had ruined everything, deceived everybody--even himself for a time--played the cad and the bounder with consummate address. There were no bounds to the contempt he felt for the man who had tricked these simple, kindly folk into believing him immaculate, impeccable; who had hoodwinked "that old prince, Graham," and under false pretences gained his confidence and affection; who had deliberately set out to snare an innocent and trusting girl for the

sake of the filthy money her father owned; who had made another and a better girl love him, though that he had done so unconsciously, only to break her heart; who had sacrificed everything, honour and decency and self-respect, to his greed for money.

But it should go no further. He'd given what he called his word of honour to a despicable compact; there could be no dishonour so great as holding by that word, sticking to his bargain, maintaining the deception and--ruining the life of one woman--perhaps two: Josie Lockwood's, for he could never love her; and possibly Betty Graham's, for she was of that sort that loves once and once only. If she truly loved him...

But by his own act he had placed himself forever beyond the joy of her love. He could never accept it, desire it as passionately as he might--and did. He could never consent to drag her down to his base level...

To-morrow--no, to-night, that very night, he would unmask himself, declare his character to them all, pillory himself that all might see how low a man could fall. And to-morrow he would go, leave Radville, lose himself to all that had come to be so dear to him, forever....

So, raving and ranting with the extravagance of youth, he passed through the village, out into the open country, and in the course of an hour and a half, back--all blindly: circling back to the store, in the course of his wanderings, as instinctly as a carrier pigeon shapes its course for home.

It was with incredulity that he found himself again in that cheerful, cherished, homely place. But there he was when he came out of his abstraction: there in those familiar surroundings, with Tracey's round red face beaming at him over the cigar-stand like a lively counterfeit of the round red moon he had watched lift up into the skies, back there in the still countryside, just as he paused to turn back to town.

He recollected his faculties and resumed command of himself sufficiently to acknowledge Tracey's greeting with a moody word.

"All right, Tracey," he said abruptly. "You may go, now. I'll shut up the store."

He looked at his watch, and was surprised to discover that it was no later than half-past eight. He seemed to have lived a lifetime in the last few hours.

"Thank you, sir," said Tracey with a gush of gratitude. "I'll be glad to get off. Angle's waiting."

"Angle----?"

"Good-evening, Mr. Duncan."

"Oh, Miss Tuthill!" Nat discovered that little rogue, all smiles and dimples and blushes, not distant from his elbow. "I didn't see you--I was thinking."

"Guess we know what you was thinkin' about," observed Tracey, bringing his hat round the counter. "Everybody in town's talkin' about it."

"About what?"

"Ah, you know about what, and we're mighty glad of it, and we want to congratulate you, don't we, Angie."

"Oh, yes, indeed, Mr. Duncan. It's just too sweet for anything."

"O Lord!" groaned Nat.

"I'm awful glad you done it when you did," pursued Tracey, oblivious to Nat in his own ecstatic temper. "I guess I wouldn't never 've got up the spunk to--to tell Angie what I did to-night, 'f it hadn't been we was talkin' 'bout your engagement to Josie. Then, somehow, it just seemed to bust right out of me, like I couldn't hold it no longer. Didn't it, Angie?"

"Oh, Tracey, how can you talk so!"

"Then you're engaged, too?" Nat inquired, rousing himself a little and smiling feebly upon them.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm glad to hear it. It's great news. Now run along, both of you, and don't forget you'll never be so happy again." With what he thought an expiring flash of humour he raised his hands above their heads. "Bless you, my children!" he said solemnly. "Now, for Heaven's sake, beat it!"

Alone he went to the prescription desk and opening one of the drawers took out the firm's books. After that for some fifteen minutes there was nothing to be heard in the store save Nat's breathing and the scratching of his pen as he figured out a trial balance....

Brisk footfalls disturbed him. He sighed and moved out into the store to find Kellogg there, suave and easy as always, yet with that in his manner, perceptible perhaps only to a friend of long-standing like Nat, to betray a mind far from complacent.

"Oh, you're here!" he cried, with a distinct start of relief. "I've been looking all over for you."

"I just got in." Nat brushed aside explanations curtly, intent upon his purpose. "Harry, I've got something to say to you: I'm not going through with this thing."

"You're not?"

"No; and that's final. I was just on the point of drawing you a cheque for three-hundred; that's all my share of the profits of this concern, so far; and my note for the balance. I'll pay that up as soon as I'm able--and I'll work like a terrier until I do. But as for the rest of it, I'm through."

"Oh, you are?" Kellogg took a chair and tipped back, frowning gravely. "But what about your word to me?"

"Damn that," said Duncan without heat. "The word of honour of a man who'd stoop to a trick as vile as I have doesn't amount to a continental shinplaster. I'll rather be dishonoured by breaking it than by ruining a woman's life."

"Very well, if you feel that way about it," said Kellogg as coolly. "And you may keep your cheque and note: I wouldn't take them. You can pay me back when it's convenient--I don't care when. But what I want to know is what you mean to do?"

"I mean to do the only thing left to do. I'm going to shut up here and then see Lockwood and Josie and tell them the whole story."

"Hm," Kellogg reflected, quizzical. "You've got a pleasant little job ahead of you."

"I don't care about that: I deserve all that's coming to me. I owe Josie a duty. Why, it's awful, Harry, to trick a girl into caring for you and then to--to----"

"Break her heart?" Kellogg's tone was sardonic.

"That's what I meant."

"Don't flatter yourself, my boy. Josie Lockwood doesn't love you; she just set herself to win you because you're the best chance she's seen." Kellogg laughed quietly. "The system would have worked just as well if anyone else had tried it."

"Do you think so--honest?" Nat's eagerness to believe him was undisguised.

"I'm sure of it. The trouble is that people will say you've thrown her over--there isn't anyone in Radville who hasn't heard the news by this time; and that's going to make the girl feel pretty cheap. But only for a while: she'll get over it and solace herself with the next best thing.... And don't forget; you lose a fortune."

"No, I don't," Duncan disclaimed. "I never had it and now I don't want it."

"That's true enough," Kellogg admitted evenly. "And I hope you'll

always feel that way about it; but, believe me, you'll find plenty of money a great help if you want to live a happy life."

"There are better things than money to make a man happy; I'll pass up the money and try for the others."

"That's true, too; but when did you find it out?"

"Here--this last year.... You know I had everything my heart desired until the governor cashed in; and I used to think I was a pretty happy kid in those days. But now I've learned that you can beat that kind of happiness to death. Harry"--Duncan was growing almost sententious--"the real way to be happy is to work and have your work amount to something and--and to have someone who believes in you to work for."

"Is this a sermon, Nat?"

"Call it what you like: it goes, just the same. ... That's what I've found out this year."

Kellogg let his chair fall forward and rose, imprisoning Nat's shoulders with two heavy but kindly hands. "And you're right!" he cried heartily. "I'm glad you had the backbone to back out, Nat. It was a low-down trick and I'm ashamed of myself for proposing it. I did it, I presume, simply because I'm a schemer at heart, and I knew it would work. It did work, but it's worked a finer way than I dreamed of: it's made a man of you, Nat, and I'm mightly glad and proud of you!"

Nat swayed with amazement. "What's changed you all of a sudden?" he demanded blankly.

Releasing him, Kellogg resumed his seat, laughing. "Well, a number of things. Among others, I've talked with Graham and I've met his daughter."

"Oh-h!"

"And that reminds me," Kellogg changed the subject briskly; "I understood from you that Graham was sole owner of that patent burner."

"So he is."

"He says not. I had a proposition to make him from the Mutual people, and he referred me to you, saying that you controlled the matter."

"I've not the slightest interest in it!" Nat protested.

"I know you haven't, but Graham insisted you owned the whole thing. I pressed him for an explanation, and he finally furnished one in his rambling, inconsequent, fine old way. He admitted that there wasn't any sort of an existing contract or agreement of any sort, even oral, between you, but just the same you'd been so good to him and his girl that he'd made up his mind--some time ago, I gather--to make you a

present of the burner; but naturally he forgot to tell you about an insignificant detail like that."

"Of course that's nonsense; I wouldn't and shant accept."

"Of course you won't. I did you the honour to discount that. But he wouldn't say a word about the offer--yes or no--just left it all up to you. He says you're a business man, and that he's often thought what a help you must have been to me before you left New York."

Nat laughed outright. "Can you beat that? ... But what is the offer?"

"Fifty thousand cash and ten thousand shares of preferred stock--hundred dollars par."

"What's that worth?"

"At the market rate when I left town, seventy-eight." Kellogg waited a moment. "Well, what do you say?"

"Say? Great Caesar's Ghost! What is there to say? Wire 'em an acceptance before they get their second wind.... You don't know how good this makes me feel, Harry; I can't thank you enough for what you've done. This'll square me with Graham to some extent, and I can clear out----"

"No, you can't, Mr. Smarty! You ain't been 'cute enough."

Both men, startled by the interruption, wheeled round to discover Roland Barnette dancing with excitement in the doorway, the while he beckoned frantically to an invisible party without. "Come on!" he shouted. "Here he is!"

"What's eating you, Roly-Poly?" inquired

Nat, too happy for the money to cherish animosity even toward his one-time rival.

"You'll find out soon enough," snarled Roland. "Mr. Lockwood's got something to say to you, I guess."

And on the heels of this announcement Lockwood strode into the store, Josie clinging to his arm, Pete Willing--a trifle more sanely drunk than he had been some hours previous--bringing up the rear.

"So!" snarled Blinky, halting and transfixing Nat with the stare of his cold blue eyes. "So we've found you, eh?"

"Oh? I didn't know I was lost."

"No nonsense, young man. I ain't in the humour for foolin'." Blinky was unquestionably in no sort of a humour at all beyond an evil one. "I come here to have a word with you."

"Well, sir?" Nat's tone and attitude were perfectly pacific.

"Ah, there ain't no use beatin' 'round the bush. You've behaved yourself ever since you come to Radville, and insinuated yourself into our confidence, 'spite of the fact that nobody in town knows who you were before you came. But now Roland's laid a charge again' you, and I want to know the rights to it."

"Well," Roland interposed cockily, "I accused him of it to-night and he didn't deny it."

[Illustration: "You're a thief with a reward out for you!"]

"What's more," Lockwood continued with rising colour, "Roland says he can prove it?"

"Prove what?" Nat insisted. "Get down to facts, can't you?"

"That you're a thief with a reward out for you," said Roland. "You're that Mortimer Henry what absconded from the Longacre National Bank in New York."

There fell a brief pause. Nat bowed his head and tugged at his moustache, his shoulders shaking with emotion variously construed by those who watched him. Presently he looked up again, his features gravely composed.

"Roly," said he, "Balaam must miss you terribly."

"That ain't no answer." Lockwood put himself solidly between Nat and the object of his obscure remark--who was painfully digesting it. "I want to know about this. You got my daughter to say she'd marry you this evenin', and you've got to explain to me about this bank business before it goes any further."

"Yes?" commented Nat civilly.

"Yes!" thundered Blinky. "Do you deny it? ... Answer me."

To Kellogg's huge diversion, Nat struck an attitude, "I refuse to answer," said he.

"Aha! What'd I tell you?" This was Roland's triumphant crow.

"Nat!" Josie advanced, trembling with excitement. "Tell me, what does this mean?"

Duncan perforce avoided her gaze. "Don't ask," he said sadly.

"Is it true?" she insisted.

"You heard what Roly said," he replied, with a chastened expression.

"Then you admit it?"

"I admit nothing."

"Oh-h!" The girl drew away from him as from defilement. "I--I hate you!" she cried in a voice of loathing

"That's all right," he told her serenely; "I've despised myself all evening."

The girl showed him a scornful back. "Papa----" she began.

"Don't thank me, Josie. Roland done it all: he got onto him." Lockwood continued to watch Duncan with the air of a cat eyeing a mouse.

Impulsively Josie moved to Roland's side and caught his arm. He drew himself up proudly.

"I do thank you, Roland; I can never be grateful enough. I've been so foolish.

"That's all right." Roland tucked the girl's hand beneath his arm and patted it down. "You wasn't to blame. I never seen anyone from Noo York yet that wasn't a crook."

"Won't you please take me away from this--place, Roland?" she appealed.

"I'll be mighty glad to see you home, Josie," he assured her generously, turning.

In the act of leaving, Josie caught Nat's eye. She hung back for an instant, withering him with a glare. "Oh-h!" she cried. "How did you dare pretend to care for me?"

He bowed politely. "It was one of the rules, Josie."

"There's no need to tell you, I guess, that the engagement is broken."

"None whatever, Miss Lockwood. Good-evening."

"Come, Roland!"

Arm in arm they left, with the haughty tread of the elect, while Pete Willing lurched to Duncan's side and caught his arm.

"Come 'long to jail, Mish'r Duncan," he said with sympathy. "Mush bessher."

"You look after him, Pete." Lockwood turned to leave with a final shot for Duncan. "I'll 'tend to your case in the mornin', young man, and I'll make you wish you never came to this town."

"You needn't trouble. I feel that way about it already. _Good_-night."

Lockwood left them, snarling. Nat caught Kellogg's eye and began to giggle. But Pete was still holding him fast, partially, beyond doubt, for support.

"You've been saved just in time, Mish'r Duncan," he commented; "y'are mighty lucky man. Now lissen: you better make tracks. I ain't got no warrant to hold you, 'nd I wouldn't if I had."

"You're a good fellow, Pete; but you needn't worry. I'm not the man they think me, and it'll be easy to prove."

"Wal," said Pete, "jus' the same, you better git out, 'r you may have to marry her aft'all."

"No, I won't."

"Thank Gawd f'r that!" Pete exclaimed in maudlin gratitude. He swung widely toward the door, and by a miracle found it. "G'night, Mish'r Duncan. I feel s' good 'bout thish I'm goin' try goin' home 'nd face m' wife. G'night."

"Good-night, Pete."

"Well!" said Kellogg after a pause, "that was a bit of luck!"

"Luck!" Nat seized his hat and began to turn off the lights. "It's more luck than I thought there was in the whole world. Come along."

"Where are you going?"

"First, to see Lockwood and have it out with him."

"No, you aren't," Kellogg laughed as Nat locked the door. "You're going to leave Lockwood to me; I'll manage to ease his mind. You've got infinitely more important matters to attend to--and the sooner you find her, the better, Nat!"

XXIII

THE RAINBOW'S END

The air was heavy with moisture and very still and warm; a heady fragrance of precocious blooms flavoured the air, vying with the scent of rain. The silence was profound, but shaken now and then by a grumble of distant thunder. The world hung breathless on the issue of the night.

Since evenfall a wall of cloud, massive and portentous, had been

climbing up over the western hills, slowly but with ominous steadiness obscuring the moon-swept sky with its far, pale wreaths of stars, blotting it out with monstrous folds and convolutions of impenetrable purple-black. Along its crest fire played like swords in the sunlight, and now and again sheeted flame lightened the monstrous expanse so that it glowed with the pale phosphorescence of a summer sea.

As Duncan hurried homeward over sidewalks chequered in silver and ink, the advance of the cloud army seemed to become accelerated. With increasing frequency gusts of air set the trees a-shiver until their sibilant whispers of warning filled the valley. The rolling of the thunder grew more sharp, more instant upon the flashes.... When there was no wind the air seemed to quiver with terror--as a dog cringes to the whip....

But of this Duncan was barely conscious.

He gained the gate in the fence of wood paling, opened it, and entered. The lawn and house were lit with the unearthly radiance of moonlight threatened by eclipse. He could see the light in Graham's study and, through the open doors, the faint glow of the hall-lamp. But there was no one visible.

He hurried up the path, tortured by impatience, fear, longing, despair....

Then he saw what seemed at first a pale shadow detach itself from darker shades in the shrubbery and move toward him.

"Nat, is it you?"

"Betty!"

His whole heart was in that cry; the girl thrilled to its timbre as though a master hand had struck a chord upon her heart-strings.

"Nat, what--what is it?"

"Betty, I want to tell you something."

She came very slowly toward him, torn alternately by fear and hope. What did he mean?

"Do you happen to remember that I told you a while ago I was engaged to Josie Lockwood?"

[Illustration: "Forever and ever and a day"]

"Nat! Could I forget? ... Why?"

"Because ... it's broken off, Betty."

"Broken off! ... How? Why?"

"Because it had to be, sweetheart: because I love you."

She was very close to him then. Her uplifted face shone like marble in the fading light. "Nat, I ... I don't understand."

"Then, listen--I must tell you. It was all a plan, a scheme, my coming here, Betty. Everything I did, said, thought, was part of a contemptible trick.... I meant to marry Josie Lockwood, whom I'd never seen, for her money. ... Now you know what I was, dear.... But it's different, now. I'm not the same man who came to Radville ten months ago. I've learned a little to understand the right, I hope: I've learned to love and reverence goodness and purity and unselfishness and ... And I want to be a man, the kind of a man you thought me: a man worthy of you and your love, Betty.... Because I love you. I want you to be my wife. ... And, O Betty, Betty, I need you to help me!"

His voice broke. He waited, every nerve and fibre of him tense for her answer. While he had been speaking, the onrush of the storm had blotted out the moon. There was only darkness there in the garden--deep, dense darkness, so thick he could not even see the shimmer of her dress....

Then suddenly she was in his arms, shaking and sobbing, straining him to her.

"Oh, Nat, my Nat! I've loved you from the first day I ever saw you! You know I have."

"Betty! ... sweetheart..."

There came an abrupt, furious patter of heavy drops of water, beating upon the foliage, splashing and rebounding from the house.

"Forever and ever, Nat?"

"Forever and ever and a day, my dear ... my dear!"

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