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Baby Mine

by Margaret Mayo

March, 1997 [Etext #860]

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BABY MINE

BY MARGARET MAYO

To my Helper and Husband

CHAPTER I

Even in college Alfred Hardy was a young man of fixed ideas and high ideals and proud of it.

His friend, Jimmy Jinks, had few ideas and no ideals, and was glad of it, and before half of their first college term had passed, Jimmy had ridded himself of all such worries as making up his own mind or directing his own morals. Alfred did all these things so much better, argued Jimmy, furthermore, Alfred LIKED to do them--Jimmy owed it to his friend to give him that pleasure.

The fact that Jimmy was several years Alfred's senior and twice his size, in no way altered his opinion of Alfred's judgment, and through their entire college course they agreed as one man in all their discussions--or rather--in all Alfred's discussions.

But it was not until the close of their senior year that Alfred favoured Jimmy with his views on matrimony.

Sitting alone in a secluded corner of the campus waiting for Alfred to solve a problem in higher mathematics, Jimmy now recalled fragments of Alfred's last conversation.

"No twelve dollar shoes and forty dollar hats for MY wife," his young friend had raged and he condemned to Jimmy the wicked extravagance of his own younger sisters. "The woman who gets me must be a home-maker. I'll take her to the theatre occasionally, and now and then we'll have a few friends in for the evening; but the fireside must be her magnet, and I'll be right by her side each night with my books and my day's worries. She shall be taken into my confidence completely; and I'll take good care to let her know, before I marry her, just what I expect in return."

"Alfred certainly has the right idea about marriage," mused Jimmy, as the toe of his boot shoved the gravel up and down the path. "There's just one impractical feature about it." He was conscious of a slight feeling of heresy when he admitted even ONE flaw in his friend's scheme of things. "Where is Alfred to find such a wife?"

Jimmy ran through the list of unattached girls to whom Alfred had thus far presented him. It was no doubt due to his lack of imagination, but try as he would, he could not see any one of these girls sitting by the fireside listening to Alfred's "worries" for four or five nights each week. He recalled all the married women whom he had been obliged, through no fault of his own, to observe.

True, all of them did not boast twelve dollar shoes or forty dollar hats--for the very simple reason that the incomes or the tempers of their husbands did not permit of it. In any case, Jimmy did not remember having seen them spend many evenings by the fireside. Where then was Alfred to find the exceptional creature who was to help "systematise his life"? Jimmy was not above hoping that Alfred's search might be a long one. He was content for his friend to go jogging along by his side, theorising about marriage and taking no chances with facts. Having come to this conclusion, he began to feel uneasy at Alfred's non- appearance. Alfred had promised to meet him on this spot at four-thirty, and Alfred had decided ideas about punctuality. It was now five- thirty. Ought Jimmy to look for him, or would he be wiser to remain comfortably seated and to try to digest another of his friend's theories?

While Jimmy was trying to decide this vexed question, his ear caught the sound of a girlish titter. Turning in embarrassment toward a secluded path just behind him, whom did he see coming toward him but Alfred, with what appeared to be a bunch of daffodils; but as Alfred drew nearer, Jimmy began to perceive at his elbow a large flower-trimmed hat, and--"horrors!--" beneath it, with a great deal of filmy white and yellow floating from it, was a small pink and white face.

Barely had Jimmy reversed himself and rearranged his round, astonished features, when Alfred, beaming and buoyant, brought the bundle of fluff to a full stop before him.

"Sorry to be late, old chap," said Alfred. "I have brought my excuse with me. I want you to know Miss Merton." Then turning to the small creature, whose head peeped just above his elbow, Alfred explained to her graciously that Jimmy Jinks was his very best friend, present company excepted, of course, and added that she and Jimmy would no doubt "see a great deal of each other in the future."

In his embarrassment, Jimmy's eyes went straight to the young lady's shoes. It was possible that there might be more expensive shoes in this world, but Jimmy had certainly never seen daintier.

"I hope we didn't disturb you," a small voice was chirping; and innocent and conventional as the remark surely was, Jimmy was certain of an undercurrent of mischief in it. He glanced up to protest, but two baby-blue eyes fixed upon him in apparent wonderment, made him certain that anything he could say would seem rude or ridiculous; so, as usual when in a plight, he looked to Alfred for the answer.

Slapping Jimmy upon the shoulder in a condescending spirit, Alfred suggested that they all sit down and have a chat.

"Oh, how nice," chirped the small person.

Jimmy felt an irresistible desire to run, but the picture of himself, in his very stout person, streaking across the campus to the giggled delight of Miss Fluff, soon brought him submissively to the seat, where he sat twiddling his straw hat between his fingers, and glancing uncertainly at Alfred, who was thoughtful enough to sit next him.

"Goodness, one could almost dance out here, couldn't one?" said the small person, named Zoie, as her eyes roved over the bit of level green before them.

"Would you like to try?" asked Alfred, apparently agreeable to her every caprice.

"I'd love it!" cried Zoie. "Come along." She sprang up and held out her hands to him.

"I'm going to be unselfish," answered Alfred, "and let Jimmy have that fun."

By this time, Jimmy had been seized with an intuitive feeling that his friend was in immediate danger.

"Was this the young woman who was to sit opposite the fireside five nights a week and systematise Alfred's life?"

Jimmy stared at the intruder blankly. For answer, two small hands were thrust out toward him and an impatient little voice was commanding him to "Come, dance." He heard Alfred's laughter. He had no intention of accommodating the small person in this or any other matter, yet, before he realised quite how it had happened, he was two-stepping up and down the grass to her piping little voice; nor did she release him until the perspiration came rolling from his forehead; and, horror of horrors, his one-time friend, Alfred, seemed to find this amusing, and laughed louder and louder when Jimmy sank by his side exhausted.

When Jimmy was again able to think consecutively, he concluded that considerable conversation must have taken place between Alfred and the small one, while he was recovering his breath and re-adjusting his wilted neckwear. He was now thrown into a fresh panic by an exclamation from the excitable Zoie.

"You must both meet my friend, Aggie Darling," she was saying. "I am bringing her with me to the hop to-night. She is not at all like me. You will like her dreadfully." She smiled at Jimmy as though she were conferring a great favour upon him.

"Like her dreadfully," commented Jimmy to himself. "It was just the kind of expression one might expect from a mind in such disorder as hers. 'Systematise Alfred's life,' indeed!"

There was more nonsensical chatter, or so it seemed to Jimmy, then Zoie and Alfred rose to go, and Jimmy was told by both of them that he was to put in an appearance at the Fraternity "hop" that night.

"I'll see you at dinner," called Alfred gaily over his shoulder and Jimmy was left to grapple with his first disappointment at his friend's lack of discrimination.

"It's her fault," concluded Jimmy, as he lifted himself heavily off the bench and started down the campus, resolved to console himself with food.

CHAPTER II

Now Jimmy had no intention of going to the "hop." He had tried to tell Alfred so a dozen times during dinner, but each time he had been interrupted by one of Alfred's enthusiastic rhapsodies about Zoie.

"Most marvellous girl I have ever met!" exclaimed Alfred over his soup. "So sensible; so modest. And did you see how simply she dresses?" he asked. Jimmy recalled his first vision of billowy fluff; but before he could answer, Alfred had continued excitedly:

"I'll tell you what first attracted me toward her." He looked at Jimmy as though he expected some especial mark of gratitude for the favour about to be bestowed; then he explained with a serious weighing of his words, "It was her love of children. I had barely been introduced to her when she turned her back upon me and gave her whole attention to Professor Peck's little boy Willie. I said to myself, 'any girl of that age who prefers children to young chaps of my age, is the girl for me.' "

"I see," assented Jimmy lamely. It was his first remark during dinner.

"After that, I no longer hesitated. You know, Jimmy, I have decision."

"Yes, I have noticed," admitted Jimmy, without conviction.

"In fifteen minutes," said Alfred, "I had learned all about the young lady's antecedents."

Having finished his soup, and resisted a childish impulse to tip the plate and scrape the bottom of it, Jimmy was now looking anxiously toward the door through which the roast ought to come.

"I'll tell you all about her," volunteered Alfred. But Jimmy's

eyes were upon Alfred's plate; his friend had not yet devoured more than two spoonfuls of soup; at that rate, argued Jimmy, the roast would reach them about the time that he was usually trying to make his dessert last as long as possible.

"She is here with her aunt," continued Alfred. "They are on a short visit to Professor Peck."

Jimmy approved of the "short."

"That's good," he murmured, hopeful that a separation from the minx might restore his friend's reason.

"And Jimmy," exclaimed Alfred with glistening eyes, "what do you think?"

Jimmy thought a great deal but he forebore to say it, and Alfred continued very enthusiastically.

"She lives right in the same town with us."

"What!" ejaculated Jimmy, and he felt his appetite going.

"Within a stone's throw of my house--and yours," added Alfred triumphantly. "Think of our never having met her before!"

"I am thinking," said Jimmy.

"Of course she has been away from home a great deal," went on Alfred. "She's been in school in the East; but there were the summers."

"So there were," assented Jimmy, thinking of his hitherto narrow escapes.

"Her father is old John Merton," continued Alfred. "Merton the stationer--you know him, Jimmy. Unfortunately, he has a great deal of money; but that hasn't spoiled her. Oh no! She is just as simple and considerate in her behaviour as if she were some poor little struggling school teacher. She is the one for me, Jimmy. There is no doubt about it, and I'll tell you a secret."

Jimmy looked at him blankly.

"I am going to propose to her this very night."

"Good Lord!" groaned Jimmy, as if his friend had been suddenly struck down in the flower of his youth.

"That's why you simply must come with me to the hop," continued Alfred. "I want you to take care of her friend Aggie, and leave me alone with Zoie as much as possible."

"Zoie!" sniffed Jimmy. The name to him was as flippant as its owner.

"True, strong name," commented Alfred. "So simple, so direct, so like her. I'll have to leave you now," he said, rising. "I must send her some flowers for the dance." He turned at the door. "Suppose I add a few from you for Aggie."

"What!" exploded Jimmy.

"Just by way of introduction," called Alfred gaily. "It's a good idea."

Before Jimmy could protest further, he found himself alone for the second time that day. He ate his roast in gloomy silence. It seemed dry and tasteless. Even his favourite desert of plum pudding failed to rouse him from his dark meditations, and he rose from the table dejected and forlorn.

A few hours later, when Alfred led Jimmy into the ballroom, the latter was depressed, not only by his friend's impending danger, but he felt an uneasy foreboding as to his own future. With his college course practically finished and Alfred attaching himself to unforeseen entities, Jimmy had come to the ball with a curious feeling of having been left suspended in mid-air.

Before he could voice his misgivings to Alfred, the young men were surrounded by a circle of chattering females. And then it was that Jimmy found himself looking into a pair of level brown eyes, and felt himself growing hot and cold by turns. When the little knot of youths and maidens disentangled itself into pairs of dancers, it became clear to Jimmy that he had been introduced to Aggie, and that he was expected to dance with her.

As a matter of fact, Jimmy had danced with many girls; true, it was usually when there was no other man left to "do duty"; but still he had done it. Why then should he feel such distressing hesitation about placing his arm around the waist of this brown-eyed Diana? Try as he would he could not find words to break the silence that had fallen between them. She was so imposing; so self-controlled. It really seemed to Jimmy that she should be the one to ask him to dance. As a matter of fact, that was just what happened; and after the dance she suggested that they sit in the garden; and in the garden, with the moonlight barely peeping through the friendly overhanging boughs of the trees, Jimmy found Aggie capable of a courage that filled him with amazement; and later that night, when he and Alfred exchanged confidences, it became apparent to the latter that Aggie had volunteered to undertake the responsibility of outlining Jimmy's entire future.

He was to follow his father's wishes and take up a business career in Chicago at once; and as soon as all the relatives

concerned on both sides had been duly consulted, he and Aggie were to embark upon matrimony.

"Good!" cried Alfred, when Jimmy had managed to stammer his shame-faced confession. "We'll make it a double wedding. I can be ready to-morrow, so far as I'm concerned." And then followed another rhapsody upon the fitness of Zoie as the keeper of his future home and hearth, and the mother of his future sons and daughters. In fact, it was far into the night when the two friends separated--separated in more than one sense, as they afterward learned.

While Alfred and Jimmy were saying "good- night" to each other, Zoie and Aggie in one of the pretty chintz bedrooms of Professor Peck's modest home, were still exchanging mutual confidences.

"The thing I like about Alfred," said Zoie, as she gazed at the tip of her dainty satin slipper, and turned her head meditatively to one side, "is his positive nature. I've never before met any one like him. Do you know," she added with a sly twinkle in her eye, "it was all I could do to keep from laughing at him. He's so awfully serious." She giggled to herself at the recollection of him; then she leaned forward to Aggie, her small hands clasped across her knees and her face dimpling with mischief. "He hasn't the remotest idea what I'm like."

Aggie studied her young friend with unmistakable reproach. "I MADE Jimmy know what I'M like," she said. "I told him ALL my ideas about everything."

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Zoie in shocked surprise.

"He's sure to find out sooner or later," said Aggie sagely. "I think that's the only sensible way to begin."

"If I'd told Alfred all MY ideas about things," smiled Zoie, "there'd have BEEN no beginning."

"What do you mean?" asked Aggie, with a troubled look.

"Well, take our meeting," explained Zoie. "Just as we were introduced, that horrid little Willie Peck caught his heel in a flounce of my skirt. I turned round to slap him, but I saw Alfred looking, so I patted his ugly little red curls instead. And what do you think? Alfred told me to-night that it was my devotion to Willie that first made him adore me."

"And you didn't explain to him?" asked Aggie in amazement.

"And lose him before I'd got him!" exclaimed Zoie.

"It might be better than losing him AFTER you've got him," concluded the elder girl.

"Oh, Aggie," pouted Zoie, "I think you are horrid. You're just trying to spoil all the fun of my engagement."

"I am not," cried Aggie, and the next moment she was sitting on the arm of Zoie's chair.

"Goose!" she said, "how dare you be cross with me?"

"I am NOT cross," declared Zoie, and after the customary apologies from Aggie, confidence was fully restored on both sides and Zoie continued gaily: "Don't you worry about Alfred and me," she said as she kicked off her tiny slippers and hopped into bed. "Just you wait until I get him. I'll manage him all right."

"I dare say," answered Aggie; not without misgivings, as she turned off the light.

CHAPTER III

The double wedding of four of Chicago's "Younger Set" had been adequately noticed in the papers, the conventional "honeymoon" journey had been made, and Alfred Hardy and Jimmy Jinks had now settled down to the routine of their respective business interests.

Having plunged into his office work with the same vigour with which he had attacked higher mathematics, Alfred had quickly gained the confidence of the elders of his firm, and they had already begun to give way to him in many important decisions. In fact, he was now practically at the head of his particular department with one office doing well in Chicago and a second office promising well in Detroit.

As for Jimmy, he had naturally started his business career with fewer pyrotechnics; but he was none the less contented. He seldom saw his old friend Alfred now, but Aggie kept more or less in touch with Zoie; and over the luncheon table the affairs of the two husbands were often discussed by their wives. It was after one of these luncheons that Aggie upset Jimmy's evening repose by the fireside by telling him that she was a wee bit worried about Zoie and Alfred.

"Alfred is so unreasonable," said Aggie, "so peevish."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Jimmy shortly. "If he's peevish he has some good reason. You can be sure of that."

"You needn't get cross with me, Jimmy," said Aggie in a hurt voice.

"Why should I be cross with you?" snapped Jimmy. "It isn't YOUR fault if Alfred's made a fool of himself by marrying the last person on earth whom he should have married."

"I think he was very lucky to get her," argued Aggie in defence of her friend.

"Oh, you do, do you?" answered Jimmy in a very aggrieved tone.

"She is one of the prettiest girls in Chicago," said Aggie.

"You're pretty too," answered Jimmy, "but it doesn't make an idiot of you."

"It's TIME you said something nice to me," purred Aggie; and her arm stole fondly around Jimmy's large neck.

"I don't know why it is," said Jimmy, shaking his head dejectedly, "but every time Zoie Hardy's name is mentioned in this house it seems to stir up some sort of a row between you and me."

"That's because you're so prejudiced," answered Aggie with a touch of irritation.

"There you go again," said Jimmy.

"I didn't mean it!" interposed Aggie contritely. "Oh, come now, Jimmy," she pleaded, "let's trundle off to bed and forget all about it." And they did.

But the next day, as Jimmy was heading for the La Salle restaurant to get his luncheon, who should call to him airily from a passing taxi but Zoie. It was apparent that she wished him to wait until she could alight; and in spite of his disinclination to do so, he not only waited but followed the taxi to its stopping place and helped the young woman to the pavement.

"Oh, you darling!" exclaimed Zoie, all of a flutter, and looking exactly like an animated doll. "You've just saved my life." She called to the taxi driver to "wait."

"Are you in trouble?" asked the guileless Jimmy.

"Yes, dreadful," answered Zoie, and she thrust a half-dozen small parcels into Jimmy's arms. "I have to be at my dressmaker's in half an hour; and I haven't had a bite of lunch. I'm miles and miles from home; and I can't go into a restaurant and eat just by myself without being stared at. Wasn't it lucky that I saw you when I did?"

There was really very little left for Jimmy to say, so he said it; and a few minutes later they were seated tete-a-tete in one

of Chicago's most fashionable restaurants, and Zoie the unconscious flirt was looking up at Jimmy with apparently adoring eyes, and suggesting all the eatables which he particularly abominated.

No sooner had the unfortunate man acquiesced in one thing and communicated Zoie's wish to the waiter, than the flighty young person found something else on the menu that she considered more tempting to her palate. Time and again the waiter had to be recalled and the order had to be given over until Jimmy felt himself laying up a store of nervous indigestion that would doubtless last him for days.

When the coveted food at last arrived, Zoie had become completely engrossed in the headgear of one of her neighbours, and it was only after Jimmy had been induced to make himself ridiculous by craning his neck to see things of no possible interest to him that Zoie at last gave her attention to her plate.

In obedience of Jimmy's order the waiter managed to rush the lunch through within three-quarters of an hour; but when Jimmy and Zoie at length rose to go he was so insanely irritated, that he declared they had been in the place for hours; demanded that the waiter hurry his bill; and then finally departed in high dudgeon without leaving the customary "tip" behind him.

But all this was without its effect upon Zoie, who, a few moments later rode away in her taxi, waving gaily to Jimmy who was now late for business and thoroughly at odds with himself and the world.

As a result of the time lost at luncheon Jimmy missed an appointment that had to wait over until after office hours, and as a result of this postponement, he missed Aggie, who went to a friend's house for dinner, leaving word for him to follow. For the first time in his life, Jimmy disobeyed Aggie's orders, and, later on, when he "trundled off to bed" alone, he again recalled that it was Zoie Hardy who was always causing hard feeling between him and his spouse.

Some hours later, when Aggie reached home with misgivings because Jimmy had not joined her, she was surprised to find him sleeping as peacefully as a cherub. "Poor dear," she murmured, "I hope he wasn't lonesome." And she stole away to her room.

The next morning when Aggie did not appear at the breakfast table, Jimmy rushed to her room in genuine alarm. It was now Aggie's turn to sleep peacefully; and he stole dejectedly back to the dining-room and for the first time since their marriage, he munched his cold toast and sipped his coffee alone.

So thoroughly was his life now disorganised, and so low were his spirits that he determined to walk to his office, relying upon

the crisp morning air to brace him for the day's encounters. By degrees, he regained his good cheer and as usual when in rising spirits, his mind turned toward Aggie. The second anniversary of their wedding was fast approaching--he began to take notice of various window displays. By the time he had reached his office, the weightiest decision on his mind lay in choosing between a pearl pendant and a diamond bracelet for his now adorable spouse.

But a more difficult problem awaited him. Before he was fairly in his chair, the telephone bell rang violently. Never guessing who was at the other end of the wire, he picked up his receiver and answered.

"What?" he exclaimed in surprise. "Mrs. Hardy?" Several times he opened his lips to ask a question, but it was apparent that the person at the other end of the line had a great deal to say and very little time to say it, and it was only after repeated attempts that he managed to get in a word or so edgewise.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"Say nothing to anybody," was Zoie's noncommittal answer, "not even to Aggie. Jump in a taxi and come as quickly as you can."

"But what IS it?" persisted Jimmy. The dull sound of the wire told him that the person at the other end had "hung up."

Jimmy gazed about the room in perplexity. What was he to do? Why on earth should he leave his letters unanswered and his mail topsy turvy to rush forth in the shank of the morning at the bidding of a young woman whom he abhorred. Ridiculous! He would do no such thing. He lit a cigar and began to open a few letters marked "private." For the life of him he could not understand one word that he read. A worried look crossed his face.

"Suppose Zoie were really in need of help, Aggie would certainly never forgive him if he failed her." He rose and walked up and down.

"Why was he not to tell Aggie?"

"Where was Alfred?" He stopped abruptly. His over excited imagination had suggested a horrible but no doubt accurate answer. "Wedded to an abomination like Zoie, Alfred had sought the only escape possible to a man of his honourable ideals--he had committed suicide."

Seizing his coat and hat Jimmy dashed through the outer office without instructing his astonished staff as to when he might possibly return.

"Family troubles," said the secretary to himself as he appropriated one of Jimmy's best cigars.

CHAPTER IV

LESS than half an hour later, Jimmy's taxi stopped in front of the fashionable Sherwood Apartments where Zoie had elected to live. Ascending toward the fifth floor he scanned the face of the elevator boy expecting to find it particularly solemn because of the tragedy that had doubtless taken place upstairs. He was on the point of sending out a "feeler" about the matter, when he remembered Zoie's solemn injunction to "say nothing to anybody." Perhaps it was even worse than suicide. He dared let his imagination go no further. By the time he had put out his hand to touch the electric button at Zoie's front door, his finger was trembling so that he wondered whether he could hit the mark. The result was a very faint note from the bell, but not so faint that it escaped the ear of the anxious young wife, who had been pacing up and down the floor of her charming living room for what seemed to her ages.

"Hurry, hurry, hurry!" Zoie cried through her tears to her neat little maid servant, then reaching for her chatelaine, she daubed her small nose and flushed cheeks with powder, after which she nodded to Mary to open the door.

To Jimmy, the maid's pert "good-morning" seemed to be in very bad taste and to properly reprove her he assumed a grave, dignified air out of which he was promptly startled by Zoie's even more unseemly greeting.

"Hello, Jimmy!" she snapped. Her tone was certainly not that of a heart-broken widow. "It's TIME you got here," she added with an injured air.

Jimmy gazed at Zoie in astonishment. She was never what he would have called a sympathetic woman, but really----!

"I came the moment you 'phoned me," he stammered; "what is it? What's the matter?"

"It's awful," sniffled Zoie. And she tore up and down the room regardless of the fact that Jimmy was still unseated.

"Awful what?" questioned Jimmy.

"Worst I've ever had," sobbed Zoie.

"Is anything wrong with Alfred?" ventured Jimmy. And he braced himself for her answer.

"He's gone," sobbed Zoie.

"Gone!" echoed Jimmy, feeling sure that his worst fears were about to be realised. "Gone where?"

"I don't know," sniffled Zoie, "I just 'phoned his office. He isn't there."

"Oh, is that all?" answered Jimmy, with a sigh of relief. "Just another little family tiff," he was unable to conceal a feeling of thankfulness. "What's up?"

Zoie measured Jimmy with a dangerous gleam in her eyes. She resented the patronising tone that he was adopting. How dare he be cheerful when she was so unhappy--and because of him, too? She determined that his self-complacency should be short-lived.

"Alfred has found out that I lied about the luncheon," she said, weighing her words and their effect upon Jimmy.

"What luncheon?" stuttered Jimmy, feeling sure that Zoie had suddenly marked him for her victim, but puzzled as to what form her persecution was about to take.

"What luncheon?" repeated Zoie, trying apparently to conceal her disgust at his dulness. "OUR luncheon yesterday."

"Why did you LIE," asked Jimmy, his eyes growing rounder and rounder with wonder.

"I didn't know he KNEW," answered Zoie innocently.

"Knew what?" questioned Jimmy, more and more befogged.

"That I'd eaten with a man," concluded Zoie impatiently. Then she turned her back upon Jimmy and again dashed up and down the room occupied with her own thoughts.

It was certainly difficult to get much understanding out of Zoie's disjointed observations, but Jimmy was doing his best. He followed her restless movements about the room with his eyes, and then ventured a timid comment.

"He couldn't object to your eating with me."

"Oh, couldn't he?" cried Zoie, and she turned upon him with a look of contempt. "If there's anything that he DOESN'T object to," she continued, "I haven't found it out yet." And with that she threw herself in a large arm chair near the table, and left Jimmy to draw his own conclusions.

Jimmy looked about the room as though expecting aid from some unseen source; then his eyes sought the floor. Eventually they crept to the tip of Zoie's tiny slipper as it beat a nervous tattoo on the rug. To save his immortal soul, Jimmy could never

help being hypnotised by Zoie's small feet. He wondered now if they had been the reason of Alfred's first downfall. He recalled with a sigh of relief that Aggie's feet were large and reassuring. He also recalled an appropriate quotation: "The path of virtue is not for women with small feet," it ran. "Yes, Aggie's feet are undoubtedly large," he concluded. But all this was not solving Zoie's immediate problem; and an impatient cough from her made him realise that something was expected of him.

"Why did you lunch with me," he asked, with a touch of irritation, "if you thought he wouldn't like it?"

"I was hungry," snapped Zoie.

"Oh," grunted Jimmy, and in spite of his dislike of the small creature his vanity resented the bald assertion that she had not lunched with him for his company's sake.

"I wouldn't have made an engagement with you of course," she continued, with a frankness that vanquished any remaining conceit that Jimmy might have brought with him. "I explained to you how it was at the time. It was merely a case of convenience. You know that."

Jimmy was beginning to see it more and more in the light of an inconvenience.

"If you hadn't been in front of that horrid old restaurant just when I was passing," she continued, "all this would never have happened. But you were there, and you asked me to come in and have a bite with you; and I did, and there you are."

"Yes, there I am," assented Jimmy dismally. There was no doubt about where he was now, but where was he going to end? That was the question. "See here," he exclaimed with fast growing uneasiness, "I don't like being mixed up in this sort of thing."

"Of course you'd think of yourself first," sneered Zoie. "That's just like a man."

"Well, I don't want to get your husband down on me," argued Jimmy evasively.

"Oh, I didn't give YOU away," sneered Zoie. "YOU needn't worry," and she fixed her eyes upon him with a scornful expression that left no doubt as to her opinion that he was a craven coward.

"But you said he'd 'found out,' " stammered Jimmy.

"He's found out that I ate with a MAN," answered Zoie, more and more aggrieved at having to employ so much detail in the midst of her distress. "He doesn't know it was you."

"But Zoie----" protested Jimmy.

She lifted a small hand, begging him to spare her further questions. It was apparent that she must explain each aspect of their present difficulty, with as much patience as though Jimmy were in reality only a child. She sank into her chair and then proceeded, with a martyred air.

"You see it was like this," she said. "Alfred came into the restaurant just after we had gone out and Henri, the waiter who has taken care of him for years, told him that I had just been in to luncheon with a gentleman."

Jimmy shifted about on the edge of his chair, ill at ease.

"Now if Alfred had only told me that in the first place," she continued, "I'd have known what to say, but he didn't. Oh no, he was as sweet as could be all through breakfast and last night too, and then just as he was leaving this morning, I said something about luncheon and he said, quite casually, 'Where did you have luncheon YESTERDAY, my dear?' So I answered quite carelessly, 'I had none, my love.' Well, I wish you could have seen him. He called me dreadful things. He says I'm the one thing he can't endure."

"What's that?" questioned Jimmy, wondering how Alfred could confine himself to any "ONE thing."

"He says I'm a liar!" shrieked Zoie tearfully.

"Well, aren't you?" asked Jimmy.

"Of course I am," declared Zoie; "but why shouldn't I be?" She looked at Jimmy with such an air of self-approval that for the life of him he could find no reason to offer. "You know how jealous Alfred is," she continued. "He makes such a fuss about the slightest thing that I've got out of the habit of EVER telling the TRUTH." She walked away from Jimmy as though dismissing the entire matter; he shifted his position uneasily; she turned to him again with mock sweetness. "I suppose YOU told AGGIE all about it?" she said.

Jimmy's round eyes opened wide and his jaw dropped lower.

"I--I--don't believe I did," he stammered weakly. "I didn't think of it again."

"Thank heaven for that!" concluded Zoie with tightly pressed lips. Then she knotted her small white brow in deep thought.

Jimmy regarded her with growing uneasiness. "What are you up to now?" he asked.

"I don't know yet," mused Zoie, "BUT YOU'RE NOT GOING TO TELL

AGGIE--that's ONE SURE thing." And she pinned him down with her eyes.

"I certainly will tell her," asserted Jimmy, with a wag of his very round head. "Aggie is just the one to get you out of this."

"She's just the one to make things worse," said Zoie decidedly. Then seeing Jimmy's hurt look, she continued apologetically: "Aggie MEANS all right, but she has an absolute mania for mixing up in other people's troubles. And you know how THAT always ends."

"I never deceived my wife in all my life," declared Jimmy, with an air of self approval that he was far from feeling.

"Now, Jimmy," protested Zoie impatiently, "you aren't going to have moral hydrophobia just when I need your help!"

"I'm not going to lie to Aggie, if that's what you mean," said Jimmy, endeavouring not to wriggle under Zoie's disapproving gaze.

"Then don't," answered Zoie sweetly.

Jimmy never feared Zoie more than when she APPEARED to agree with him. He looked at her now with uneasy distrust.

"Tell her the truth," urged Zoie.

"I will," declared Jimmy with an emphatic nod.

"And I'LL DENY IT," concluded Zoie with an impudent toss of her head.

"What!" exclaimed Jimmy, and he felt himself getting onto his feet.

"I've already denied it to Alfred," continued Zoie. "I told him I'd never been in that restaurant without him in all my life, that the waiter had mistaken someone else for me." And again she turned her back upon Jimmy.

"But don't you see," protested Jimmy, "this would all be so very much simpler if you'd just own up to the truth now, before it's too late?"

"It IS too late," declared Zoie. "Alfred wouldn't believe me now, whatever I told him. He says a woman who lies once lies all the time. He'd think I'd been carrying on with you ALL ALONG."

"Good Lord!" groaned Jimmy as the full realisation of his predicament thrust itself upon him.

"We don't DARE tell him now," continued Zoie, elated by the demoralised state to which she was fast reducing him. "For Heaven's sake, don't make it any worse," she concluded; "it's bad enough as it is."

"It certainly is," agreed Jimmy, and he sank dejectedly into his chair.

"If you DO tell him," threatened Zoie from the opposite side of the table, "I'll say you ENTICED me into the place."

"What!" shrieked Jimmy and again he found himself on his feet.

"I will," insisted Zoie, "I give you fair warning."

He stared at her in absolute horror. "I don't believe you've any conscience at all," he said.

"I haven't," she sniffled. "I'm too miserable." And throwing herself into the nearest armchair she wept copiously at the thought of her many injuries.

Uncertain whether to fly or to remain, Jimmy gazed at her gloomily. "Well, I'M not laughing myself to death," he said.

For answer Zoie turned upon him vehemently. "I just wish I'd never laid eyes on you, Jimmy," she cried.

Jimmy was wishing the very same thing.

"If I cared about you," she sobbed, "it wouldn't be so bad; but to think of losing my Alfred for----" words failed her and she trailed off weakly,--"for nothing!"

"Thanks," grunted Jimmy curtly. In spite of himself he was always miffed by the uncomplimentary way in which she disposed of him.

His sarcasm was lost upon Zoie. Having finished all she had to say to him, she was now apparently bent upon indulging herself in a first class fit of hysterics.

There are critical moments in all of our lives when our future happiness or woe hangs upon our own decision. Jimmy felt intuitively that he was face to face with such a moment, but which way to turn? that was the question. Being Jimmy, and soft-hearted in spite of his efforts to conceal it, he naturally turned the wrong way, in other words, towards Zoie.

"Oh, come now," he said awkwardly, as he crossed to the arm of her chair. "This will soon blow over."

Zoie only sobbed the louder.

"This isn't the first time you and Alfred have called it all off," he reminded her.

Again she sobbed.

Jimmy could never remember quite how it happened. But apparently he must have patted Zoie on the shoulder. At any rate, something or other loosened the flood-gates of her emotion, and before Jimmy could possibly escape from her vicinity she had wheeled round in her chair, thrown her arms about him, and buried her tear-stained face against his waist-coat.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Jimmy, for the third time that morning, as he glanced nervously toward the door; but Zoie was exclaiming in her own way and sobbing louder and louder; furthermore she was compelling Jimmy to listen to an exaggerated account of her many disappointments in her unreasonable husband. Seeing no possibility of escape, without resorting to physical violence, Jimmy stood his ground, wondering what to expect next. He did not have long to wonder.

CHAPTER V

WITHIN an hour from the time Alfred had entered his office that morning he was leaving it, in a taxi, with his faithful secretary at his side, and his important papers in a bag at his feet.

"Take me to the Sherwood," he commanded the driver, "and be quick."

As they neared Alfred's house, Johnson could feel waves of increasing anger circling around his perturbed young employer and later when they alighted from the taxi it was with the greatest difficulty that he could keep pace with him.

Unfortunately for Jimmy, the outer door of the Hardy apartment had been left ajar, and thus it was that he was suddenly startled from Zoie's unwelcome embraces by a sharp exclamation.

"So!" cried Alfred, and he brought his fist down with emphasis on the centre table at Jimmy's back.

Wheeling about, Jimmy beheld his friend face to face with him. Alfred's lips were pressed tightly together, his eyes flashing fire. It was apparent that he desired an immediate explanation. Jimmy turned to the place where Zoie had been, to ask for help; like the traitress that she was, he now saw her flying through her bedroom door. Again he glanced at Alfred, who was standing like a sentry, waiting for the pass-word that should restore his confidence in his friend.

"I'm afraid I've disturbed you," sneered Alfred.

"Oh, no, not at all," answered Jimmy, affecting a careless indifference that he did not feel and unconsciously shaking hands with the waiting secretary.

Reminded of the secretary's presence in such a distinctly family scene, Alfred turned to him with annoyance.

"Go into my study," he said. "I'll be with you presently. Here's your list," he added and he thrust a long memorandum into the secretary's hand. Johnson retired as unobtrusively as possible and the two old friends were left alone. There was another embarrassed silence which Jimmy, at least, seemed powerless to break.

"Well?" questioned Alfred in a threatening tone.

"Tolerably well," answered Jimmy in his most pleasant but slightly nervous manner. Then followed another pause in which Alfred continued to eye his old friend with grave suspicion.

"The fact is," stammered Jimmy, "I just came over to bring Aggie----" he corrected himself-- "that is, to bring Zoie a little message from Aggie."

"It seemed to be a SAD one," answered Alfred, with a sarcastic smile, as he recalled the picture of Zoie weeping upon his friend's sleeve.

"Oh no--no!" answered Jimmy, with an elaborate attempt at carelessness.

"Do you generally play the messenger during business hours?" thundered Alfred, becoming more and more enraged at Jimmy's petty evasions.

"Just SOMETIMES," answered Jimmy, persisting in his amiable manner.

"Jimmy," said Alfred, and there was a solemn warning in his voice, "don't YOU lie to me!"

Jimmy started as though shot. The consciousness of his guilt was strong upon him. "I beg your pardon," he gasped, for the want of anything more intelligent to say.

"You don't do it well," continued Alfred, "and you and I are old friends."

Jimmy's round eyes fixed themselves on the carpet.

"My wife has been telling you her troubles," surmised Alfred.

Jimmy tried to protest, but the lie would not come.

"Very well," continued Alfred, "I'll tell you something too. I've done with her." He thrust his hands in his pockets and began to walk up and down.

"What a turbulent household," thought Jimmy and then he set out in pursuit of his friend. "I'm sorry you've had a misunderstanding," he began.

"Misunderstanding!" shouted Alfred, turning upon him so sharply that he nearly tripped him up, "we've never had anything else. There was never anything else for us TO have. She's lied up hill and down dale from the first time she clinched her baby fingers around my hand--" he imitated Zoie's dainty manner-- "and said 'pleased to meet you!' But I've caught her with the goods this time," he shouted, "and I've just about got HIM."

"Him!" echoed Jimmy weakly.

"The wife-stealer," exclaimed Alfred, and he clinched his fists in anticipation of the justice he would one day mete out to the despicable creature.

Now Jimmy had been called many things in his time, he realised that he would doubtless be called many more things in the future, but never by the wildest stretch of imagination, had he ever conceived of himself in the role of "wife- stealer."

Mistaking Jimmy's look of amazement for one of incredulity, Alfred endeavoured to convince him.

"Oh, YOU'LL meet a wife-stealer sooner or later," he assured him. "You needn't look so horrified."

Jimmy only stared at him and he continued excitedly: "She's had the effrontery--the bad taste--the idiocy to lunch in a public restaurant with the blackguard."

The mere sound of the word made Jimmy shudder, but engrossed in his own troubles Alfred continued without heeding him.

"Henri, the head-waiter, told me," explained Alfred, and Jimmy remembered guiltily that he had been very bumptious with the fellow. "You know the place," continued Alfred, "the LaSalle --a restaurant where I am known--where she is known--where my best friends dine--where Henri has looked after me for years. That shows how desperate she is. She must be mad about the fool. She's lost all sense of decency." And again Alfred paced the floor.

"Oh, I wouldn't go as far as that," stammered Jimmy.

"Oh, wouldn't you?" cried Alfred, again turning so abruptly that Jimmy caught his breath. Each word of Jimmy's was apparently goading him on to greater anger.

"Now don't get hasty," Jimmy almost pleaded. "The whole thing is no doubt perfectly innocent. Talk to her gently. Win her confidence. Get her to tell you the truth."

"The truth!" shouted Alfred in derision. "Zoie! The truth!"

Jimmy feared that his young friend might actually become violent. Alfred bore down upon him like a maniac.

"The truth!" he repeated wildly. "She wouldn't know the truth if she saw it under a microscope. She's the most unconscionable little liar that ever lured a man to the altar."

Jimmy rolled his round eyes with feigned incredulity.

"I found it out before we'd been married a month," continued Alfred. "She used to sit evenings facing the clock. I sat with my back to it. I used to ask her the time. Invariably she would lie half an hour, backward or forward, just for practice. THAT was the BEGINNING. Here, listen to some of these," he added, as he drew half a dozen telegrams from his inner pocket, and motioned Jimmy to sit at the opposite side of the table.

Jimmy would have preferred to stand, but it was not a propitious time to consult his own preferences. He allowed himself to be bullied into the chair that Alfred suggested.

Throwing himself into the opposite chair, Alfred selected various exhibits from his collection of messages. "I just brought these up from the office," he said. "These are some of the telegrams that she sent me each day last week while I was away. This is Monday's." And he proceeded to read with a sneering imitation of Zoie's cloy sweetness.

" 'Darling, so lonesome without you. Cried all day. When are you coming home to your wee sad wifie? Love and kisses. Zoie.' "

Tearing the defenceless telegram into bits, Alfred threw it from him and waited for his friend's verdict.

"She sent that over the wire?" gasped Jimmy.

"Oh, that's nothing," answered Alfred. "That's a mild one." And he selected another from the same pocket. "Here, listen to this. This is what she REALLY did. This is from my secretary the same night."

"You spied upon her!" asked Jimmy, feeling more and more convinced that his own deceptions would certainly be run to

earth.

"I HAVE to spy upon her," answered Alfred, "in self-defence. It's the only way I can keep her from making me utterly ridiculous." And he proceeded to read from the secretary's telegram. " 'Shopped all morning. Lunched at Martingale's with man and woman unknown to me--Martingale's,' " he repeated with a sneer-- " 'Motored through Park with Mrs. Wilmer until five.' Mrs. Wilmer," he exclaimed, "there's a woman I've positively forbidden her to speak to."

Jimmy only shook his head and Alfred continued to read.

" 'Had tea with Mr. and Mrs. Thompson and young Ardesley at the Park View.' Ardesley is a young cub," explained Alfred, "who spends his time running around with married women while their husbands are away trying to make a living for them."

"Shocking!" was the extent of Jimmy's comment, and Alfred resumed reading.

" 'Dinner and theatre same party. Supper at Wellingford. Home two A. M.' " He looked at Jimmy, expecting to hear Zoie bitterly condemned. Jimmy only stared at him blankly. "That's pretty good," commented Alfred, "for the woman who 'CRIED' all day, isn't it?"

Still Jimmy made no answer, and Alfred brought his fist down upon the table impatiently. "Isn't it?" he repeated.

"She was a bit busy THAT day," admitted Jimmy uneasily.

"The truth!" cried Alfred again, as he rose and paced about excitedly. "Getting the truth out of Zoie is like going to a fire in the night. You think it's near, but you never get there. And when she begins by saying that she's going to tell you the 'REAL truth' "--he threw up his hands in despair--"well, then it's time to leave home."

CHAPTER VI

There was another pause, then Alfred drew in his breath and bore down upon Jimmy with fresh vehemence. "The only time I get even a semblance of truth out of Zoie," he cried, "is when I catch her red-handed." Again he pounded the table and again Jimmy winced. "And even then," he continued, "she colours it so with her affected innocence and her plea about just wishing to be a 'good fellow,' that she almost makes me doubt my own eyes. She is an artist," he declared with a touch of enforced admiration. "There's no use talking; that woman is an artist."

"What are you going to do?" asked Jimmy, for the want of anything better to say.

"I am going to leave her," declared Alfred emphatically. "I am going away."

A faint hope lit Jimmy's round childlike face. With Alfred away there would be no further investigation of the luncheon incident.

"That might be a good idea," he said.

"It's THE idea," said Alfred; "most of my business is in Detroit anyhow. I'm going to make that my headquarters and stay there."

Jimmy was almost smiling.

"As for Zoie," continued Alfred, "she can stay right here and go as far as she likes."

"Not with me," thought Jimmy.

"But," shrieked Alfred, with renewed emphasis, "I'm going to find out who the FELLOW is. I'll have THAT satisfaction!"

Jimmy's spirits fell.

"Henri knows the head-waiter of every restaurant in this town," said Alfred, "that is, every one where she'd be likely to go; and he says he'd recognise the man she lunched with if he saw him again."

Jimmy's features became suddenly distorted.

"The minute she appears anywhere with anybody," explained Alfred, "Henri will be notified by 'phone. He'll identify the man and then he'll wire me."

"What good will that do?" asked Jimmy weakly.

"I'll take the first train home," declared Alfred.

"For what?" questioned Jimmy.

"To shoot him!" exclaimed Alfred.

"What!" gasped Jimmy, almost losing his footing.

Alfred mistook Jimmy's concern for anxiety on his behalf.

"Oh, I'll be acquitted," he declared. "Don't you worry. I'll get my tale of woe before the jury."

"But I say," protested Jimmy, too uneasy to longer conceal his

real emotions, "why kill this one particular chap when there are so many others?"

"He's the only one she's ever lunched with, ALONE," said Alfred. "She's been giddy, but at least she's always been chaperoned, except with him. He's the one all right; there's no doubt about it. He's the beginning of the end."

"His own end, yes," assented Jimmy half to himself. "Now, see here, old man," he argued, "I'd give that poor devil a chance to explain."

"Explain!" shouted Alfred so sharply that Jimmy quickly retreated. "I wouldn't believe him now if he were one of the Twelve Apostles."

"That's tough," murmured Jimmy as he saw the last avenue of honourable escape closed to him.

"Tough!" roared Alfred, thinking of himself. "Hah."

"On the Apostles, I mean," explained Jimmy nervously.

Again Alfred paced up and down the room, and again Jimmy tried to think of some way to escape from his present difficulty. It was quite apparent that his only hope lay not in his own candor, but in Alfred's absence. "How long do you expect to be away?" he asked.

"Only until I hear from Henri," said Alfred.

"Henri?" repeated Jimmy and again a gleam of hope shone on his dull features. He had heard that waiters were often to be bribed. "Nice fellow, Henri," he ventured cautiously. "Gets a large salary, no doubt?"

"Does he!" exclaimed Alfred, with a certain pride of proprietorship. "No tips could touch Henri, no indeed. He's not that sort of a person."

Again the hope faded from Jimmy's round face.

"I look upon Henri as my friend," continued Alfred enthusiastically. "He speaks every language known to man. He's been in every country in the world. HENRI UNDERSTANDS LIFE."

"LOTS of people UNDERSTAND LIFE," commented Jimmy dismally, "but SOME people don't APPRECIATE it. They value it too lightly, to MY way of thinking."

"Ah, but you have something to live for," argued Alfred.

"I have indeed; a great deal," agreed Jimmy, more and more abused

at the thought of what he was about to lose.

"Ah, that's different," exclaimed Alfred. "But what have _I_?"

Jimmy was in no frame of mind to consider his young friend's assets, he was thinking of his own difficulties.

"I'm a laughing stock," shouted Alfred. "I know it. A 'good thing' who gives his wife everything she asks for, while she is running around with--with my best friend, for all I know."

"Oh, no, no," protested Jimmy nervously. "I wouldn't say that."

"Even if she weren't running around," continued Alfred excitedly, without heeding his friend's interruption, "what have we to look forward to? What have we to look backward to?"

Again Jimmy's face was a blank.

Alfred answered his own question by lifting his arms tragically toward Heaven. "One eternal round of wrangles and rows! A childless home! Do you think she wants babies?" he cried, wheeling about on Jimmy, and daring him to answer in the affirmative. "Oh, no!" he sneered. "All she wants is a good time."

"Well," mumbled Jimmy, "I can't see much in babies myself, fat, little, red worms."

Alfred's breath went from him in astonishment

"Weren't YOU ever a fat, little, red worm?" he hissed. "Wasn't _I_ ever a little, fat, red----" he paused in confusion, as his ear became puzzled by the proper sequence of his adjectives, "a fat, red, little worm," he stammered; "and see what we are now!" He thrust out his chest and strutted about in great pride.

"Big red worms," admitted Jimmy gloomily.

But Alfred did not hear him. "You and I ought to have SONS on the way to what we are," he declared, "and better."

"Oh yes, better," agreed Jimmy, thinking of his present plight. "Much better."

"But HAVE we?" demanded Alfred.

Jimmy glanced about the room, as though expecting an answering demonstration from the ceiling.

"Have YOU?" persisted Alfred.

Jimmy shook his head solemnly.

"Have _I_?" asked the irate husband.

Out of sheer absent mindedness Jimmy shrugged his shoulders.

As usual Alfred answered his own question. "Oh, no!" he raged. "YOU have a wife who spends her time and money gadding about with----"

Jimmy's face showed a new alarm.

"--my wife," concluded Alfred.

Jimmy breathed a sigh of relief.

"I have a wife," said Alfred, "who spends her time and my money gadding around with God knows whom. But I'll catch him!" he cried with new fury. "Here," he said, pulling a roll of bills from his pocket. "I'll bet you I'll catch him. How much do you want to bet?"

Undesirous of offering any added inducements toward his own capture, Jimmy backed away both literally and figuratively from Alfred's proposition.

"What's the use of getting so excited?" he asked.

Mistaking Jimmy's unwillingness to bet for a disinclination to take advantage of a friend's reckless mood, Alfred resented the implied insult to his astuteness.

"You think I can't catch him?" he exclaimed. "Let's see the colour of your money," he demanded.

But before Jimmy could comply, an unexpected voice broke into the argument and brought them both round with a start.

CHAPTER VII

"Good Heavens," exclaimed Aggie, who had entered the room while Alfred was talking his loudest. "What a racket!"

Her eyes fell upon Jimmy who was teetering about uneasily just behind Alfred. She stared at him in amazement. Was it possible that Jimmy, the methodical, had left his office at this hour of the morning, and for what?

Avoiding the question in Aggie's eyes, Jimmy pretended to be searching for his pocket handkerchief-- but always with the vision of Aggie in her new Fall gown and her large "picture" hat at his elbow. Never before had she appeared so beautiful to him,

so desirable--suppose he should lose her? Life spread before him as a dreary waste. He tried to look up at her; he could not. He feared she would read his guilt in his eyes. "What guilt?" he asked himself. There was no longer any denying the fact--a secret had sprung up between them.

Annoyed at receiving no greeting, Aggie continued in a rather hurt voice:

"Aren't you two going to speak to me?"

Alfred swallowed hard in an effort to regain his composure.

"Good-morning," he said curtly.

Fully convinced of a disagreement between the two old friends, Aggie addressed herself in a reproachful tone to Jimmy.

"My dear," she said, "what are you doing here this time of day?"

Jimmy felt Alfred's steely eyes upon him. "Why!" he stammered. "Why, I just came over to--bring your message."

"My message?" repeated Aggie in perplexity. "What message?"

Alfred's eyebrows drew themselves sharply together.

Jimmy had told so many lies this morning that another more or less could not matter; moreover, this was not a time to hesitate.

"Why, the message you sent to Zoie," he answered boldly.

"But I sent no message to Zoie," said Aggie.

"What!" thundered Alfred, so loud that Aggie's fingers involuntarily went to her ears. She was more and more puzzled by the odd behaviour of the two.

"I mean yesterday's message," corrected Jimmy. And he assumed an aggrieved air toward Aggie.

"You villain," exclaimed Aggie. "I told you to 'phone her yesterday morning from the office."

"Yes, I know," agreed Jimmy placidly, "but I forgot it and I just came over to explain." Alfred's fixed stare was relaxing and at last Jimmy could breathe.

"Oh," murmured Aggie, with a wise little elevation of her eye-brows, "then that's why Zoie didn't keep her luncheon appointment with me yesterday."

Jimmy felt that if this were to go on much longer, he would utter

one wild shriek and give himself up for lost; but at present he merely swallowed with an effort, and awaited developments.

It was now Alfred's turn to become excited.

"Oh, IS it!" he cried with hysterical laughter.

Aggie regarded him with astonishment. Was this her usually self-controlled friend?

"Oh, no!" sneered Alfred with unmistakable pity for her credulity. "That's not why my wife didn't eat luncheon with you. She may TELL you that's why. She undoubtedly will; but it's NOT why. Oh, no!" and running his hands through his hair, Alfred tore up and down the room.

"What do you mean by that?" Aggie asked in amazement.

"Your dear husband Jimmy will doubtless explain," answered Alfred with a slur on the "dear." Then he turned toward the door of his study. "Pray excuse me--I'M TOO BUSY," and with that he strode out of the room and banged the study door behind him.

"Goodness gracious!" gasped Aggie. She looked after Alfred, then at Jimmy. She was the picture of consternation. "What's the matter with him?" she asked.

"Just another little family tiff," answered Jimmy, trying to assume a nonchalant manner.

"Not about YOU!" gasped Aggie.

"Me!" cried Jimmy, his equilibrium again upset. "Certainly not!" he declared. "What an idea!"

"Yes, wasn't it?" answered Aggie. "That just shows how silly one can be. I almost thought Alfred was going to say that Zoie had lunched with you."

"Me?" again echoed Jimmy, and he wondered if everybody in the world had conspired to make him the target of their attention. He caught Aggie's eye and tried to laugh carelessly. "That would have been funny, wouldn't it?" he said.

"Yes, wouldn't it," repeated Aggie, and he thought he detected a slight uneasiness in her voice.

"Speaking of lunch," added Jimmy quickly, "I think, dearie, that I'll come home for lunch in the future."

"What?" exclaimed Aggie in great amazement.

"Those downtown places upset my digestion," explained Jimmy

quickly.

"Isn't this very SUDDEN," she asked, and again Jimmy fancied that there was a shade of suspicion in her tone.

His face assumed a martyred expression. "Of course, dear," he said, "if you insist upon my eating downtown, I'll do it; but I thought you'd be glad to have me at home."

Aggie turned to him with real concern. "Why, Jimmy," she said, "what's the matter with you?" She took a step toward him and anxiously studied his face. "I never heard you talk like that before. I don't think you're well."

"That's just what I'm telling you," insisted Jimmy vehemently, excited beyond all reason by receiving even this small bit of sympathy. "I'm ill," he declared. No sooner had he made the declaration than he began to believe in it. His doleful countenance increased Aggie's alarm.

"My angel-face," she purred, and she took his chubby cheeks in her hands and looked down at him fondly. "You know I ALWAYS want you to come home." She stooped and kissed Jimmy's pouting lips. He held up his face for more. She smoothed the hair from his worried brow and endeavoured to cheer him. "I'll run right home now," she said, "and tell cook to get something nice and tempting for you! I can see Zoie later."

"It doesn't matter," murmured Jimmy, as he followed her toward the door with a doleful shake of his head. "I don't suppose I shall ever enjoy my luncheon again--as long as I live."

"Nonsense," cried Aggie, "come along."

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN Alfred returned to the living room he was followed by his secretary, who carried two well-filled satchels. His temper was not improved by the discovery that he had left certain important papers at his office. Dispatching his man to get them and to meet him at the station with them, he collected a few remaining letters from the drawer of the writing table, then uneasy at remaining longer under the same roof with Zoie, he picked up his hat, and started toward the hallway. For the first time his eye was attracted by a thick layer of dust and lint on his coat sleeve. Worse still, there was a smudge on his cuff. If there was one thing more than another that Alfred detested it was untidiness. Putting his hat down with a bang, he tried to flick the dust from his sleeve with his pocket handkerchief; finding this impossible, he removed his coat and began to shake it violently.

It was at this particular moment that Zoie's small face appeared cautiously from behind the frame of the bedroom door. She was quick to perceive Alfred's plight. Disappearing from view for an instant, she soon reappeared with Alfred's favourite clothes-brush. She tiptoed into the room.

Barely had Alfred drawn his coat on his shoulders, when he was startled by a quick little flutter of the brush on his sleeve. He turned in surprise and beheld Zoie, who looked up at him as penitent and irresistible as a newly-punished child.

"Oh," snarled Alfred, and he glared at her as though he would enjoy strangling her on the spot.

"Alfred," pouted Zoie, and he knew she was going to add her customary appeal of "Let's make up." But Alfred was in no mood for nonsense. He thrust his hands in his pockets and made straight for the outer doorway.

Smiling to herself as she saw him leaving without his hat, Zoie slipped it quickly beneath a flounce of her skirt. No sooner had Alfred reached the sill of the door than his hand went involuntarily to his head; he turned to the table where he had left his hat. His face wore a puzzled look. He glanced beneath the table, in the chair, behind the table, across the piano, and then he began circling the room with pent up rage. He dashed into his study and out again, he threw the chairs about with increasing irritation, then giving up the search, he started hatless toward the hallway. It was then that a soft babyish voice reached his ear.

"Have you lost something, dear?" cooed Zoie.

Alfred hesitated. It was difficult to lower his dignity by answering her, but he needed his headgear. "I want my hat," he admitted shortly.

"Your hat?" repeated Zoie innocently and she glanced around the room with mild interest. "Maybe Mary took it."

"Mary!" cried Alfred, and thinking the mystery solved, he dashed toward the inner hallway.

"Let ME get it, dear," pleaded Zoie, and she laid a small detaining hand upon his arm as he passed.

"Stop it!" commanded Alfred hotly, and he shook the small hand from his sleeve as though it had been something poisonous.

"But Allie," protested Zoie, pretending to be shocked and grieved.

"Don't you 'but Allie' me," cried Alfred, turning upon her sharply. "All I want is my hat," and again he started in search of Mary.

"But--but--but Allie," stammered Zoie, as she followed him.

"But--but--but," repeated Alfred, turning on her in a fury. "You've butted me out of everything that I wanted all my life, but you're not going to do it again."

"You see, you said it yourself," laughed Zoie.

"Said WHAT," roared Alfred.

"But," tittered Zoie.

The remnants of Alfred's self-control were forsaking him. He clinched his fists hard in a final effort toward restraint. "You'd just as well stop all these baby tricks," he threatened between his teeth, "they're not going to work. THIS time my mind is made up."

"Then why are you afraid to talk to me?" asked Zoie sweetly.

"Who said I was afraid?" demanded Alfred hotly.

"You ACT like it," declared Zoie, with some truth on her side. "You don't want----" she got no further.

"All I want," interrupted Alfred, "is to get out of this house once and for all and to stay out of it." And again he started in pursuit of his hat.

"Why, Allie," she gazed at him with deep reproach. "You liked this place so much when we first came here."

Again Alfred picked at the lint on his coat sleeve. Edging her way toward him cautiously she ventured to touch his sleeve with the brush.

"I'll attend to that myself," he said curtly, and he sank into the nearest chair to tie a refractory shoe lace.

"Let me brush you, dear," pleaded Zoie. "I don't wish you to start out in the world looking unbrushed," she pouted. Then with a sly emphasis she added teasingly, "The OTHER women might not admire you that way."

Alfred broke his shoe string then and there. While he stooped to tie a knot in it, Zoie managed to perch on the arm of his chair.

"You know, Allie," she continued coaxingly, "no one could ever love you as I do."

Again Alfred broke his shoe lace.

"Oh, Allie!" she exclaimed with a little ripple of childish laughter, "do you remember how absurdly poor we were when we were first married, and how you refused to take any help from your family? And do you remember that silly old pair of black trousers that used to get so thin on the knees and how I used to put shoe-blackening underneath so the white wouldn't show through?" By this time her arm managed to get around his neck.

"Stop it!" shrieked Alfred as though mortal man could endure no more. "You've used those trousers to settle every crisis in our lives."

Zoie gazed at him without daring to breathe; even she was aghast at his fury, but only temporarily. She recovered herself and continued sweetly:

"If everything is SETTLED," she argued, "where's the harm in talking?"

"We've DONE with talking," declared Alfred. "From this on, I act." And determined not to be cheated out of this final decision, he again started for the hall door.

"Oh, Allie!" cried Zoie in a tone of sharp alarm.

In spite of himself Alfred turned to learn the cause of her anxiety.

"You haven't got your overshoes on," she said.

Speechless with rage, Alfred continued on his way, but Zoie moved before him swiftly. "I'll get them for you, dear," she volunteered graciously.

"Stop!" thundered Alfred. They were now face to face.

"I wish you wouldn't roar like that," pouted Zoie, and the pink tips of her fingers were thrust tight against her ears.

Alfred drew in his breath and endeavoured for the last time to repress his indignation. "Either you can't, or you won't understand that it is extremely unpleasant for me to even talk to you-- much less to receive your attentions."

"Very likely," answered Zoie, unperturbed. "But so long as I am your lawful wedded wife----" she emphasised the "lawful"--"I shan't let any harm come to you, if _I_ can help it." She lifted her eyes to heaven bidding it to bear witness to her martyrdom and looking for all the world like a stained glass saint.

"Oh, no!" shouted Alfred, almost hysterical at his apparent failure to make himself understood. "You wouldn't let any harm come to me. Oh, no. You've only made me the greatest joke in Chicago," he shouted. "You've only made me such a laughing stock that I have to leave it. That's all--that's all!"

"Leave Chicago!" exclaimed Zoie incredulously. Then regaining her self-composure, she edged her way close to him and looked up into his eyes in baby-like wonderment. "Why, Allie, where are we going?" Her small arm crept up toward his shoulder. Alfred pushed it from him rudely.

"WE are not going," he asserted in a firm, measured voice. "_I_ am going. Where's my hat?" And again he started in search of his absent headgear.

"Oh, Allie!" she exclaimed, and this time there was genuine alarm in her voice, "you wouldn't leave me?"

"Wouldn't I, though?" sneered Alfred. Before he knew it, Zoie's arms were about him--she was pleading desperately.

"Now see here, Allie, you may call me all the names you like," she cried with great self-abasement, "but you shan't--you SHAN'T go away from Chicago."

"Oh, indeed?" answered Alfred as he shook himself free of her. "I suppose you'd like me to go on with this cat and dog existence. You'd like me to stay right here and pay the bills and take care of you, while you flirt with every Tom, Dick and Harry in town."

"It's only your horrid disposition that makes you talk like that," whimpered Zoie. "You know very well that I never cared for anybody but you."

"Until you GOT me, yes," assented Alfred, "and NOW you care for everybody BUT me." She was about to object, but he continued quickly. "Where you MEET your gentlemen friends is beyond me. _I_ don't introduce them to you."

"I should say not," agreed Zoie, and there was a touch of vindictiveness in her voice. "The only male creature that you ever introduced to me was the family dog."

"I introduce every man who's fit to meet you," declared Alfred with an air of great pride.

"That doesn't speak very well for your acquaintances," snipped Zoie. Even HER temper was beginning to assert itself.

"I won't bicker like this," declared Alfred.

"That's what you always say, when you can't think of an answer," retorted Zoie.

"You mean when I'm tired of answering your nonsense!" thundered Alfred.

CHAPTER IX

Realising that she was rapidly losing ground by exercising her advantage over Alfred in the matter of quick retort, Zoie, with her customary cunning, veered round to a more conciliatory tone.

"Well," she cooed, "suppose I DID eat lunch with a man?"

"Ah!" shrieked Alfred, as though he had at last run his victim to earth.

She retreated with her fingers crossed. "I only said suppose," she reminded him quickly. Then she continued in a tone meant to draw from him his heart's most secret confidence. "Didn't you ever eat lunch with any woman but me?"

"Never!" answered Alfred firmly.

There was an unmistakable expression of pleasure on Zoie's small face, but she forced back the smile that was trying to creep round her lips, and sidled toward Alfred, with eyes properly downcast. "Then I'm very sorry I did it," she said solemnly, "and I'll never do it again."

"So!" cried Alfred with renewed indignation. "You admit it?"

"Just to please you, dear," explained Zoie sweetly, as though she were doing him the greatest possible favour.

"To please me?" gasped Alfred. "Do you suppose it pleases me to know that you are carrying on the moment my back is turned, making a fool of me to my friends?"

"Your friends?" cried Zoie with a sneer. This time it was her turn to be angry. "So! It's your FRIENDS that are worrying you!" In her excitement she tossed Alfred's now damaged hat into the chair just behind her. He was far too overwrought to see it. "_I_ haven't done you any harm," she continued wildly. "It's only what you think your friends think."

"You haven't done me any harm?" repeated Alfred, in her same tragic key, "Oh no! Oh no! You've only cheated me out of everything I expected to get out of life! That's all!"

Zoie came to a full stop and waited for him to enumerate the various treasures that he had lost by marrying her. He did so.

"Before we were married," he continued, "you pretended to adore children. You started your humbugging the first day I met you. I refer to little Willie Peck."

A hysterical giggle very nearly betrayed her. Alfred continued:

"I was fool enough to let you know that I admire women who like children. From that day until the hour that I led you to the altar, you'd fondle the ugliest little brats that we met in the street, but the moment you GOT me----"

"Alfred!" gasped Zoie. This was really going too far.

"Yes, I repeat it!" shouted Alfred, pounding the table with his fist for emphasis. "The moment you GOT me, you declared that all children were horrid little insects, and that someone ought to sprinkle bug-powder on them."

"Oh!" protested Zoie, shocked less by Alfred's interpretation of her sentiments, than by the vulgarity with which he expressed them.

"On another occasion," declared Alfred, now carried away by the recital of his long pent up wrongs, "you told me that all babies should be put in cages, shipped West, and kept in pens until they got to be of an interesting age. 'Interesting age!' " he repeated with a sneer, "meaning old enough to take YOU out to luncheon, I suppose."

"I never said any such thing," objected Zoie.

"Well, that was the idea," insisted Alfred. "I haven't your glib way of expressing myself."

"You manage to express yourself very well," retorted Zoie. "When you have anything DISAGREEABLE to say. As for babies," she continued tentatively, "I think they are all very well in their PLACE, but they were NEVER meant for an APARTMENT."

"I offered you a house in the country," shouted Alfred.

"The country!" echoed Zoie. "How could I live in the country, with people being murdered in their beds every night? Read the papers."

"Always an excuse," sighed Alfred resignedly. "There always HAS been and there always would be if I'd stay to listen. Well, for once," he declared, "I'm glad that we have no children. If we had, I might feel some obligation to keep up this farce of a marriage. As it is," he continued, "YOU are free and _I_ am free." And with a courtly wave of his arm, he dismissed Zoie and the entire subject, and again he started in pursuit of Mary and

his hat.

"If it's your freedom you wish," pouted Zoie with an abused air, "you might have said so in the first place."

Alfred stopped in sheer amazement at the cleverness with which the little minx turned his every statement against him.

"It's not very manly of you," she continued, "to abuse me just because you've found someone whom you like better."

"That's not true," protested Alfred hotly, "and you know it's not true." Little did he suspect the trap into which she was leading him.

"Then you DON'T love anybody more than you do me?" she cried eagerly, and she gazed up at him with adoring eyes.

"I didn't say any such thing," hedged Alfred.

"Then you DO," she accused him.

"I DON'T," he declared in self defence.

With a cry of joy, she sprang into his arms, clasped her fingers tightly behind his neck, and rained impulsive kisses upon his unsuspecting face.

For an instant, Alfred looked down at Zoie, undecided whether to strangle her or to return her embraces. As usual, his self-respect won the day for him and, with a determined effort, he lifted her high in the air, so that she lost her tenacious hold of him, and sat her down with a thud in the very same chair in which she had lately dropped his hat. Having acted with this admirable resolution, he strode majestically toward the inner hall, but before he could reach it, Zoie was again on her feet, in a last vain effort to conciliate him. Turning, Alfred caught sight of his poor battered hat. This was the final spur to action. Snatching it up with one hand, and throwing his latchkey on the table with the other, he made determinedly for the outer door.

Screaming hysterically, Zoie caught him just as he reached the threshold and threw the whole weight of her body upon him.

"Alfred," she pleaded, "if you REALLY love me, you CAN'T leave me like this!" Her emotion was now genuine. He looked down at her gravely-- then into the future.

"There are other things more important than what YOU call 'love,' " he said, very solemnly.

"There is such a thing as a soul, if you only knew it. And you

have hurt mine through and through."

"But how, Alfred, how?" asked the small person, and there was a frown of genuine perplexity on her tiny puckered brow. "What have I REALLY DONE," She stroked his hand fondly; her baby eyes searched his face.

"It isn't so much what people DO to us that counts," answered Alfred in a proud hurt voice. "It's how much they DISAPPOINT us in what they do. I expected better of YOU," he said sadly.

"I'll DO better," coaxed Zoie, "if you'll only give me a chance."

He was half inclined to believe her.

"Now, Allie," she pleaded, perceiving that his resentment was dying and resolved to, at last, adopt a straight course, "if you'll only listen, I'll tell you the REAL TRUTH."

Unprepared for the electrical effect of her remark, Zoie found herself staggering to keep her feet. She gazed at Alfred in amazement. His arms were lifted to Heaven, his breath was coming fast.

" 'The REAL TRUTH!' " he gasped, then bringing his crushed hat down on his forehead with a resounding whack, he rushed from her sight.

The clang of the closing elevator door brought Zoie to a realisation of what had actually happened. Determined that Alfred should not escape her she rushed to the hall door and called to him wildly. There was no answer. Running back to the room, she threw open the window and threw herself half out of it. She was just in time to see Alfred climb into a passing taxi. "Alfred!" she cried. Then automatically she flew to the 'phone. "Give me 4302 Main," she called and she tried to force back her tears. "Is this Hardy & Company?" she asked.

"Well, this is Mrs. Hardy," she explained.

"I wish you'd ring me up the moment my husband comes in." There was a slight pause, then she clutched the receiver harder. "Not COMING back?" she gasped. "Gone!--to Detroit?" A short moan escaped her lips. She let the receiver fall back on the hook and her head went forward on her outstretched arms.

CHAPTER X

When Jimmy came home to luncheon that day, Aggie succeeded in getting a general idea of the state of affairs in the Hardy household. Of course Jimmy didn't tell the whole truth. Oh,

no--far from it. In fact, he appeared to be aggravatingly ignorant as to the exact cause of the Hardy upheaval. Of ONE thing, however, he was certain. "Alfred was going to quit Chicago and leave Zoie to her own devices."

"Jimmy!" cried Aggie. "How awful!" and before Jimmy was fairly out of the front gate, she had seized her hat and gloves and rushed to the rescue of her friend.

Not surprised at finding Zoie in a state of collapse, Aggie opened her arms sympathetically to receive the weeping confidences that she was sure would soon come.

"Zoie dear," she said as the fragile mite rocked to and fro. "What is it?" She pressed the soft ringlets from the girl's throbbing forehead.

"It's Alfred," sobbed Zoie. "He's gone!"

"Yes, I know," answered Aggie tenderly. "Isn't it awful? Jimmy just told me."

"Jimmy told you WHAT?" questioned Zoie, and she lifted her head and regarded Aggie with sudden uneasiness. Her friend's answer raised Jimmy considerably in Zoie's esteem. Apparently he had not breathed a word about the luncheon.

"Why, Jimmy told me," continued Aggie, "that you and Alfred had had another tiff, and that Alfred had gone for good."

"For GOOD!" echoed Zoie and her eyes were wide with terror. "Did Alfred tell Jimmy that?"

Aggie nodded.

"Then he MEANS it!" cried Zoie, at last fully convinced of the strength of Alfred's resolve. "But he shan't," she declared emphatically. "I won't let him. I'll go after him. He has no right----" By this time she was running aimlessly about the room.

"What did you do to him?" asked Aggie, feeling sure that Zoie was as usual at fault.

"Nothing," answered Zoie with wide innocent eyes.

"Nothing?" echoed Aggie, with little confidence in her friend's ability to judge impartially about so personal a matter.

"Absolutely nothing," affirmed Zoie. And there was no doubting that she at least believed it.

"What does he SAY," questioned Aggie diplomatically.

"He SAYS I 'hurt his soul.' Whatever THAT is," answered Zoie, and her face wore an injured expression. "Isn't that a nice excuse," she continued, "for leaving your lawful wedded wife?" It was apparent that she expected Aggie to rally strongly to her defence. But at present Aggie was bent upon getting facts.

"HOW did you hurt him?" she persisted.

"I ate lunch," said Zoie with the face of a cherub.

"With whom?" questioned Aggie slyly. She was beginning to scent the probable origin of the misunderstanding.

"It's of no consequence," answered Zoie carelessly; "I wouldn't have wiped my feet on the man." By this time she had entirely forgotten Aggie's proprietorship in the source of her trouble.

"But who WAS the man?" urged Aggie, and in her mind, she had already condemned him as a low, unprincipled creature.

"What does that matter?" asked Zoie impatiently. "It's ANY man with Alfred--you know that--ANY man! "

Aggie sank in a chair and looked at her friend in despair. "Why DO you do these things," she said wearily, "when you know how Alfred feels about them?"

"You talk as though I did nothing else," answered Zoie with an aggrieved tone. "It's the first time since I've been married that I've ever eaten lunch with any man but Alfred. I thought you'd have a little sympathy with me," she whimpered, "instead of putting me on the gridiron like everyone else does."

"Everyone else?" questioned Aggie, with recurring suspicion.

"I mean Alfred," explained Zoie. "HE'S 'everyone else' to me." And then with a sudden abandonment of grief, she threw herself prostrate at her friend's knees. "Oh, Aggie, what can I do?" she cried.

But Aggie was not satisfied with Zoie's fragmentary account of her latest escapade. "Is that the only thing that Alfred has against you?" she asked.

"That's the LATEST," sniffled Zoie, in a heap at Aggie's feet. And then she continued in a much aggrieved tone, "You know he's ALWAYS rowing because we haven't as many babies as the cook has cats."

"Well, why don't you get him a baby?" asked the practical, far-seeing Aggie.

"It's too late NOW," moaned Zoie.

"Not at all," reassured Aggie. "It's the very thing that would bring him back."

"How COULD I get one?" questioned Zoie, and she looked up at Aggie with round astonished eyes.

"Adopt it," answered Aggie decisively.

Zoie regarded her friend with mingled disgust and disappointment.

"No," she said with a sigh and a shake of her head, "that wouldn't do any good. Alfred's so fussy. He always wants his OWN things around."

"He needn't know," declared Aggie boldly.

"What do you mean?" whispered Zoie.

Drawing herself up with an air of great importance, and regarding the wondering young person at her knee with smiling condescension, Aggie prepared to make a most interesting disclosure.

"There was a long article in the paper only this morning," she told Zoie, "saying that three thousand husbands in this VERY CITY are fondling babies not their own."

Zoie turned her small head to one side, the better to study Aggie's face. It was apparent to the latter that she must be much more explicit.

"Babies adopted in their absence," explained Aggie, "while they were on trips around the country."

A dangerous light began to glitter in Zoie's eyes.

"Aggie!" she cried, bringing her small hands together excitedly, "do you think I COULD?"

"Why not?" asked Aggie, with a very superior air. Zoie's enthusiasm was increasing her friend's admiration of her own scheme. "This same paper tells of a woman who adopted three sons while her husband was in Europe, and he thinks each one of them is his."

"Where can we get some?" cried Zoie, now thoroughly enamoured of the idea.

"You can always get TONS of them at the Children's Home," answered Aggie confidently.

"I can't endure babies," declared Zoie, "but I'd do ANYTHING to get Alfred back. Can we get one TO-DAY?" she asked.

Aggie looked at her small friend with positive pity. "You don't WANT one TO-DAY," she explained.

Zoie rolled her large eyes inquiringly.

"If you were to get one to-day," continued Aggie, "Alfred would know it wasn't yours, wouldn't he?"

A light of understanding began to show on Zoie's small features.

"There was none when he left this morning," added Aggie.

"That's true," acquiesced Zoie.

"You must wait awhile," counselled Aggie, "and then get a perfectly new one."

But Zoie had never been taught to wait.

"Now Aggie----" she began.

Aggie continued without heeding her.

"After a few months," she explained, "when Alfred's temper has had time to cool, we'll get Jimmy to send him a wire that he has an heir."

"A few months!" exclaimed Zoie, as though Aggie had suggested an eternity. "I've never been away from Alfred that long in all my life."

Aggie was visibly annoyed. "Well, of course," she said coldly, as she rose to go, "if you can get Alfred back WITHOUT that----"

"But I can't!" cried Zoie, and she clung to her friend as to her last remaining hope.

"Then," answered Aggie, somewhat mollified by Zoie's complete submission. "THIS is the only way. The President of the Children's Home is a great friend of Jimmy's," she said proudly.

It was at this point that Zoie made her first practical suggestion. "Then we'll LET JIMMY GET IT," she declared.

"Of course," agreed Aggie enthusiastically, as though they would be according the poor soul a rare privilege. "Jimmy gives a hundred dollars to the Home every Christmas,"--additional proof why he should be selected for this very important office.

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Zoie with shocked surprise. "If Alfred were to give a hundred dollars to a Baby's Home, I should suspect him."

"Don't be silly!" snapped Aggie curtly. In spite of her firm faith in Jimmy's innocence, she was undoubtedly annoyed by Zoie's unpleasant suggestion.

There was an instant's pause, then putting disagreeable thoughts from her mind, Aggie turned to Zoie with renewed enthusiasm.

"We must get down to business," she said, "we'll begin on the baby's outfit at once."

"Its what?" queried Zoie.

"Its clothes," explained Aggie.

"Oh, what fun!" exclaimed Zoie, and she clapped her hands merrily like a very small child. A moment later she stopped with sudden misgiving.

"But, Aggie," she said fearfully, "suppose Alfred shouldn't come back after I've got the baby? I'd be a widow with a child."

"Oh, he's sure to come back!" answered Aggie, with a confident air. "He'll take the first train, home."

"I believe he will," assented Zoie joyfully. All her clouds were again dispelled. "Aggie," she cried impulsively, "you are a darling. You have just saved my life." And she clasped her arms so tightly around Aggie's neck that her friend was in danger of being suffocated.

Releasing herself Aggie continued with a ruffled collar and raised vanity: "You can write him an insinuating letter now and then, just to lead up to the good news gradually."

Zoie tipped her small head to one side and studied her friend thoughtfully. "Do you know, Aggie," she said, with frank admiration, "I believe you are a better liar than I am."

"I'm NOT a liar," objected Aggie vehemently, "at least, not often," she corrected. "I've

never lied to Jimmy in all my life." She drew herself up with conscious pride. "And Jimmy has NEVER LIED TO ME."

"Isn't that nice," sniffed Zoie and she pretended to be searching for her pocket-handkerchief.

But Aggie did not see her. She was glancing at the clock.

"I must go now," she said. And she started toward the door.

"But, Aggie----" protested Zoie, unwilling to be left alone.

"I'll run in again at tea time," promised Aggie.

"I don't mind the DAYS," whined Zoie, "but when NIGHT comes I just MUST have somebody's arms around me."

"Zoie!" gasped Aggie, both shocked and alarmed.

"I can't help it," confessed Zoie; "the moment it gets dark I'm just scared stiff."

"That's no way for a MOTHER to talk," reproved Aggie.

"A mother!" exclaimed Zoie, horrified at the sudden realisation that this awful appellation would undoubtedly pursue her for the rest of her life. "Oh, don't call me that," she pleaded. "You make me feel a thousand years old."

"Nonsense," laughed Aggie, and before Zoie could again detain her she was out of the room.

When the outside door had closed behind her friend, Zoie gazed about the room disconsolately, but her depression was short-lived. Remembering Aggie's permission about the letter, she ran quickly to the writing table, curled her small self up on one foot, placed a brand new pen in the holder, then drew a sheet of paper toward her and, with shoulders hunched high and her face close to the paper after the manner of a child, she began to pen the first of a series of veiled communications that were ultimately to fill her young husband with amazement.

CHAPTER XI

When Jimmy reached his office after his unforeseen call upon Zoie, his subsequent encounter with Alfred, and his enforced luncheon at home with Aggie, he found his mail, his 'phone calls, and his neglected appointments in a state of hopeless congestion, and try as he would, he could not concentrate upon their disentanglement. Growing more and more furious with the long legged secretary who stood at the corner of his desk, looking down upon him expectantly, and waiting for his tardy instructions, Jimmy rose and looked out of the window. He could feel Andrew's reproachful eyes following him.

"Shall Miss Perkins take your letters now?" asked Andrew, and he wondered how late the office staff would be kept to-night to make up for the time that was now being wasted.

Coming after repeated wounds from his nearest and dearest, Andrew's implied reproach was too much for Jimmy's overwrought nerves. "Get out!" he answered unceremoniously. And when Andrew

could assure himself that he had heard aright, he stalked out of the door with his head high in the air.

Jimmy looked after his departing secretary with positive hatred. It was apparent to him that the whole world was against him. He had been too easy he decided. His family, friends, and business associates had undoubtedly lost all respect for him. From this day forth he was determined to show himself to be a man of strong mettle.

Having made this important decision and having convinced himself that he was about to start on a new life, Jimmy strode to the door of the office and, without disturbing the injured Andrew, he called sharply to Miss Perkins to come at once and take his letters.

Poor Jimmy! Again he tried in vain to concentrate upon the details of the "cut-glass" industry. Invariably his mind would wander back to the unexpected incidents of the morning. Stopping suddenly in the middle of a letter to a competing firm, he began pacing hurriedly up and down the room.

Had she not feared that her chief might misconstrue any suggestion from her as an act of impertinence, Miss Perkins, having learned all the company's cut-glass quotations by rote, could easily have supplied the remainder of the letter. As it was, she waited impatiently, tapping the corner of the desk with her idle pencil. Jimmy turned at the sound, and glanced at the pencil with unmistakable disapproval. Miss Perkins waited in silence. After one or two more uneasy laps about the room, Jimmy went to his 'phone and called his house number.

"It's undoubtedly domestic trouble," decided Miss Perkins, and she wondered whether it would be delicate of her, under the circumstances, to remain in the room.

From her employer's conversation at the 'phone, it was clear to Miss Perkins that Mrs. Jinks was spending the afternoon with Mrs Hardy, but why this should have so annoyed MR. Jinks was a question that Miss Perkins found it difficult to answer. Was it possible that Mr. Jinks's present state of unrest could be traced to the door of the beautiful young wife of his friend?" Oh dear," thought Miss Perkins, "how scandalous!"

"That will do," commanded Jimmy, interrupting Miss Perkins's interesting speculations, and he nodded toward the door.

"But----" stammered Miss Perkins, as she glanced at the unfinished letters.

"I'll call you when I need you," answered Jimmy gruffly. Miss Perkins left the room in high dudgeon.

"I'LL show them," said Jimmy to himself, determined to carry out his recent resolve to be firm.

Then his mind went back to his domestic troubles. "Suppose, that Zoie, after imposing secrecy upon him, should change that thing called her 'mind' and confide in Aggie about the luncheon?" Jimmy was positively pale. He decided to telephone to Zoie's house and find out how affairs were progressing. At the 'phone he hesitated. "If Aggie HAS found out about the luncheon," he argued, "my 'phoning to Zoie's will increase her suspicions. If Zoie has told her nothing, she'll wonder why I'm 'phoning to Zoie's house. There's only one thing to do," he decided. "I must wait and say nothing. I can tell from Aggie's face when I meet her at dinner whether Zoie has betrayed me."

Having arrived at this conclusion, Jimmy resolved to get home as early as possible, and again Miss Perkins was called to his aid.

The flurry with which Jimmy despatched the day's remaining business confirmed both Miss Perkins and Andrew in their previous opinion that "the boss" had suddenly "gone off his head." And when he at last left the office and banged the door behind him there was a general sigh of relief from his usually tranquil staff.

Instead of walking, as was his custom, Jimmy took a taxi to his home but alas, to his surprise he found no wife.

"Did Mrs. Jinks leave any word?" he inquired from the butler.

"None at all," answered that unperturbed creature; and Jimmy felt sure that the attitude of his office antagonists had communicated itself to his household servants.

When Jimmy's anxious ear at last caught the rustle of a woman's dress in the hallway, his dinner had been waiting half an hour, and he had worked himself into a state of fierce antagonism toward everything and everybody.

At the sound of Aggie's voice however, his heart began to pound with fear. "Had she found him out for the weak miserable deceiver that he was? Would she tell him that they were going to separate forever?"

Aggie's first words were reassuring. "Awfully sorry to be so late, dear," she said.

Jimmy felt her kiss upon his chubby cheek and her dear arms about his neck. He decided forthwith to tell her everything, and never, never again to run the risk of deceiving her; but before he could open his lips, she continued gaily:

"I've brought Zoie home with me, dear. There's no sense in her

eating all alone, and she's going to have ALL her dinners with us." Jimmy groaned. "After dinner," continued Aggie, "you and I can take her to the theatre and all those places and keep her cheered until Alfred comes home."

"Home?" repeated Jimmy in alarm. Was it possible that Alfred had already relented?

"Oh, he doesn't know it yet," explained Aggie, "but he's coming. We'll tell you all about it at dinner." And they did.

While waiting for Aggie, Jimmy had thought himself hungry, but once the two women had laid before him their "nefarious baby-snatching scheme"--food lost its savour for him, and one course after another was taken away from him untouched.

Each time that Jimmy ventured a mild objection to his part in the plan, as scheduled by them, he met the threatening eye of Zoie; and by the time that the three left the table he was so harassed and confused by the chatter of the two excited women, that he was not only reconciled but eager to enter into any scheme that might bring Alfred back, and free him of the enforced companionship of Alfred's nerve-racking wife. True, he reflected, it was possible that Alfred, on his return, might discover him to be the culprit who lunched with Zoie and might carry out his murderous threat; but even such a fate was certainly preferable to interminable evenings spent under the same roof with Zoie.

"All YOU need do, Jimmy," explained Aggie sweetly, when the three of them were comfortably settled in the library, "is to see your friend the Superintendent of the Babies' Home, and tell him just what kind of a baby we shall need, and when we shall need it."

"Can't we see it ourselves?" chimed in Zoie.

"Oh yes, indeed," said Aggie confidently, and she turned to Jimmy with a matter-of-fact tone. "You'd better tell the Superintendent to have several for us to look at when the time arrives."

"Yes, that's better," agreed Zoie.

As for Jimmy, he had long ceased to make any audible comment, but internally he was saying to himself: "man of strong mettle, indeed!"

"We'll attend to all the clothes for the child," said Aggie generously to Jimmy.

"I want everything to be hand-made," exclaimed Zoie enthusiastically.

"We can make a great many of the things ourselves, evenings,"

said Aggie, "while we sit here and talk to Jimmy."

"I thought we were going OUT evenings!" objected Zoie.

Jimmy rolled his eyes toward her like a dumb beast of burden.

"MOST evenings," assented Aggie. "And then toward the last, you know, Zoie----" she hesitated to explain further, for Jimmy was already becoming visibly embarrassed.

"Oh, yes, that's true," blushed Zoie.

There was an awkward pause, then Aggie turned again toward Jimmy, who was pretending to rebuild the fire. "Oh yes, one more thing," she said. "When everything is quite ready for Alfred's return, we'll allow you, Jimmy dear, to wire him the good news."

"Thanks, so much," said Jimmy.

"I wish it were time to wire now," said Zoie pensively, and in his mind, Jimmy fervently agreed with that sentiment.

"The next few months will slip by before you know it," declared Aggie cheerfully. "And by the way, Zoie," she added, "why should you go back to your lonesome flat to-night?"

Zoie began to feel for her pocket handkerchief --Jimmy sat up to receive the next blow. "Stay here with us," suggested Aggie. "We'll be so glad to have you." She included Jimmy in her glance. "Won't we, dear?" she asked.

When the two girls went upstairs arm in arm that night, Jimmy remained in his chair by the fire, too exhausted to even prepare for bed. "A man of mettle!" he said again to himself.

This had certainly been the longest day of his life.

CHAPTER XII

WHEN Aggie predicted that the few months of waiting would pass quickly for Zoie, she was quite correct. They passed quickly for Aggie as well; but how about Jimmy? When he afterward recalled this interval in his life, it was always associated with long strands of lace winding around the legs of the library chairs, white things lying about in all the places where he had once enjoyed sitting or lying, late dinners, lonely breakfasts, and a sense of isolation from Aggie.

One evening when he had waited until he was out of all patience with Aggie, he was told by his late and apologetical spouse that she had been helping Zoie to redecorate her bedroom to fit the

coming occasion.

"It is all done in pink and white," explained Aggie, and then followed detailed accounts of the exquisite bed linens, the soft lovely hangings, and even the entire relighting of the room.

"Why pink?" asked Jimmy, objecting to any scheme of Zoie's on general principles.

"It's Alfred's favourite colour," explained Aggie. "Besides, it's so becoming," she added.

Jimmy could not help feeling that this lure to Alfred's senses was absolutely indecent, and he said so.

"Upon my word," answered Aggie, quite affronted, "you are getting as unreasonable as Alfred himself." Then as Jimmy prepared to sulk, she added coaxingly, "I was GOING to tell you about Zoie's lovely new negligee, and about the dear little crib that just matches it. Everything is going to be in harmony."

"With Zoie in the house?" asked Jimmy sceptically.

"I can't think why you've taken such a dislike to that helpless child," said Aggie.

A few days later, while in the midst of his morning's mail, Jimmy was informed that it was now time for him to conduct Aggie and Zoie to the Babies' Home to select the last, but most important, detail for their coming campaign. According to instructions, Jimmy had been in communication with the amused Superintendent of the Home, and he now led the two women forth with the proud consciousness that he, at least, had attended properly to his part of the business. By the time they reached the Children's Home, several babies were on view for their critical inspection.

Zoie stared into the various cribs containing the wee, red mites with puckered faces. "Oh dear!" she exclaimed, "haven't you any white ones?"

"These are supposed to be white," said the Superintendent, with an indulgent smile, "the black ones are on the other side of the room."

"Black ones!" cried Zoie in horror, and she faced about quickly as though expecting an attack from their direction.

"Which particular one of these would you recommend?" asked the practical Aggie of the Superintendent as she surveyed the first lot.

"Well, it's largely a matter of taste, ma'am," he answered.

"This seems a healthy little chap," he added, and seizing the

long white clothes of the nearest infant, he drew him across his arm and held him out for Aggie's inspection.

"Let's see," cried Zoie, and she stood on tiptoe to peep over the Superintendent's elbow.

As for Jimmy, he stood gloomily apart. This was an ordeal for which he had long been preparing himself, and he was resolved to accept it philosophically.

"I don't think much of that one," snipped Zoie. And in spite of himself. Jimmy felt his temper rising.

Aggie turned to him with a smile. "Which one do YOU prefer, Jimmy?"

"It's not MY affair," answered Jimmy curtly.

"Since when?" asked Zoie.

Aggie perceived trouble brewing, and she turned to pacify Jimmy. "Which one do you think your FRIEND ALFRED would like?" she persisted.

"If I were in his place----" began Jimmy hotly.

"Oh, but you AREN'T," interrupted Zoie; then she turned to the Superintendent. "What makes some of them so much larger than others?" she asked, glancing at the babies he had CALLED "white."

"Well, you see they're of different ages," explained the Superintendent indulgently.

"We told Mr. Jinks they must all be of the same age," said Zoie with a reproachful look at Jimmy.

"What age is that?" asked the Superintendent.

"I should say a week old," said Aggie.

"Then this is the one for you," decided the Superintendent, designating his first choice.

"I think we'd better take the Superintendent's advice," said Aggie complacently.

Zoie looked around the room with a dissatisfied air. Was it possible that all babies were as homely as these?

"You know, Zoie," explained Aggie, divining her thought, "they get better looking as they grow older."

"They couldn't look worse!" was Zoie's disgusted comment.

"Fetch it home, Jimmy," said Aggie.

"What!" exclaimed Jimmy, who had considered his mission completed.

"You don't expect US to carry it, do you?" asked Aggie in a hurt voice.

The Superintendent settled the difficulty temporarily by informing them that the baby could not possibly leave the home until the mother had signed the necessary papers for its release.

"I thought all those details had been attended to," said Aggie, and again the two women surveyed Jimmy with grieved disappointment.

"I'll get the mother's signature the first thing in the morning," volunteered the Superintendent.

"Very well," said Zoie, "and in the meantime, I'll send some new clothes for it," and with a lofty farewell to the Superintendent, she and Aggie followed Jimmy down stairs to the taxi.

"Now," said Zoie, when they were properly seated, "let's stop at a telegraph office and let Jimmy send a wire to Alfred."

"Wait until we get the baby," cautioned Aggie.

"We'll have it the first thing in the morning," argued Zoie.

"Jimmy can send him a night-letter," compromised Aggie, "that way Alfred won't get the news until morning."

A few minutes later, the taxi stopped in front of Jimmy's office and with a sigh of thanksgiving he hurried upstairs to his unanswered mail.

CHAPTER XIII

When Alfred Hardy found himself on the train bound for Detroit, he tried to assure himself that he had done the right thing in breaking away from an association that had kept him for months in a constant state of ferment. His business must come first, he decided. Having settled this point to his temporary satisfaction, he opened his afternoon paper and leaned back in his seat, meaning to divert his mind from personal matters, by learning what was going on in the world at large.

No sooner had his eye scanned the first headline than he was startled by a boisterous greeting from a fellow traveller, who

was just passing down the aisle.

"Hello, Hardy!" cried his well meaning acquaintance. "Where are you bound for?"

"Detroit," answered Alfred, annoyed by the sudden interruption.

"Where's the missus?" asked the intruder.

"Chicago," was Alfred's short reply.

"THAT'S a funny thing," declared the convivial spirit, not guessing how funny it really was. "You know," he continued, so loud that everyone in the vicinity could not fail to hear him, "the last time I met you two, you were on your honeymoon--on THIS VERY TRAIN," and with that the fellow sat himself down, uninvited, by Alfred's side and started on a long list of compliments about "the fine little girl" who had in his opinion done Alfred a great favour when she consented to tie herself to a "dull, money-grubbing chap" like him.

"So," thought Alfred, "this is the way the world sees us." And he began to frame inaudible but desperate defences of himself. Again he told himself that he was right; but his friend's thoughtless words had planted an uncomfortable doubt in his mind, and when he left the train to drive to his hotel, he was thinking very little about the new business relations upon which he was entering in Detroit, and very much about the domestic relations which he had just severed in Chicago.

Had he been merely a "dull money-grubber"? Had he left his wife too much alone? Was she not a mere child when he married her? Could he not, with more consideration, have made of her a more understanding companion? These were questions that were still unanswered in his mind when he arrived at one of Detroit's most enterprising hotels.

But later, having telephoned to his office and found that several matters of importance were awaiting his decision, he forced himself to enter immediately upon his business obligations.

As might have been expected, Alfred soon won the respect and serious consideration of most of his new business associates, and this in a measure so mollified his hurt pride, that upon rare occasions he was affable enough to accept the hospitality of their homes. But each excursion that he made into the social life of these new friends, only served to remind him of the unsettled state of his domestic affairs.

"How your wife must miss you!" his hostess would remark before they were fairly seated at table.

"They tell me she is so pretty," his vis-a-vis would exclaim.

"When is she going to join you?" the lady on his left would ask.

Then his host would laugh and tell the "dear ladies" that in HIS opinion, Alfred was afraid to bring his wife to Detroit, lest he might lose her to a handsomer man.

Alfred could never quite understand why remarks such as this annoyed him almost to the point of declaring the whole truth. His LEAVING Zoie, and his "losing" her, as these would-be comedians expressed it, were two separate and distinct things in his mind, and he felt an almost irresistible desire to make this plain to all concerned.

But no sooner did he open his lips to do so, than a picture of Zoie in all her child-like pleading loveliness, arose to dissuade him. He could imagine his dinner companions all pretending to sympathise with him, while they flayed poor Zoie alive. She would never have another chance to be known as a respectable woman, and compared to most women of his acquaintance, she WAS a respectable woman. True, according to old-fashioned standards, she had been indiscreet, but apparently the present day woman had a standard of her own. Alfred found his eye wandering round the table surveying the wives of his friends. Was there one of them, he wondered, who had never fibbed to her husband, or eaten a simple luncheon unchaperoned by him? Of one thing he was certain, there was not one of them so attractive as Zoie. Might she not be forgiven, to some extent, if her physical charms had made her a source of dangerous temptation to unprincipled scoundrels like the one with whom she had no doubt lunched? Then, too, had she not offered at the moment of his departure to tell him the "real truth"? Might this not have been the one occasion upon which she would have done so? "She seemed so sincere," he ruminated, "so truly penitent." Then again, how generous it was of her to persist in writing to him with never an answer from him to encourage her. If she cared for him so little as he had once imagined, why should she wish to keep up even a presence of fondness? Her letters indicated an undying devotion.

These were some of the thoughts that were going through Alfred's mind just three months after his departure from Chicago, and all the while his hostess was mentally dubbing him a "dull person."

"What an abstracted man he is!" she said before he was down the front steps.

"Is he really so clever in business?" a woman friend inquired.

"It's hard to believe, isn't it?" commented a third, and his host apologised for the absent Alfred by saying that he was no doubt worried about a particular business decision that had to be made the next morning.

But it was not the responsibility of this business decision that was knotting Alfred's brow, as he walked hurriedly toward the hotel, where he had told his office boy to leave the last mail. This had been the longest interval that Zoie had ever let slip without writing. He recalled that her last letters had hinted at a "slight indisposition." In fact, she had even mentioned "seeing the doctor"--"Good Heavens!" he thought, "Suppose she were really ill? Who would look after her?"

When Alfred reached his rooms, the boy had not yet arrived. He crossed to the library table and took from the drawer all the letters thus far received from Zoie. He read them consecutively. "How could he have been so stupid as not to have realised sooner that her illness--whatever it was--had been gradually creeping upon her from the very first day of his departure?"

The boy arrived with the mail. It contained no letter from Zoie and Alfred went to bed with an uneasy mind.

The next morning he was down at his office early, still no letter from Zoie.

Refusing his partner's invitation to lunch, Alfred sat alone in his office, glad to be rid of intrusive eyes. "He would write to Jimmy Jinks," he decided, "and find out whether Zoie were in any immediate danger."

Not willing to await the return of his stenographer, or to acquaint her with his personal affairs, Alfred drew pen and paper toward him and sat helplessly before it. How could he inquire about Zoie without appearing to invite a reconciliation with her? While he was trying to answer this vexed question, a sharp knock came at the door. He turned to see a uniformed messenger holding a telegram toward him. Intuitively he felt that it contained some word about Zoie. His hand trembled so that he could scarcely sign for the message before opening it.

A moment later the messenger boy was startled out of his lethargy by a succession of contradictory exclamations.

"No!" cried Alfred incredulously as he gazed in ecstasy at the telegram. "Yes!" he shouted, excitedly, as he rose from his chair. "Where's a time table?" he asked the astonished boy, and he began rummaging rapidly through the drawers of his desk.

"Any answer?" inquired the messenger.

"Take this," said Alfred. And he thrust a bill into the small boy's hand.

"Yes, sir," answered the boy and disappeared quickly, lest this madman might reconsider his generosity.

Alfred threw down the time table in despair. "No train for Chicago until night," he cried; but his mind was working fast. The next moment he was at the telephone, asking for the Division Superintendent of the railway line.

When Alfred's partner returned from luncheon he found a curt note informing him that Alfred had left on a special for Chicago and would "write."

"I'll bet it's his wife!" said the partner.

CHAPTER XIV

During the evening of the same day that Alfred was enjoying such pleasurable emotions, Zoie and Aggie were closeted in the pretty pink and white bedroom that the latter had tried to describe to Jimmy. On a rose-coloured couch in front of the fire sat Aggie threading ribbons through various bits of soft white linen, and in front of her, at the foot of a rose-draped bed, knelt Zoie. She was trying the effect of a large pink bow against the lace flounce of an empty but inviting bassinette.

"How's that?" she called to Aggie, as she turned her head to one side and surveyed the result of her experiment with a critical eye.

Aggie shot a grudging glance at the bassinette. "I wish you wouldn't bother me every moment," she said. "I'll never get all these things finished."

Apparently Zoie decided that the bow was properly placed, for she applied herself to sewing it fast to the lining. In her excitement she gave the thread a vicious pull. "Oh, dear, oh dear, my thread is always breaking!" she sighed in vexation.

"You're excited," said Aggie.

"Wouldn't YOU be excited," questioned Zoie, "if you were expecting a baby and a husband in the morning?"

"I suppose I should," admitted Aggie.

For a time the two friends sewed in silence, then Zoie looked up with sudden anxiety.

"You're SURE Jimmy sent the wire?" she asked.

"I saw him write it," answered Aggie, "while I was in the office to-day."

"When will Alfred get it?" demanded Zoie eagerly.

"Oh, he won't GET it until to-morrow morning," said Aggie. "I told you that to-day. It's a night message."

"I wonder what he'll be doing when he gets it?" mused Zoie. There was a suspicion of a smile around her lips.

"What will he do AFTER he gets it?" questioned Aggie.

Looking up at her friend in alarm, Zoie suddenly ceased sewing. "You don't mean he won't come?" she gasped.

"Of course I don't," answered Aggie. "He's only HUMAN if he is a husband."

There was a sceptical expression around Zoie's mouth, but she did not pursue the subject. "How do you suppose that red baby will ever look in this pink basket?" she asked. And then with a regretful little sigh, she declared that she wished she'd "used blue."

"I didn't think the baby that we chose was so horribly red," said Aggie.

"Red!" cried Zoie, "it's magenta." And again her thread broke. "Oh, darn!" she exclaimed in annoyance, and once more rethreaded her needle. "I couldn't look at it," she continued with a disgusted little pucker of her face. "I wish they had let us take it this afternoon so I could have got used to it before Alfred gets here."

"Now don't be silly," scolded Aggie. "You know very well that the Superintendent can't let it leave the home until its mother signs the papers. It will be here the first thing in the morning. You'll have all day to get used to it before Alfred gets here."

"ALL DAY," echoed Zoie, and the corners of her mouth began to droop. "Won't Alfred be here before TO-MORROW NIGHT?"

Aggie was becoming exasperated by Zoie's endless questions. "I told you," she explained wearily, "that the wire won't be delivered until to-morrow morning, it will take Alfred eight hours to get here, and there may not be a train just that minute."

"Eight long hours," sighed Zoie dismally. And Aggie looked at her reproachfully, forgetting that it is always the last hour that is hardest to bear. Zoie resumed her sewing resignedly. Aggie was meditating whether she should read her young friend a lecture on the value of patience, when the telephone began to ring violently.

Zoie looked up from her sewing with a frown. "You answer it, will you, Aggie?" she said. "I can't let go this thread."

"Hello," called Aggie sweetly over the 'phone; then she added in surprise, "Is this you, Jimmy dear?" Apparently it was; and as Zoie watched Aggie's face, with its increasing distress she surmised that Jimmy's message was anything but "dear."

"Good heavens!" cried Aggie over the telephone, "that's awful!"

"Isn't Alfred coming?" was the first question that burst from Zoie's lips.

Aggie motioned to Zoie to be quiet. "TO- NIGHT!" she exclaimed.

"To-night!" echoed Zoie joyfully; and without waiting for more details and with no thought beyond the moment, she flew to her dressing table and began arranging her hair, powdering her face, perfuming her lips, and making herself particularly alluring for the prodigal husband's return.

Now the far-sighted Aggie was experiencing less pleasant sensations at the phone. "A special?" she was saying to Jimmy. "When did Alfred GET the message?" There was a slight pause. Then she asked irritably, "Well, didn't you mark it 'NIGHT message'?" From the expression on Aggie's face it was evident that he had not done so. "But, Jimmy," protested Aggie, "this is dreadful! We haven't any baby!" Then calling to him to wait a minute, and leaving the receiver dangling, she crossed the room to Zoie, who was now thoroughly engrossed in the making of a fresh toilet. "Zoie!" she exclaimed excitedly, "Jimmy made a mistake."

"Of course he'd do THAT," answered Zoie carelessly.

"But you don't understand," persisted Aggie. "They sent the 'NIGHT message' TO-DAY. Alfred's coming on a special. He'll be here tonight."

"Thank goodness for that!" cried Zoie, and the next instant she was waltzing gaily about the room.

"That's all very well," answered Aggie, as she followed Zoie with anxious eyes, "but WHERE'S YOUR BABY?"

"Good heavens!" cried Zoie, and for the first time she became conscious of their predicament. She gazed at Aggie in consternation. "I forgot all about it," she said, and then asked with growing anxiety, "What can we DO?"

"Do?" echoed Aggie, scarcely knowing herself what answer to make, "we've got to GET it-- TO-NIGHT. That's all!"

"But," protested Zoie, "how CAN we get it when the mother hasn't signed the papers yet?"

"Jimmy will have to arrange that with the Superintendent of the Home," answered Aggie with decision, and she turned toward the 'phone to instruct Jimmy accordingly.

"Yes, that's right," assented Zoie, glad to be rid of all further responsibility, "we'll let Jimmy fix it."

"Say, Jimmy," called Aggie excitedly, "you'll have to go straight to the Children's Home and get that baby just as quickly as you can. There's some red tape about the mother signing papers, but don't mind about that. Make them give it to you to-night. Hurry, Jimmy. Don't waste a minute."

There was evidently a protest from the other end of the wire, for Aggie added impatiently, "Go on, Jimmy, do! You can EAT any time." And with that she hung up the receiver.

"Its clothes," called Zoie frantically. "Tell him about the clothes. I sent them this evening."

"Never mind about the clothes," answered Aggie. "We're lucky if we get the baby."

"But I have to mind," persisted Zoie. "I gave all its other things to the laundress. I wanted them to be nice and fresh. And now the horrid old creature hasn't brought them back yet."

"You get into your OWN things," commanded Aggie.

"Where's my dressing gown?" asked Zoie, her elation revived by the thought of her fine raiment, and with that she flew to the foot of the bed and snatched up two of the prettiest negligees ever imported from Paris. "Which do you like better?" she asked, as she held them both aloft, "the pink or the blue?"

"It doesn't matter," answered Aggie wearily. "Get into SOMETHING, that's all."

"Then unhook me," commanded Zoie gaily, as she turned her back to Aggie, and continued to admire the two "creations" on her arm. So pleased was she with the picture of herself in either of the garments that she began humming a gay waltz and swaying to the rhythm.

"Stand still," commanded Aggie, but her warning was unnecessary, for at that moment Zoie was transfixed by a horrible fear.

"Suppose," she said in alarm, "that Jimmy can't GET the baby?"

"He's GOT to get it," answered Aggie emphatically, and she undid

the last stubborn hook of Zoie's gown and put the girl from her. "There, now, you're all unfastened," she said, "hurry and get dressed."

"You mean undressed," laughed Zoie, as she let her pretty evening gown fall lightly from her shoulders and drew on her pink negligee. "Oh, Aggie!" she exclaimed, as she caught sight of her reflection in the mirror, "isn't it a love? And you know," she added. "Alfred just adores pink."

"Silly!" answered Aggie, but in spite of herself, she was quite thrilled by the picture of the exquisite young creature before her. Zoie had certainly never looked more irresistible. "Can't you get some of that colour out of your cheeks," asked Aggie in despair. "You look like a washerwoman."

"I'll put on some cold cream and powder," answered Zoie. She flew to her dressing table; and in a moment there was a white cloud in her immediate vicinity. She turned to Aggie to inquire the result. Again the 'phone rang. "Who's that?" she exclaimed in alarm.

"I'll see," answered Aggie.

"It couldn't be Alfred, could it?" asked Zoie with mingled hope and dread.

"Of course not," answered Aggie, as she removed the receiver from the hook. "Alfred wouldn't 'phone, he would come right up."

CHAPTER XV

Discovering that it was merely Jimmy "on the wire," Zoie's uneasiness abated, but Aggie's anxiety was visibly increasing.

"Where ARE you?" she asked of her spouse. "The Children's Home!" she repeated, then followed further explanations from Jimmy which were apparently not satisfactory. "Oh, Jimmy!" cried his disturbed wife, "it can't be! That's horrible!"

"What is it?" shrieked Zoie, trying to get her small ear close enough to the receiver to catch a bit of the obviously terrifying message.

"Wait a minute," called Aggie into the 'phone. Then she turned to Zoie with a look of despair. "The mother's changed her mind," she explained; "she won't give up the baby."

"Good Lord!" cried Zoie, and she sank into the nearest chair. For an instant the two women looked at each other with blank faces. "What can we DO," asked Zoie.

Aggie did not answer immediately. This was indeed a serious predicament; but presently Zoie saw her friend's mouth becoming very resolute, and she surmised that Aggie had solved the problem. "We'll have to get ANOTHER baby, that's all," decided Aggie. "There must be OTHER babies."

"Where?" asked Zoie.

"There, in the Children's Home," answered Aggie with great confidence, and she returned to the 'phone.

Zoie crossed to the bed and knelt at its foot in search of her little pink slippers.

"Oh, Aggie," she sighed, "the others were all so red!"

But Aggie did not heed her protest. "Listen, Jimmy," she called in the 'phone, "can't you get another baby?" There was a pause, then Aggie commanded hotly, "Well, GET in the business!" Another pause and then Aggie continued very firmly, "Tell the Superintendent that we JUST MUST have one."

Zoie stopped in the act of putting on her second slipper and called a reminder to Aggie. "Tell him to get a HE one," she said, "Alfred wants a boy."

"Take what you can get!" answered Aggie impatiently, and again she gave her attention to the 'phone. "What!" she cried, with growing despair, and Zoie waited to hear what had gone wrong now. "Nothing under three months," explained Aggie.

"Won't that do?" asked Zoie innocently.

"Do!" echoed Aggie in disgust. "A three- months' old baby is as big as a whale."

"Well, can't we say it GREW UP?" asked Zoie, priding herself on her power of ready resource.

"Overnight, like a mushroom?" sneered Aggie.

Almost vanquished by her friend's new air of cold superiority, Zoie was now on the verge of tears. "Somebody must have a new baby," she faltered. "Somebody ALWAYS has a new baby."

"For their own personal USE, yes," admitted Aggie, "but who has a new baby for US?"

"How do I know?" asked Zoie helplessly. "You're the one who ought to know. You got me into this, and you've GOT to get me out of it. Can you imagine," she asked, growing more and more unhappy, "what would happen to me if Alfred were to come home now

and not find a baby? He wouldn't forgive a LITTLE lie, what would he do with a WHOPPER like this?" Then with sudden decision, she rushed toward the 'phone. "Let me talk to Jimmy," she said, and the next moment she was chattering so rapidly and incoherently over the 'phone that Aggie despaired of hearing one word that she said, and retired to the next room to think out a new plan of action.

"Say, Jimmy," stammered Zoie into the 'phone, "you've GOT to get me a baby. If you don't, I'll kill myself! I will, Jimmy, I will. You got me into this, Jimmy," she reminded him. "You've GOT to get me out of it." And then followed pleadings and coaxings and cajolings, and at length, a pause, during which Jimmy was apparently able to get in a word or so. His answer was not satisfactory to Zoie. "What!" she shrieked, tiptoeing to get her lips closer to the receiver; then she added with conviction, "the mother has no business to change her mind."

Apparently Jimmy maintained that the mother had changed it none the less.

"Well, take it away from her," commanded Zoie. "Get it quick, while she isn't looking." Then casting a furtive glance over her shoulder to make sure that Aggie was still out of the room, she indulged in a few dark threats to Jimmy, also some vehement reminders of how he had DRAGGED her into that horrid old restaurant and been the immediate cause of all the misfortunes that had ever befallen her.

Could Jimmy have been sure that Aggie was out of ear-shot of Zoie's conversation, the argument would doubtless have kept up indefinitely-- as it was--the result was a quick acquiescence on his part and by the time that Aggie returned to the room, Zoie was wreathed in smiles.

"It's all right," she said sweetly. "Jimmy's going to get it."

Aggie looked at her sceptically. "Goodness knows I hope so," she said, then added in despair, "Look at your cheeks. They're flaming."

Once more the powder puff was called into requisition, and Zoie turned a temporarily blanched face to Aggie. "Is that better?" she asked.

"Very much," answered Aggie, "but how about your hair?"

"What's the matter with it?" asked Zoie. Her reflection betrayed a coiffure that might have turned Marie Antoinette green with envy.

"Would anybody think you'd been in bed for days?" asked Aggie.

"Alfred likes it that way," was Zoie's defence.

"Turn around," said Aggie, without deigning to argue the matter further. And she began to remove handfuls of hairpins from the yellow knotted curls.

"What are you doing?" exclaimed Zoie, as she sprayed her white neck and arms with her favourite perfume.

Aggie did not answer.

Zoie leaned forward toward the mirror to smooth out her eyebrows with the tips of her perfumed fingers. "Good gracious," she cried in horror as she caught sight of her reflection. "You're not going to put my hair in a pigtail!"

"That's the way invalids always have their hair," was Aggie's laconic reply, and she continued to plait the obstinate curls.

"I won't have it like that!" declared Zoie, and she shook herself free from Aggie's unwelcome attentions and proceeded to unplait the hateful pigtail. "Alfred would leave me."

Aggie shrugged her shoulders.

"If you're going to make a perfect fright of me," pouted Zoie, "I just won't see him."

"He isn't coming to see YOU," reminded Aggie. "He's coming to see the baby."

"If Jimmy doesn't come soon, I'll not HAVE any baby," answered Zoie.

"Get into bed," said Aggie, and she proceeded to turn down the soft lace coverlets.

"Where did I put my cap?" asked Zoie. Her eyes caught the small knot of lace and ribbons for which she was looking, and she pinned it on top of her saucy little curls.

"In you go," said Aggie, motioning to the bed.

"Wait," said Zoie impressively, "wait till I get my rose lights on the pillow." She pulled the slender gold chain of her night lamp; instantly the large white pillows were bathed in a warm pink glow--she studied the effect very carefully, then added a lingerie pillow to the two more formal ones, kicked off her slippers and hopped into bed. One more glance at the pillows, then she arranged the ribbons of her negligee to fall "carelessly" outside the coverlet, threw one arm gracefully above her head, half-closed her eyes, and sank languidly back against her pillows.

"How's that?" she breathed faintly.

Controlling her impulse to smile, Aggie crossed to the dressing-table with a business-like air and applied to Zoie's pink cheeks a third coating of powder.

Zoie sat bolt upright and began to sneeze. "Aggie," she said, "I just hate you when you act like that." But suddenly she was seized with a new idea.

"I wonder," she mused as she looked across the room at the soft, pink sofa bathed in firelight, "I wonder if I shouldn't look better on that couch under those roses."

Aggie was very emphatic in her opinion to the contrary. "Certainly not!" she said.

"Then," decided Zoie with a mischievous smile, "I'll get Alfred to carry me to the couch. That way I can get my arms around his neck. And once you get your arms around a man's neck, you can MANAGE him."

Aggie looked down at the small person with distinct disapproval. "Now, don't you make too much fuss over Alfred," she continued. "YOU'RE the one who's to do the forgiving. Don't forget that! What's more," she reminded Zoie, "you're very, very weak." But before she had time to instruct Zoie further there was a sharp, quick ring at the outer door.

The two women glanced at each other inquiringly. The next instant a man's step was heard in the hallway.

"How is she, Mary?" demanded someone in a voice tense with anxiety.

"It's Alfred!" exclaimed Zoie.

"And we haven't any baby!" gasped Aggie.

"What shall I do?" cried Zoie.

"Lie down," commanded Aggie, and Zoie had barely time to fall back limply on the pillows when the excited young husband burst into the room.

CHAPTER XVI

When Alfred entered Zoie's bedroom he glanced about him in bewilderment. It appeared that he was in an enchanted chamber. Through the dim rose light he could barely perceive his young

wife. She was lying white and apparently lifeless on her pillows. He moved cautiously toward the bed, but Aggie raised a warning finger. Afraid to speak, he grasped Aggie's hand and searched her face for reassurance; she nodded toward Zoie, whose eyes were closed. He tiptoed to the bedside, sank on his knees and reverently kissed the small hand that hung limply across the side of the bed.

To Alfred's intense surprise, his lips had barely touched Zoie's fingertips when he felt his head seized in a frantic embrace. "Alfred, Alfred!" cried Zoie in delight; then she smothered his face with kisses. As she lifted her head to survey her astonished husband, she caught the reproving eye of Aggie. With a weak little sigh, she relaxed her tenacious hold of Alfred, breathed his name very faintly, and sank back, apparently exhausted, upon her pillows.

"It's been too much for her," said the terrified young husband, and he glanced toward Aggie in anxiety.

Aggie nodded assent.

"How pale she looks," added Alfred, as he surveyed the white face on the pillows.

"She's so weak, poor dear," sympathised Aggie, almost in a whisper.

Alfred nodded his understanding to Aggie. It was then that his attention was for the first time attracted toward the crib.

"My boy!" he exclaimed. And again Zoie forgot Aggie's warning and sat straight up in bed. But Alfred did not see her. He was making determinedly for the crib, his heart beating high with the pride of possession.

Throwing back the coverlets of the bassinette, Alfred stared at the empty bed in silence, then he quickly turned to the two anxious women. "Where is he?" he asked, his eyes wide with terror.

Zoie's lips opened to answer, but no words came.

Alfred's eyes turned to Aggie. The look on her face increased his worst fears. "Don't tell me he's----" he could not bring himself to utter the word. He continued to look helplessly from one woman to the other.

In vain Zoie again tried to answer. Aggie also made an unsuccessful attempt to speak. Then, driven to desperation by the strain of the situation, Zoie declared boldly: "He's out."

"Out?" echoed Alfred in consternation.

"With Jimmy," explained Aggie, coming to Zoie's rescue as well as she knew how.

"Jimmy!" repeated Alfred in great astonishment.

"Just for a breath of air," explained Zoie sweetly. She had now entirely regained her self-possession.

"Isn't he very young to be out at night?" asked Alfred with a puzzled frown.

"We told Jimmy that," answered Aggie, amazed at the promptness with which each succeeding lie presented itself. "But you see," she continued, "Jimmy is so crazy about the child that we can't do anything with him."

"Jimmy crazy about my baby?" exclaimed Alfred incredulously. "He always said babies were 'little red worms.' "

"Not this one," answered Zoie sweetly.

"No, indeed," chimed in Aggie. "He acts as though he owned it."

"Oh, DOES he?" exclaimed Alfred hotly. "I'll soon put a stop to that," he declared. "Where did he take him?"

Again the two women looked at each other inquiringly, then Aggie stammered evasively.

"Oh, j-just downstairs--somewhere."

"I'll LOOK j-just downstairs somewhere," decided Alfred, and he snatched up his hat and started toward the door.

"Alfred!" cried Zoie in alarm.

Coming back to her bedside to reassure her, Alfred was caught in a frantic embrace. "I'll be back in a minute, dear," he said, but Zoie clung to him and pleaded desperately.

"You aren't going to leave me the very first thing?"

Alfred hesitated. He had no wish to be cruel to Zoie, but the thought of Jimmy out in the street with his baby at this hour of the night was not to be borne.

Zoie renewed her efforts at persuasion. "Now, dearie," she said, "I wish you'd go get shaved and wash up a bit. I don't wish baby to see you looking so horrid."

"Yes, do, Alfred," insisted Aggie. "He's sure to be here in a minute."

"My boy won't care HOW his father looks," declared Alfred proudly, and Zoie told Aggie afterward that his chest had momentarily expanded three inches.

"But I care," persisted Zoie. "First impressions are so important."

"Now, Zoie," cautioned Aggie, as she crossed toward the bed with affected solicitude. "You mustn't excite yourself."

Zoie was quick to understand the suggested change in her tactics, and again she sank back on her pillows apparently ill and faint.

Utterly vanquished by the dire result of his apparently inhuman thoughtlessness, Alfred glanced at Aggie, uncertain as to how to repair the injury.

Aggie beckoned to him to come away from the bed.

"Let her have her own way," she whispered with a significant glance toward Zoie.

Alfred nodded understandingly and put a finger to his lips to signify that he would henceforth speak in hushed tones, then he tiptoed back to the bed and gently stroked the curls from Zoie's troubled forehead.

"There now, dear," he whispered, "lie still and rest and I'll go shave and wash up a bit."

Zoie sighed her acquiescence.

"Mind," he whispered to Aggie, "you are to call me the moment my boy comes," and then he slipped quietly into the bedroom.

No sooner had Alfred crossed the threshold, than Zoie sat up in bed and called in a sharp whisper to Aggie, "What's keeping them?" she asked.

"I can't imagine," answered Aggie, also in whisper.

"If I had Jimmy here," declared Zoie vindictively, "I'd wring his little fat neck," and slipping her little pink toes from beneath the covers, she was about to get out of bed, when Aggie, who was facing Alfred's bedroom door, gave her a warning signal.

Zoie had barely time to get back beneath the covers, when Alfred re-entered the room in search of his satchel. Aggie found it for him quickly.

Alfred glanced solicitously at Zoie's closed eyes. "I'm so sorry," he apologised to Aggie, and again he slipped softly out

of the room.

Aggie and Zoie drew together for consultation.

"Suppose Jimmy can't get the baby," whispered Zoie.

"In that case, he'd have 'phoned," argued Aggie.

"Let's 'phone to the Home," suggested Zoie, "and find----" She was interrupted by Alfred's voice.

"Say, Aggie," called Alfred from the next room.

"Yes?" answered Aggie sweetly, and she crossed to the door and waited.

"Hasn't he come yet?" called Alfred impatiently.

"Not yet, Alfred," said Aggie, and she closed the door very softly, lest Alfred should hear her.

"I never knew Alfred could be so silly!" snapped Zoie.

"Sh! sh!" warned Aggie, and she glanced anxiously toward Alfred's door.

"He doesn't care a bit about me!" complained Zoie. "It's all that horrid old baby that he's never seen.,'

"If Jimmy doesn't come soon, he never WILL see it," declared Aggie, and she started toward the window to look out.

Just then there was a short quick ring of the bell. The two women glanced at each other with mingled hope and fear. Then their eyes sought the door expectantly.

CHAPTER XVII

With the collar of his long ulster pushed high and the brim of his derby hat pulled low, Jimmy Jinks crept cautiously into the room. When he at length ceased to glance over his shoulder and came to a full stop, Aggie perceived a bit of white flannel hanging beneath the hem of his tightly buttoned coat.

"You've GOT it!" she cried.

"Where is it ?" asked Zoie.

"Give it to me," demanded Aggie.

Jimmy stared at them as though stupefied, then glanced uneasily

over his shoulder, to make sure that no one was pursuing him. Aggie unbuttoned his ulster, seized a wee mite wrapped in a large shawl, and clasped it to her bosom with a sigh of relief. "Thank heaven!" she exclaimed, then crossed quickly to the bassinette and deposited her charge.

In the meantime, having thrown discretion to the wind, Zoie had hopped out of bed. As usual, her greeting to Jimmy was in the nature of a reproach. "What kept you?" she demanded crossly.

"Yes," chimed in Aggie, who was now bending over the crib. "What made you so long?"

"See here!" answered Jimmy hotly, "if you two think you can do any better, you're welcome to the job," and with that he threw off his overcoat and sank sullenly on the couch.

"Sh! sh!" exclaimed Zoie and Aggie, simultaneously, and they glanced nervously toward Alfred's bedroom door.

Jimmy looked at them without comprehending why he should "sh." They did not bother to explain. Instead, Zoie turned her back upon him.

"Let's see it," she said, peeping into the bassinette. And then with a little cry of disgust she again looked at Jimmy reproachfully. "Isn't it ugly?" she said. Jimmy's contempt for woman's ingratitude was too deep for words, and he only stared at her in injured silence. But his reflections were quickly upset when Alfred called from the next room, to inquire again about Baby.

"Alfred's here!" whispered Jimmy, beginning to realise the meaning of the women's mysterious behaviour.

"Sh! sh!" said Aggie again to Jimmy, and Zoie flew toward the bed, almost vaulting over the footboard in her hurry to get beneath the covers.

For the present Alfred did not disturb them further. Apparently he was still occupied with his shaving, but just as Jimmy was about to ask for particulars, the 'phone rang. The three culprits glanced guiltily at each other.

"Who's that?" whispered Zoie in a frightened voice.

Aggie crossed to the 'phone. "Hello," she called softly. "The Children's Home?" she exclaimed.

Jimmy paused in the act of sitting and turned his round eyes toward the 'phone.

Aggie's facial expression was not reassuring. "But we can't,"

she was saying; "that's impossible."

"What is it?" called Zoie across the foot of the bed, unable longer to endure the suspense.

Aggie did not answer. She was growing more and more excited. "A thief!" she cried wildly, over the 'phone. "How dare you call my husband a thief!"

Jimmy was following the conversation with growing interest.

"Wait a minute," said Aggie, then she left the receiver hanging by the cord and turned to the expectant pair behind her. "It's the Children's Home," she explained. "That awful woman says Jimmy STOLE her baby!"

"What!" exclaimed Zoie as though such depravity on Jimmy's part were unthinkable. Then she looked at him accusingly, and asked in low, measured tones, "DID you STEAL HER BABY, JIMMY?"

"Didn't you tell me to?" asked Jimmy hotly. "Not literally," corrected Aggie.

"How else COULD I steal a baby?" demanded Jimmy.

Zoie looked at the unfortunate creature as if she could strangle him, and Aggie addressed him with a threat in her voice.

"Well, the Superintendent says you've got to bring it straight back."

"I'd like to see myself!" said Jimmy.

"He sha'n't bring it back," declared Zoie. "I'll not let him!"

"What shall I tell the Superintendent?" asked Aggie, "he's holding the wire."

"Tell him he can't have it," answered Zoie, as though that were the end of the whole matter.

"Well," concluded Aggie, "he says if Jimmy DOESN'T bring it back the mother's coming after it."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Zoie.

As for Jimmy, he bolted for the door. Aggie caught him by the sleeve as he passed. "Wait, Jimmy," she said peremptorily. There was a moment of awful indecision, then something approaching an idea came to Zoie.

"Tell the Superintendent that it isn't here," she whispered to Aggie across the footboard. "Tell him that Jimmy hasn't got here

yet."

"Yes," agreed Jimmy, "tell him I haven't got here yet."

Aggie nodded wisely and returned to the 'phone. "Hello," she called pleasantly; then proceeded to explain. "Mr. Jinks hasn't got here yet." There was a pause, then she added in her most conciliatory tone, "I'll tell him what you say when he comes in." Another pause, and she hung up the receiver with a most gracious good-bye and turned to the others with increasing misgivings. "He says he won't be responsible for that mother much longer--she's half-crazy."

"What right has she to be crazy?" demanded Zoie in an abused voice. "She's a widow. She doesn't need a baby."

"Well," decided Aggie after careful deliberation, "you'd better take it back, Jimmy, before Alfred sees it."

"What?" exclaimed Zoie in protest. And again Jimmy bolted, but again he failed to reach the door.

CHAPTER XVIII

His face covered with lather, and a shaving brush in one hand, Alfred entered the room just as his friend was about to escape.

"Jimmy!" exclaimed the excited young father, "you're back."

"Oh, yes--yes," admitted Jimmy nervously, "I'm back."

"My boy!" cried Alfred, and he glanced toward the crib. "He's here!"

"Yes--yes," agreed Aggie uneasily, as she tried to place herself between Alfred and the bassinette. "He's here, but you mayn't have him, Alfred."

"What?" exclaimed Alfred, trying to put her out of the way.

"Not yet," protested Aggie, "not just yet."

"Give him to me," demanded Alfred, and thrusting Aggie aside, he took possession of the small mite in the cradle.

"But--but, Alfred," pleaded Aggie, "your face. You'll get him all wet."

Alfred did not heed her. He was bending over the cradle in an ecstasy. "My boy!" he cried, "my boy!" Lifting the baby in his arms he circled the room cooing to him delightedly.

"Was he away from home when his fadder came? Oh, me, oh, my! Coochy! Coochy! Coochy!" Suddenly he remembered to whom he owed this wondrous treasure and forgetful of the lather on his unshaven face he rushed toward Zoie with an overflowing heart. "My precious!" he exclaimed, and he covered her cheek with kisses.

"Go away!" cried Zoie in disgust and she pushed Alfred from her and brushed the hateful lather from her little pink cheek.

But Alfred was not to be robbed of his exaltation, and again he circled the room, making strange gurgling sounds to Baby.

"Did a horrid old Jimmy take him away from fadder?" he said sympathetically, in the small person's ear; and he glanced at Jimmy with frowning disapproval. "I'd just like to see him get you away from me again!" he added to Baby, as he tickled the mite's ear with the end of his shaving brush. "Oh, me! oh, my!" he exclaimed in trepidation, as he perceived a bit of lather on the infant's cheek. Then lifting the boy high in his arms and throwing out his chest with great pride, he looked at Jimmy with an air of superiority. "I guess I'm bad, aye?" he said.

Jimmy positively blushed. As for Zoie, she was growing more and more impatient for a little attention to herself.

"Rock-a-bye, Baby," sang Alfred in strident tones and he swung the child high in his arms.

Jimmy and Aggie gazed at Alfred as though hypnotised. They kept time to his lullaby out of sheer nervousness. Suddenly Alfred stopped, held the child from him and gazed at it in horror. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed. The others waited breathlessly. "Look at that baby's face," commanded Alfred.

Zoie and Aggie exchanged alarmed glances, then Zoie asked in trepidation, "What's the matter with his face?"

"He's got a fever," declared Alfred. And he started toward the bed to show the child to its mother.

"Go away!" shrieked Zoie, waving Alfred off in wild alarm.

"What?" asked Alfred, backing from her in surprise.

Aggie crossed quickly to Alfred's side and looked over his shoulder at the boy. "I don't see anything wrong with its face," she said.

"It's scarlet!" persisted Alfred.

"Oh," said Jimmy with a superior air, "they're always like that."

"Nothing of the sort," snorted Alfred, and he glared at Jimmy threateningly. "You've frozen the child parading him around the streets."

"Let me have him, Alfred," begged Aggie sweetly; "I'll put him in his crib and keep him warm."

Reluctantly Alfred released the boy. His eyes followed him to the crib with anxiety. "Where's his nurse?" he asked, as he glanced first from one to the other.

Zoie and Jimmy stared about the room as though expecting the desired person to drop from the ceiling. Then Zoie turned upon her unwary accomplice.

"Jimmy," she called in a threatening tone, "where IS his nurse?"

"Does Jimmy take the nurse out, too?" demanded Alfred, more and more annoyed by the privileges Jimmy had apparently been usurping in his absence.

"Never mind about the nurse," interposed Aggie. "Baby likes me better anyway. I'll tuck him in," and she bent fondly over the crib, but Alfred was not to be so easily pacified.

"Do you mean to tell me," he exclaimed excitedly, "that my boy hasn't any nurse?"

"We HAD a nurse," corrected Zoie, "but--but I had to discharge her."

Alfred glanced from one to the other for an explanation.

"Discharge her?" he repeated, "for what?"

"She was crazy," stammered Zoie.

Alfred's eyes sought Aggie's for confirmation. She nodded. He directed his steady gaze toward Jimmy. The latter jerked his head up and down in nervous assent.

"Well," said Alfred, amazed at their apparent lack of resource, "why didn't you get ANOTHER nurse?"

"Aggie is going to stay and take care of baby to-night," declared Zoie, and then she beamed upon Aggie as only she knew how. "Aren't you, dear?" she asked sweetly.

"Yes, indeed," answered Aggie, studiously avoiding Jimmy's eye.

"Baby is going to sleep in the spare room with Aggie and Jimmy," said Zoie.

"What!" exclaimed Jimmy, too desperate to care what Alfred might infer.

Ignoring Jimmy's implied protest, Zoie continued sweetly to Alfred:

"Now, don't worry, dear; go back to your room and finish your shaving."

"Finish shaving?" repeated Alfred in a puzzled way. Then his hand went mechanically to his cheek and he stared at Zoie in astonishment. "By Jove!" he exclaimed, "I had forgotten all about it. That shows you how excited I am." And with a reluctant glance toward the cradle, he went quickly from the room, singing a high-pitched lullaby.

Just as the three conspirators were drawing together for consultation, Alfred returned to the room. It was apparent that there was something important on his mind.

"By the way," he said, glancing from one to another, "I forgot to ask--what's his name?"

The conspirators looked at each other without answering. To Alfred their delay was annoying. Of course his son had been given his father's name, but he wished to HEAR someone say so.

"Baby's, I mean," he explained impatiently.

Jimmy felt instinctively that Zoie's eyes were upon him. He avoided her gaze.

"Jimmy!" called Zoie, meaning only to appeal to him for a name.

"Jimmy!" thundered the infuriated Alfred. "You've called my boy 'Jimmy'? Why 'Jimmy'?"

For once Zoie was without an answer.

After waiting in vain for any response, Alfred advanced upon the uncomfortable Jimmy.

"You seem to be very popular around here," he sneered.

Jimmy shifted uneasily from one foot to the other and studied the pattern of the rug upon which he was standing.

After what seemed an age to Jimmy, Alfred turned his back upon his old friend and started toward his bedroom. Jimmy peeped out uneasily from his long eyelashes. When Alfred reached the threshold, he faced about quickly and stared again at Jimmy for an explanation. It seemed to Jimmy that Alfred's nostrils were

dilating. He would not have been surprised to see Alfred snort fire. He let his eyes fall before the awful spectacle of his friend's wrath. Alfred's upper lip began to curl. He cast a last withering look in Jimmy's direction, retired quickly from the scene and banged the door.

When Jimmy again had the courage to lift his eyes he was confronted by the contemptuous gaze of Zoie, who was sitting up in bed and regarding him with undisguised disapproval.

"Why didn't you tell him what the baby's name is?" she demanded.

"How do I know what the baby's name is?" retorted Jimmy savagely.

"Sh! sh!" cautioned Aggie as she glanced nervously toward the door through which Alfred had just passed.

"What does it matter WHAT the baby's name is so long as we have to send it back?"

"I'll NOT send it back," declared Zoie emphatically, "at least not until morning. That will give Jimmy a whole night to get another one."

"Another!" shrieked Jimmy. "See here, you two can't be changing babies every five minutes without Alfred knowing it. Even HE has SOME sense."

"Nonsense!" answered Aggie shortly. "You know perfectly well that all young babies look just alike. Their own mothers couldn't tell them apart, if it weren't for their clothes."

"But where can we GET another?" asked Zoie.

Before Aggie could answer, Alfred was again heard calling from the next room. Apparently all his anger had subsided, for he inquired in the most amiable tone as to what baby might be doing and how he might be feeling. Aggie crossed quickly to the door, and sweetly reassured the anxious father, then she closed the door softly and turned to Zoie and Jimmy with a new inspiration lighting her face. "I have it," she exclaimed ecstatically.

Jimmy regarded his spouse with grave suspicion.

"Now see here," he objected, "every time YOU 'HAVE IT,' I DO IT. The NEXT time you 'HAVE IT' YOU DO IT!"

The emphasis with which Jimmy made his declaration deserved consideration, but to his amazement it was entirely ignored by both women. Hopping quickly out of bed, without even glancing in his direction, Zoie gave her entire attention to Aggie. "What is it?" she asked eagerly.

"There must be OTHER babies' Homes," said Aggie, and she glanced at Jimmy from her superior height.

"They aren't open all night like corner drug stores," growled Jimmy.

"Well, they ought to be," decided Zoie.

"And surely," argued Aggie, "in an extraordinary case--like----"

"This was an 'extraordinary case,' " declared Jimmy, "and you saw what happened this time, and the Superintendent is a friend of mine--at least he WAS a friend of mine." And with that Jimmy sat himself down on the far corner of the couch and proceeded to ruminate on the havoc that these two women had wrought in his once tranquil life.

Zoie gazed at Jimmy in deep disgust; her friend Aggie had made an excellent suggestion, and instead of acting upon it with alacrity, here sat Jimmy sulking like a stubborn child.

"I suppose," said Zoie, as her eyebrows assumed a bored angle, "there are SOME babies in the world outside of Children's Homes."

"Of course," was Aggie's enthusiastic rejoinder; "there's one born every minute."

"But I was born BETWEEN minutes," protested Jimmy.

"Who's talking about you?" snapped Zoie.

Again Aggie exclaimed that she "had it."

"She's got it twice as bad," groaned Jimmy, and he wondered what new form her persecution of him was about to take.

"Where is the morning paper?" asked Aggie, excitedly.

"We can't advertise NOW," protested Zoie. "It's too late for that."

"Sh! Sh!" answered Aggie, as she snatched the paper quickly from the table and began running her eyes up and down its third page. "Married-- married," she murmured, and then with delight she found the half column for which she was searching. "Born," she exclaimed triumphantly. "Here we are! Get a pencil, Zoie, and we'll take down all the new ones."

"Of course," agreed Zoie, clapping her hands in glee, "and Jimmy can get a taxi and look them right up."

"Oh, CAN he?" shouted Jimmy as he rose with clenched fists. "Now

you two, see here----"

Before Jimmy could complete his threat, there was a sharp ring of the door bell. He looked at the two women inquiringly.

"It's the mother," cried Zoie in a hoarse whisper.

"The mother!" repeated Jimmy in terror and he glanced uncertainly from one door to the other.

"Cover up the baby!" called Zoie, and drawing Jimmy's overcoat quickly from his arm, Aggie threw it hurriedly over the cradle.

For an instant Jimmy remained motionless in the centre of the room, hatless, coatless, and shorn of ideas. A loud knock on the door decided him and he sank with trembling knees behind the nearest armchair, just as Zoie made a flying leap into the bed and prepared to draw the cover over her head.

The knock was repeated and Aggie signalled to Zoie to answer it.

"Come in!" called Zoie very faintly.

CHAPTER XIX

From his hiding-place Jimmy peeped around the edge of the armchair and saw what seemed to be a large clothes basket entering the room. Closer inspection revealed the small figure of Maggie, the washerwoman's daughter, propelling the basket, which was piled high with freshly laundered clothing. Jimmy drew a long sigh of relief, and unknotted his cramped limbs.

"Shall I lay the things on the sofa, mum?" asked Maggie as she placed her basket on the floor and waited for Zoie's instructions.

"Yes, please," answered Zoie, too exhausted for further comment.

Taking the laundry piece by piece from the basket, Maggie made excuses for its delay, while she placed it on the couch. Deaf to Maggie's chatter, Zoie lay back languidly on her pillows; but she soon heard something that lifted her straight up in bed.

"Me mother is sorry she had to kape you waitin' this week," said Maggie over her shoulder; "but we've got twins at OUR house."

"Twins!" echoed Zoie and Aggie simultaneously. Then together they stared at Maggie as though she had been dropped from another world.

Finding attention temporarily diverted from himself, Jimmy had

begun to rearrange both his mind and his cravat when he felt rather than saw that his two persecutors were regarding him with a steady, determined gaze. In spite of himself, Jimmy raised his eyes to theirs.

"Twins!" was their laconic answer.

Now, Jimmy had heard Maggie's announcement about the bountiful supply of offspring lately arrived at her house, but not until he caught the fanatical gleam in the eyes of his companions did he understand the part they meant him to play in their next adventure. He waited for no explanation--he bolted toward the door.

"Wait, Jimmy," commanded Aggie. But it was not until she had laid firm hold of him that he waited.

Surprised by such strange behaviour on the part of those whom she considered her superiors, Maggie looked first at Aggie, then at Jimmy, then at Zoie, uncertain whether to go or to stay.

"Anythin' to go back, mum?" she stammered.

Zoie stared at Maggie solemnly from across the foot of the bed. "Maggie," she asked in a deep, sepulchral tone, "where do you live?"

"Just around the corner on High Street, mum," gasped Maggie. Then, keeping her eyes fixed uneasily on Zoie she picked up her basket and backed cautiously toward the door.

"Wait!" commanded Zoie; and Maggie paused, one foot in mid-air. "Wait in the hall," said Zoie.

"Yes'um," assented Maggie, almost in a whisper. Then she nodded her head jerkily, cast another furtive glance at the three persons who were regarding her so strangely, and slipped quickly through the door.

Having crossed the room and stealthily closed the door, Aggie returned to Jimmy, who was watching her with the furtive expression of a trapped animal.

"It's Providence," she declared, with a grave countenance.

Jimmy looked up at Aggie with affected innocence, then rolled his round eyes away from her. He was confronted by Zoie, who had approached from the opposite side of the room.

"It's Fate," declared Zoie, in awe-struck tones.

Jimmy was beginning to wriggle, but he kept up a last desperate presence of not understanding them.

"You needn't tell me I'm going to take the wash to the old lady," he said, "for I'm not going to do it."

"It isn't the WASH," said Aggie, and her tone warned him that she expected no nonsense from him.

"You know what we are thinking about just as well as we do," said Zoie. "I'll write that washerwoman a note and tell her we must have one of those babies right now." And with that she turned toward her desk and began rummaging amongst her papers for a pencil and pad. "The luck of these poor," she murmured.

"The luck of US," corrected Aggie, whose spirits were now soaring. Then she turned to Jimmy with growing enthusiasm. "Just think of it, dear," she said, "Fate has sent us a baby to our very door."

"Well," declared Jimmy, again beginning to show signs of fight, "if Fate has sent a baby to the door, you don't need me," and with that he snatched his coat from the crib.

"Wait, Jimmy," again commanded Aggie, and she took his coat gently but firmly from him.

"Now, see here," argued Jimmy, trying to get free from his strong-minded spouse, "you know perfectly well that that washerwoman isn't going to let us have that baby."

"Nonsense," called Zoie over her shoulder, while she scribbled a hurried note to the washerwoman. "If she won't let us have it 'for keeps,' I'll just 'rent it.' "

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Jimmy in genuine horror. "Warm, fresh, palpitating babies rented as you would rent a gas stove!"

"That's all a pose," declared Aggie, in a matter-of-fact tone. "You think babies 'little red worms,' you've said so."

Jimmy could not deny it.

"She'll be only too glad to rent it," declared Zoie, as she glanced hurriedly through the note just written, and slipped it, together with a bill, into an envelope. "I'll pay her anything. It's only until I can get another one."

"Another!" shouted Jimmy, and his eyes turned heavenward for help. "An endless chain with me to put the links together!"

"Don't be so theatrical," said Aggie, irritably, as she took up Jimmy's coat and prepared to get him into it.

"Why DO you make such a fuss about NOTHING," sighed Zoie.

"Nothing?" echoed Jimmy, and he looked at her with wondering eyes. "I crawl about like a thief in the night snatching babies from their mother's breasts, and you call THAT nothing?"

"You don't have to 'CRAWL,' " reminded Zoie, "you can take a taxi."

"Here's your coat, dear," said Aggie graciously, as she endeavoured to slip Jimmy's limp arms into the sleeves of the garment.

"You can take Maggie with you," said Zoie, with the air of conferring a distinct favour upon him.

"And the wash on my lap," added Jimmy sarcastically.

"No," said Zoie, unruffled by Jimmy's ungracious behaviour. "We'll send the wash later."

"That's very kind of you," sneered Jimmy, as he unconsciously allowed his arms to slip into the sleeves of the coat Aggie was urging upon him.

"All you need to do," said Aggie complacently, "is to get us the baby."

"Yes," said Jimmy, "and what do you suppose my friends would say if they were to see me riding around town with the wash-lady's daughter and a baby on my lap? What would YOU say?" he asked Aggie, "if you didn't know the facts?"

"Nobody's going to see you," answered Aggie impatiently; "it's only around the corner. Go on, Jimmy, be a good boy."

"You mean a good thing," retorted Jimmy without budging from the spot.

"How ridiculous!" exclaimed Zoie; "it's as easy as can be."

"Yes, the FIRST one SOUNDED easy, too," said Jimmy.

"All you have to do," explained Zoie, trying to restrain her rising intolerance of his stupidity, "is to give this note to Maggie's mother. She'll give you her baby, you bring it back here, we'll give you THIS one, and you can take it right back to the Home."

"And meet the other mother," concluded Jimmy with a shake of his head.

There was a distinct threat in Zoie's voice when she again addressed the stubborn Jimmy and the glitter of triumph was in

her eyes.

"You'd better meet here THERE than HERE," she warned him; "you know what the Superintendent said."

"That's true," agreed Aggie with an anxious face. "Come now," she pleaded, "it will only take a minute; you can do the whole thing before you have had time to think."

"Before I have had time to think," repeated Jimmy excitedly. "That's how you get me to do everything. Well, this time I've HAD time to think and I don't think I will!" and with that he threw himself upon the couch, unmindful of the damage to the freshly laundered clothes.

"Get up," cried Zoie.

"You haven't time to sit down," said Aggie.

"I'll TAKE time," declared Jimmy. His eyes blinked ominously and he remained glued to the couch.

There was a short silence; the two women gazed at Jimmy in despair. Remembering a fresh grievance, Jimmy turned upon them.

"By the way," he said, "do you two know that I haven't had anything to eat yet?"

"And do you know," said Zoie, "that Alfred may be back at any minute? He can't stay away forever."

"Not unless he has cut his throat," rejoined Jimmy, "and that's what I'd do if I had a razor."

Zoie regarded Jimmy as though he were beyond redemption. "Can't you ever think of anybody but yourself?" she asked, with a martyred air.

Had Jimmy been half his age, Aggie would have felt sure that she saw him make a face at her friend for answer. As it was, she resolved to make one last effort to awaken her unobliging spouse to a belated sense of duty.

"You see, dear," she said, "you might better get the washerwoman's baby than to go from house to house for one," and she glanced again toward the paper.

"Yes," urged Zoie, "and that's just what you'll HAVE to do, if you don't get this one."

Jimmy's head hung dejectedly. It was apparent that his courage was slipping from him. Aggie was quick to realise her opportunity, and before Jimmy could protect himself from her

treacherous wiles, she had slipped one arm coyly about his neck.

"Now, Jimmy," she pleaded as she pressed her soft cheek to his throbbing temple, and toyed with the bay curl on his perspiring forehead, "wont you do this little teeny-weepy thing just for me?"

Jimmy's lips puckered in a pout; he began to blink nervously. Aggie slipped her other arm about his neck.

"You know," she continued with a baby whine, "I got Zoie into this, and I've just got to get her out of it. You're not going to desert me, are you, Jimmy? You WILL help me, won't you, dear?" Her breath was on Jimmy's cheek; he could feel her lips stealing closer to his. He had not been treated to much affection of late. His head drooped lower--he began to twiddle the fob on his watch chain. "Won't you?" persisted Aggie.

Jimmy studied the toes of his boots.

"Won't you?" she repeated, and her soft eyelashes just brushed the tip of his retrousee nose.

Jimmy's head was now wagging from side to side.

"Won't you?" she entreated a fourth time, and she kissed him full on the lips.

With a resigned sigh, Jimmy rose mechanically from the heap of crushed laundry and held out his fat chubby hand.

"Give me the letter," he groaned.

"Here you are," said Zoie, taking Jimmy's acquiescence as a matter of course; and she thrust the letter into the pocket of Jimmy's ulster. "Now, when you get back with the baby," she continued, "don't come in all of a sudden; just wait outside and whistle. You CAN WHISTLE, can't you?" she asked with a doubtful air.

For answer, Jimmy placed two fingers between his lips and produced a shrill whistle that made both Zoie and Aggie glance nervously toward Alfred's bedroom door.

"Yes, you can WHISTLE," admitted Zoie, then she continued her directions. "If Alfred is not in the room, I'll raise the shade and you can come right up."

"And if he is in the room?" asked Jimmy with a fine shade of sarcasm.

"If he IS in the room," explained Zoie, "you must wait outside until I can get rid of him."

Jimmy turned his eyes toward Aggie to ask if it were possible that she still approved of Zoie's inhuman plan. For answer Aggie stroked his coat collar fondly.

"We'll give you the signal the moment the coast is clear," she said, then she hurriedly buttoned Jimmy's large ulster and wound a muffler about his neck. "There now, dear, do go, you're all buttoned up," and with that she urged him toward the door.

"Just a minute," protested Jimmy, as he paused on the threshold. "Let me get this right, if the shade is up, I stay down."

"Not at all," corrected Aggie and Zoie in a breath. "If the shade is up, you come up."

Jimmy cast another martyred look in Zoie's direction.

"You won't hurry will you?" he said, "you know it is only twenty-three below zero and I haven't had anything to eat yet--and----"

"Yes, we know," interrupted the two women in chorus, and then Aggie added wearily, "go on, Jimmy; don't be funny."

"Funny?" snorted Jimmy. "With a baby on my lap and the wash lady's daughter, I won't be funny, oh no!"

It is doubtful whether Jimmy would not have worked himself into another state of open rebellion had not Aggie put an end to his protests by thrusting him firmly out of the room and closing the door behind him. After this act of heroic decision on her part, the two women listened intently, fearing that he might return; but presently they heard the bang of the outer door, and at last they drew a long breath of relief. For the first time since Alfred's arrival, Aggie was preparing to sink into a chair, when she was startled by a sharp exclamation from Zoie.

"Good heavens," cried Zoie, "I forgot to ask Maggie."

"Ask her what?" questioned Aggie.

"Boys or girls," said Zoie, with a solemn look toward the door through which Jimmy had just disappeared.

"Well," decided Aggie, after a moment's reflection, "it's too late now. Anyway," she concluded philosophically, "we couldn't CHANGE it."

With more or less damage to himself consequent on his excitement, Alfred completed his shaving and hastened to return to his wife and the babe. Finding the supposedly ill Zoie careering about the centre of the room expostulating with Aggie, the young man stopped dumbfounded on the threshold.

"Zoie," he cried in astonishment. "What are you doing out of bed?"

For an instant the startled Zoie gazed at him stupefied.

"Why, I--I----" Her eyes sought Aggie's for a suggestion; there was no answer there. It was not until her gaze fell upon the cradle that she was seized by the desired inspiration.

"I just got up to see baby," she faltered, then putting one hand giddily to her head, she pretended to sway.

In an instant Alfred's arms were about her. He bore her quickly to the bed. "You stay here, my darling," he said tenderly. "I'll bring baby to you," and after a solicitous caress he turned toward baby's crib and bent fondly over the little one. "Ah, there's father's man," he said. "Was he lonesome baby? Oh, goodis g'acious," then followed an incoherent muttering of baby talk, as he bore the youngster toward Zoie's bed. "Come, my precious," he called to Zoie, as he sank down on the edge of the bed. "See mother's boy."

"Mother!" shrieked Zoie in horror. It had suddenly dawned upon her that this was the name by which Alfred would no doubt call her for the rest of her life. She almost detested him.

But Alfred did not see the look of disgust on Zoie's face. He was wholly absorbed by baby.

"What a funny face," he cooed as he pinched the youngster's cheek. "Great Scott, what a grip," he cried as the infant's fingers closed around his own. "Will you look at the size of those hands," he exclaimed.

Zoie and Aggie exchanged worried glances; the baby had no doubt inherited his large hands from his mother.

"Say, Aggie," called Alfred, "what are all of these little specks on baby's forehead?" He pointed toward the infant's brow. "One, two, three," he counted.

Zoie was becoming more and more uncomfortable at the close proximity of the little stranger.

"Oh," said Aggie, with affected carelessness as she leaned over Alfred's shoulder and glanced at baby's forehead. "That is just a little rash."

"A rash!" exclaimed Alfred excitedly, "that's dangerous, isn't it? We'd better call up the doctor." And he rose and started hurriedly toward the telephone, baby in arms.

"Don't be silly," called Zoie, filled with vague alarm at the thought of the family physician's appearance and the explanations that this might entail.

Stepping between Alfred and the 'phone, Aggie protested frantically. "You see, Alfred," she said, "it is better to have the rash OUT, it won't do any harm unless it turns IN."

"He's perfectly well," declared Zoie, "if you'll only put him in his crib and leave him alone."

Alfred looked down at his charge. "Is that right, son?" he asked, and he tickled the little fellow playfully in the ribs. "I'll tell you what," he called over his shoulder to Zoie, "he's a fine looking boy." And then with a mysterious air, he nodded to Aggie to approach. "Whom does he look like?" he asked.

Again Zoie sat up in anxiety. Aggie glanced at her, uncertain what answer to make.

"I--I hadn't thought," she stammered weakly.

"Go on, go on," exclaimed the proud young father, "you can't tell me that you can look at that boy and not see the resemblance."

"To whom?" asked Aggie, half fearfully.

"Why," said Alfred, "he's the image of Zoie."

Zoie gazed at the puckered red face in Alfred's arms. "What!" she shrieked in disgust, then fall back on her pillows and drew the lace coverlet over her face.

Mistaking Zoie's feeling for one of embarrassment at being over-praised, Alfred bore the infant to her bedside. "See, dear," he persisted, "see for yourself, look at his forehead."

"I'd rather look at you," pouted Zoie, peeping from beneath the coverlet, "if you would only put that thing down for a minute."

"Thing?" exclaimed Alfred, as though doubting his own ears. But before he could remonstrate further, Zoie's arms were about his neck and she was pleading jealously for his attention.

"Please, Alfred," she begged, "I have scarcely had a look at you, yet."

Alfred shook his head and turned to baby with an indulgent smile.

It was pleasant to have two such delightful creatures bidding for his entire attention.

"Dear me," he said to baby. "Dear me, tink of mudder wanting to look at a big u'gy t'ing like fadder, when she could look at a 'itty witty t'ing like dis," and he rose and crossed to the crib where he deposited the small creature with yet more gurgling and endearing.

Zoie's dreams of rapture at Alfred's home coming had not included such divided attention as he was now showing her and she was growing more and more desperate at the turn affairs had taken. She resolved to put a stop to his nonsense and to make him realise that she and no one else was the lode star of his existence. She beckoned to Aggie to get out of the room and to leave her a clear field and as soon as her friend had gone quietly into the next room, she called impatiently to Alfred who was still cooing rapturously over the young stranger. Finding Alfred deaf to her first entreaty, Zoie shut her lips hard, rearranged her pretty head-dress, drew one fascinating little curl down over her shoulder, reknotted the pink ribbon of her negligee, and then issued a final and imperious order for her husband to attend her.

"Yes, yes, dear," answered Alfred, with a shade of impatience. "I'm coming, I'm coming." And bidding a reluctant farewell to the small person in the crib, he crossed to her side.

Zoie caught Alfred's hand and drew him down to her; he smiled complacently.

"Well," he said in the patronising tone that Zoie always resented. "How is hubby's little girl?"

"It's about time," pouted Zoie, "that you made a little fuss over me for a change."

"My own!" murmured Alfred. He stooped to kiss the eager lips, but just as his young wife prepared to lend herself to his long delayed embrace, his mind was distracted by an uneasy thought. "Do you think that Baby is----"

He was not permitted to finish the sentence.

Zoie drew him back to her with a sharp exclamation.

"Think of ME for a while," she commanded.

"My darling," expostulated Alfred with a shade of surprise at her vehemence. "How could I think of anyone else?" Again he stooped to embrace her and again his mind was directed otherwise. "I wonder if Baby is warm enough," he said and attempted to rise.

"Wonder about ME for a while," snapped Zoie, clinging to him determinedly.

Again Alfred looked at her in amazement. Was it possible there was anything besides Baby worth wondering about? Whether there was or not, Zoie was no longer to be resisted and with a last regretful look at the crib, he resigned himself to giving his entire attention to his spoiled young wife.

Gratified by her hard-won conquest, Zoie now settled herself in Alfred's arms.

"You haven't told me what you did all the time that you were away," she reminded him.

"Oh, there was plenty to do," answered Alfred.

"Did you think of me every minute?" she asked jealously.

"That would be telling," laughed Alfred, as he pinched her small pink ear.

"I wish to be 'told,' " declared Zoie; "I don't suppose you realise it, but if I were to live a THOUSAND YEARS, I'd never be quite sure what you did during those FEW MONTHS."

"It was nothing that you wouldn't have been proud of," answered Alfred, with an unconscious expansion of his chest.

"Do you love me as much as ever?" asked Zoie.

"Behave yourself," answered Alfred, trying not to appear flattered by the discovery that his absence had undoubtedly caused her great uneasiness.

"Well, SAY it!" demanded Zoie.

"You know I do," answered Alfred, with the diffidence of a school boy.

"Then kiss me," concluded Zoie, with an air of finality that left Alfred no alternative.

As a matter of fact, Alfred was no longer seeking an alternative. He was again under the spell of his wife's adorable charms and he kissed her not once, but many times.

"Foolish child," he murmured, then he laid her tenderly against the large white pillows, remonstrating with her for being so spoiled, and cautioning her to be a good little girl while he went again to see about Baby.

Zoie clung to his hand and feigned approaching tears.

"You aren't thinking of me at all?" she pouted. "And kisses are no good unless you put your whole mind on them. Give me a real kiss!" she pleaded.

Again Alfred stooped to humour the small importunate person who was so jealous of his every thought, but just as his lips touched her forehead his ear was arrested by a sound as yet new both to him and to Zoie. He lifted his head and listened.

"What was that?" he asked.

"I don't know," answered Zoie, wondering if the cat could have got into the room.

A redoubled effort on the part of the young stranger directed their attention in the right direction.

"My God!" exclaimed Alfred tragically, "it's Baby. He's crying." And with that, he rushed to the crib and clasped the small mite close to his breast, leaving Zoie to pummel the pillows in an agony of vexation.

After vain cajoling of the angry youngster, Alfred bore him excitedly to Zoie's bedside.

"You'd better take him, dear," he said.

To the young husband's astonishment, Zoie waved him from her in terror, and called loudly for Aggie. But no sooner had Aggie appeared on the scene, than a sharp whistle was heard from the pavement below.

"Pull down the shade!" cried Zoie frantically.

Aggie hastened toward the window.

Attributing Zoie's uneasiness to a caprice of modesty, Alfred turned from the cradle to reassure her.

"No one can see in way up here," he said.

To Zoie's distress, the lowering of the shade was answered by a yet shriller whistle from the street below.

"Was it 'up' or 'down'?" cried Zoie to Aggie in an agony of doubt, as she tried to recall her instructions to Jimmy.

"I don't know," answered Aggie. "I've forgotten."

Another impatient whistle did not improve their memory. Alarmed by Zoie's increasing excitement, and thinking she was troubled merely by a sick woman's fancy that someone might see through the

window, Alfred placed the babe quickly in its cradle and crossed to the young wife's bed.

"It was up, dear," he said. "You had Aggie put it down."

"Then I want it up," declared the seemingly perverse Zoie.

"But it was up," argued Alfred.

A succession of emotional whistles set Zoie to pounding the pillows.

"Put it down!" she commanded.

"But Zoie----" protested Alfred.

"Did I say 'up' or did I say 'down'?" moaned the half-demented Zoie, while long whistles and short whistles, appealing whistles and impatient whistles followed each other in quick succession.

"You said down, dear," persisted Alfred, now almost as distracted as his wife.

Zoie waved him from the room. "I wish you'd get out of here," she cried; "you make me so nervous that I can't think at all."

"Of course, dear," murmured Alfred, "if you wish it." And with a hurt and perplexed expression on his face he backed quickly from the room.

CHAPTER XXI

When Zoie's letter asking for the O'Flarety twin had reached that young lady's astonished mother, Mrs. O'Flarety felt herself suddenly lifted to a position of importance.

"Think of the purty Mrs. Hardy a wantin' my little Bridget," she exclaimed, and she began to dwell upon the romantic possibilities of her offspring's future under the care of such a "foine stylish lady and concluded by declaring it 'a lucky day entoirely.' "

Jimmy had his misgivings about it being Bridget's "LUCKY day," but it was not for him to delay matters by dwelling upon the eccentricities of Zoie's character, and when Mrs. O'Flarety had deposited Bridget in Jimmy's short arms and slipped a well filled nursing bottle into his overcoat pocket, he took his leave hastily, lest the excited woman add Bridget's twin to her willing offering.

Once out of sight of the elated mother, Jimmy thrust the defenceless Bridget within the folds of his already snug ulster,

buttoned the garment in such places as it would meet, and made for the taxi which, owing to the upset condition of the street, he had been obliged to abandon at the corner.

Whether the driver had obtained a more promising "fare" or been run in by the police, Jimmy never knew. At any rate it was in vain that he looked for his vehicle. So intense was the cold that it was impossible to wait for a chance taxi; furthermore, the meanness of the district made it extremely unlikely that one would appear, and glancing guiltily behind him to make sure that no one was taking cognisance of his strange exploit, Jimmy began picking his way along dark lanes and avoiding the lighted thoroughfare on which the "Sherwood" was situated, until he was within a block of his destination.

Panting with haste and excitement, he eventually gained courage to dash through a side street that brought him within a few doors of the "Sherwood." Again glancing behind him, he turned the well lighted corner and arrived beneath Zoie's window to find one shade up and one down. In his perplexity he emitted a faint whistle. Immediately he saw the other shade lowered. Uncertain as to what arrangement he had actually made with Zoie, he ventured a second whistle. The result was a hysterical running up and down of the shade which left him utterly bewildered as to what disposition he was supposed to make of the wobbly bit of humanity pressed against his shirt front.

Reaching over his artificially curved figure to grasp a bit of white that trailed below his coat, he looked up to see a passing policeman eyeing him suspiciously.

"Taking the air?" asked the policeman.

"Ye-yes," mumbled Jimmy with affected nonchalance and he knocked the heels of his boots together in order to keep his teeth from chattering. "It's a fi-fine ni-night for air," he stuttered.

"Is it?" said the policeman, and to Jimmy's horror, he saw the fellow's eyes fix themselves on the bit of white.

"Go-good-night," stammered Jimmy hurriedly, and trying to assume an easy stride in spite of the uncomfortable addition to his already rotund figure, he slipped into the hotel, where avoiding the lighted elevator, he laboured quickly, up the stairs.

At the very moment when Zoie was driving Alfred in consternation from the room, Jimmy entered it uninvited.

"Get out," was the inhospitable greeting received simultaneously from Zoie and Aggie, and without waiting for further instructions he "got."

Fortunately for all concerned, Alfred, who was at the same moment

departing by way of the bedroom door, did not look behind him; but it was some minutes before Aggie who had followed Jimmy into the hall could persuade him to return.

After repeated and insistent signals both from Aggie and Zoie, Jimmy's round red face appeared cautiously around the frame of the door. It bore unmistakable indications of apoplexy. But the eyes of the women were not upon Jimmy's face, they too had caught sight of the bit of white that hung below his coat, and dragging him quickly into the room and closing the door, Aggie proceeded without inquiry or thanks to unbutton his coat and to take from beneath it the small object for which she and Zoie had been eagerly waiting.

"Thank Heaven!" sighed Zoie, as she saw Aggie bearing the latest acquisition to Alfred's rapidly increasing family safely toward the crib.

Suddenly remembering something in his right hand coat pocket, Jimmy called to Aggie, who turned to him and waited expectantly. After characteristic fumbling, he produced a well filled nursing bottle.

"What's that?" asked Zoie.

"For HER," grunted Jimmy, and he nodded toward the bundle in Aggie's arms.

"HER!" cried Zoie and Aggie in chorus. Zoie shut her lips hard and gazed at him with contempt.

"I might have known you'd get the wrong kind," she said.

What Jimmy thought about the ingratitude of woman was not to be expressed in language. He controlled himself as well as he could and merely LOOKED the things that he would like to have said.

"Well, it can't be helped now," decided the philosophic Aggie; "here, Jimmy," she said, "you hold 'HER' a minute and I'll get you the other one."

Placing the small creature in Jimmy's protesting arms, Aggie turned toward the cradle to make the proposed exchange when she was startled by the unexpected return of Alfred.

Thanks to the ample folds of Jimmy's ulster, he was able to effectually conceal his charge and he started quickly toward the hall, but in making the necessary detour around the couch he failed to reach the door before Alfred, who had chosen a more direct way.

"Hold on, Jimmy," exclaimed Alfred good-naturedly, and he laid a detaining hand on his friend's shoulder. "Where are you going?"

"I'll be back," stammered Jimmy weakly, edging his way toward the door, and contriving to keep his back toward Alfred.

"Wait a minute," said Alfred jovially, as he let his hand slip onto Jimmy's arm, "you haven't told me the news yet."

"I'll tell you later," mumbled Jimmy, still trying to escape. But Alfred's eye had fallen upon a bit of white flannel dangling below the bottom of Jimmy's ulster, it travelled upward to Jimmy's unusually rotund figure.

"What have you got there?" he demanded to know, as he pointed toward the centre button of Jimmy's overcoat.

"Here?" echoed Jimmy vapidly, glancing at the button in question, "why, that's just a little----" There was a faint wail from the depths of the ulster. Jimmy began to caper about with elephantine tread. "Oochie, coochie, oochie," he called excitedly.

"What's the matter with you?" asked Alfred. The wail became a shriek. "Good Heavens!" cried the anxious father, "it's my boy." And with that he pounced upon Jimmy, threw wide his ulster and snatched from his arms Jimmy's latest contribution to Zoie's scheme of things.

As Aggie had previously remarked, all young babies look very much alike, and to the inexperienced eye of this new and overwrought father, there was no difference between the infant that he now pressed to his breast, and the one that, unsuspected by him, lay peacefully dozing in the crib, not ten feet from him. He gazed at the face of the newcomer with the same ecstasy that he had felt in the possession of her predecessor. But Zoie and Aggie were looking at each other with something quite different from ecstasy.

"My boy," exclaimed Alfred, with deep emotion, as he clasped the tiny creature to his breast. Then he turned to Jimmy. "What were you doing with my baby?" he demanded hotly.

"I--I was just taking him out for a little walk!" stammered Jimmy.

"You just try," threatened Alfred, and he towered over the intimidated Jimmy. "Are you crazy?"

Jimmy was of the opinion that he must be crazy or he would never have found himself in such a predicament as this, but the anxious faces of Zoie and Aggie, denied him the luxury of declaring himself so. He sank mutely on the end of the couch and proceeded to sulk in silence.

As for Aggie and Zoie, they continued to gaze open-mouthed at Alfred, who was waltzing about the room transported into a new heaven of delight at having snatched his heir from the danger of another night ramble with Jimmy.

"Did a horrid old Jimmy spoil his 'itty nap'?" he gurgled to Baby. Then with a sudden exclamation of alarm, he turned toward the anxious women. "Aggie!" he cried, as he stared intently into Baby's face. "Look--his rash! It's turned IN!"

Aggie pretended to glance over Alfred's shoulder.

"Why so it has," she agreed nervously.

"What shall we do?" cried the distraught Alfred.

"It's all right now," counselled Aggie, "so long as it didn't turn in too suddenly."

"We'd better keep him warm, hadn't we?" suggested Alfred, remembering Aggie's previous instructions on a similar occasion. "I'll put him in his crib," he decided, and thereupon he made a quick move toward the bassinette.

Staggering back from the cradle with the unsteadiness of a drunken man Alfred called upon the Diety. "What is THAT?" he demanded as he pointed toward the unexpected object before him.

Neither Zoie, Aggie, nor Jimmy could command words to assist Alfred's rapidly waning powers of comprehension, and it was not until he had swept each face for the third time with a look of inquiry that Zoie found breath to stammer nervously, "Why--why--why, that's the OTHER one."

"The other one?" echoed Alfred in a dazed manner; then he turned to Aggie for further explanation.

"Yes," affirmed Aggie, with an emphatic nod, "the other one."

An undescrivable joy was dawning on Alfred's face.

"You don't mean----" He stared from the infant in his arms to the one in the cradle, then back again at Aggie and Zoie. The women solemnly nodded their heads. Even Jimmy unblushingly acquiesced. Alfred turned toward Zoie for the final confirmation of his hopes.

"Yes, dear," assented Zoie sweetly, "that's Alfred."

What Jimmy and the women saw next appeared to be the dance of a whirling dervish; as a matter of fact, it was merely a man, mad with delight, clasping two infants in long clothes and circling the room with them.

When Alfred could again enunciate distinctly, he rushed to Zoie's side with the babes in his arms.

"My darling," he exclaimed, "why didn't you tell me?"

"I was ashamed," whispered Zoie, hiding her head to shut out the sight of the red faces pressed close to hers.

"My angel!" cried Alfred, struggling to control his complicated emotions; then gazing at the precious pair in his arms, he cast his eyes devoutly toward heaven, "Was ever a man so blessed?"

Zoie peeped from the covers with affected shyness.

"You love me just as much?" she queried.

"I love you TWICE as much," declared Alfred, and with that he sank exhausted on the foot of the bed, vainly trying to teeter one son on each knee.

CHAPTER XXII

When Jimmy gained courage to turn his eyes in the direction of the family group he had helped to assemble, he was not reassured by the reproachful glances that he met from Aggie and Zoie. It was apparent that in their minds, he was again to blame for something. Realising that they dared not openly reproach him before Alfred, he decided to make his escape while his friend was still in the room. He reached for his hat and tiptoed gingerly toward the door, but just as he was congratulating himself upon his decision, Alfred called to him with a mysterious air.

"Jimmy," he said, "just a minute," and he nodded for Jimmy to approach.

It must have been Jimmy's guilty conscience that made him powerless to disobey Alfred's every command. Anyway, he slunk back to the fond parent's side, where he ultimately allowed himself to be inveigled into swinging his new watch before the unattentive eyes of the red-faced babes on Alfred's knees.

"Lower, Jimmy, lower," called Alfred as Jimmy absent-mindedly allowed the watch to swing out of the prescribed orbit. "Look at the darlings, Jimmy, look at them," he exclaimed as he gazed at the small creatures admiringly.

"Yes, look at them, Jimmy," repeated Zoie, and she glared at Jimmy behind Alfred's back.

"Don't you wish you had one of them, Jimmy?" asked Alfred.

"Well, _I_ wish he had," commented Zoie, and she wondered how she was ever again to detach either of them from Alfred's breast.

Before she could form any plan, the telephone rang loud and persistently. Jimmy glanced anxiously toward the women for instructions.

"I'll answer it," said Aggie with suspicious alacrity, and she crossed quickly toward the 'phone. The scattered bits of conversation that Zoie was able to gather from Aggie's end of the wire did not tend to soothe her over-excited nerves. As for Alfred, he was fortunately so engrossed with the babies that he took little notice of what Aggie was saying.

"What woman?" asked Aggie into the 'phone. "Where's she from?" The answer was evidently not reassuring. "Certainly not," exclaimed Aggie, "don't let her come up; send her away. Mrs. Hardy can't see anyone at all." Then followed a bit of pantomime between Zoie and Aggie, from which it appeared that their troubles were multiplying, then Aggie again gave her attention to the 'phone. "I don't know anything about her," she fibbed, "that woman must have the wrong address." And with that she hung up the receiver and came towards Alfred, anxious to get possession of his two small charges and to get them from the room, lest the mother who was apparently downstairs should thrust herself into their midst.

"What's the trouble, Aggie?" asked Alfred, and he nodded toward the telephone.

"Oh, just some woman with the wrong address," answered Aggie with affected carelessness. "You'd better let me take the babies now, Alfred."

"Take them where?" asked Alfred with surprise.

"To bed," answered Aggie sweetly, "they are going to sleep in the next room with Jimmy and me." She laid a detaining hand on Jimmy's arm.

"What's the hurry?" asked Alfred a bit disgruntled.

"It's very late," argued Aggie.

"Of course it is," insisted Zoie. "Please, Alfred," she pleaded, "do let Aggie take them."

Alfred rose reluctantly. "Mother knows best," he sighed, but ignoring Aggie's outstretched arms, he refused to relinquish the joy of himself carrying the small mites to their room, and he disappeared with the two of them, singing his now favourite lullaby.

When Alfred had left the room, Jimmy, who was now seated comfortably in the rocker, was rudely startled by a sharp voice at either side of him.

"Well!" shrieked Zoie, with all the disapproval that could be got into the one small word.

"You're very clever, aren't you?" sneered Aggie at Jimmy's other elbow.

Jimmy stared from one to the other.

"A nice fix you've got me into NOW," reproved Zoie.

"Why didn't you get out when you had the chance?" demanded Aggie.

"You would take your own sweet time, wouldn't you," said Zoie.

"What did I tell you?" asked Aggie.

"What does he care?" exclaimed Zoie, and she walked up and down the room excitedly, oblivious of the disarrangement of her flying negligee. "He's perfectly comfortable."

"Oh yes," assented Jimmy, as he sank back into the rocker and began propelling himself to and fro. "I never felt better," but a disinterested observer would have seen in him the picture of discomfort.

"You're going to feel a great deal WORSE," he was warned by Aggie. "Do you know who that was on the telephone?" she asked.

Jimmy looked at her mutely.

"The mother!" said Aggie emphatically

"What!" exclaimed Jimmy.

"She's down stairs," explained Aggie.

Jimmy had stopped rocking--his face now wore an uneasy expression.

"It's time you showed a little human intelligence," taunted Zoie, then she turned her back upon him and continued to Aggie, "what did she say?"

"She says," answered Aggie, with a threatening glance toward Jimmy, "that she won't leave this place until Jimmy gives her baby back."

"Let her have her old baby," said Jimmy. "I don't want it."

"You don't want it?" snapped Zoie indignantly, "what have YOU got to do with it?"

"Oh nothing, nothing," acquiesced Jimmy meekly, "I'm a mere detail."

"A lot you care what becomes of me," exclaimed Zoie reproachfully; then she turned to Aggie with a decided nod.

"Well, I want it," she asserted.

"But Zoie," protested Aggie in astonishment, "you can't mean to keep BOTH of them?"

"I certainly DO," said Zoie.

"What?" cried Aggie and Jimmy in concert.

"Jimmy has presented Alfred with twins," continued Zoie testily, "and now, he has to HAVE twins."

Jimmy's eyes were growing rounder and rounder.

"Do you know," continued Zoie, with a growing sense of indignation, "what would happen to me if I told Alfred NOW that he WASN'T the father of twins? He'd fly straight out of that door and I'd never see him again."

Aggie admitted that Zoie was no doubt speaking the truth.

"Jimmy has awakened Alfred's paternal instinct for twins," declared Zoie, with another emphatic nod of her head, "and now Jimmy must take the consequences."

Jimmy tried to frame a few faint objections, but Zoie waved him aside, with a positive air. "It's no use arguing. If it were only ONE, it wouldn't be so bad, but to tell Alfred that he's lost twins, he couldn't live through it."

"But Zoie," argued Aggie, "we can't have that mother hanging around down stairs until that baby is an old man. She'll have us arrested, the next thing."

"Why arrest US?" asked Zoie, with wide baby eyes. "WE didn't take it. Old slow-poke took it." And she nodded toward the now utterly vanquished Jimmy.

"That's right," murmured Jimmy, with a weak attempt at sarcasm, "don't leave me out of anything good."

"It doesn't matter WHICH one she arrests," decided the practical Aggie.

"Well, it matters to me," objected Zoie.

"And to me too, if it's all the same to you," protested Jimmy.

"Whoever it is," continued Aggie, "the truth is bound to come out. Alfred will have to know sooner or later, so we might as well make a clean breast of it, first as last."

"That's the first sensible thing you've said in three months," declared Jimmy with reviving hope.

"Oh, is that so?" sneered Zoie, and she levelled her most malicious look at Jimmy. "What do you think Alfred would do to YOU, Mr. Jimmy, if he knew the truth? YOU'RE the one who sent him the telegram; you are the one who told him that he was a FATHER."

"That's true," admitted Aggie, with a wrinkled forehead.

Zoie was quick to see her advantage. She followed it up. "And Alfred hasn't any sense of humour, you know."

"How could he have?" groaned Jimmy; "he's married." And with that he sank into his habitual state of dumps.

"Your sarcasm will do a great deal of good," flashed Zoie. Then she dismissed him with a nod, and crossed to her dressing table.

"But Zoie," persisted Aggie, as she followed her young friend in trepidation, "don't you realise that if you persist in keeping this baby, that mother will dog Jimmy's footsteps for the rest of his life?"

"That will be nice," murmured Jimmy.

Zoie busied herself with her toilet, and turned a deaf ear to Aggie. There was a touch of genuine emotion in Aggie's voice when she continued.

"Just think of it, Zoie, Jimmy will never be able to come and go like a free man again."

"What do I care how he comes and goes?" exclaimed Zoie impatiently. "If Jimmy had gone when we told him to go, that woman would have had her old baby by now; but he didn't, oh no! All he ever does is to sit around and talk about his dinner."

"Yes," cried Jimmy hotly, "and that's about as far as I ever GET with it."

"You'll never get anywhere with anything," was Zoie's exasperating answer. "You're too slow."

"Well, there's nothing slow about you," retorted Jimmy, stung to a frenzy by her insolence.

"Oh please, please," interposed Aggie, desperately determined to keep these two irascible persons to the main issue. "What are we going to tell that mother?"

"You can tell her whatever you like," answered Zoie, with an impudent toss of her head, "but I'll NOT give up that baby until I get ANOTHER one.'

"Another?" almost shrieked Jimmy. It was apparent that he must needs increase the number of his brain cells if he were to follow this extraordinary young woman's line of thought much further. "You don't expect to go on multiplying them forever, do you?" he asked.

"YOU are the one who has been multiplying them," was Zoie's disconcerting reply.

It was evident to Jimmy that he could not think fast enough nor clearly enough to save himself from a mental disaster if he continued to argue with the shameless young woman, so he contented himself by rocking to and fro and murmuring dismally that he had "known from the first that it was to be an endless chain."

While Zoie and Jimmy had been wrangling, Aggie had been weighing the pros and cons of the case. She now turned to Jimmy with a tone of firm but motherly decision. "Zoie is quite right," she said.

Jimmy rolled his large eyes up at his spouse with a "you too, Brutus," expression.

Aggie continued mercilessly, "It's the only way, Jimmy."

No sooner had Aggie arrived at her decision than Zoie upset her tranquillity by a triumphant expression of "I have it."

Jimmy and Aggie gazed at Zoie's radiant face in consternation. They were accustomed to see only reproach there. Her sudden enthusiasm increased Jimmy's uneasiness.

"YOU have it," he grunted without attempting to conceal his disgust. "SHE'S the one who generally has it." And he nodded toward Aggie.

Inflamed by her young friend's enthusiasm, Aggie rushed to her eagerly.

"What is it, Zoie?" she asked.

"The washerwoman!" exclaimed Zoie, as though the revelation had come straight from heaven. "SHE HAD TWINS," and with that, two pairs of eyes turned expectantly toward the only man in the room.

Tracing the pattern of the rug with his toe, Jimmy remained stubbornly oblivious of their attentions. He rearranged the pillows on the couch, and finally, for want of a better occupation, he wound his watch. All to no avail. He could feel Zoie's cat-like gaze upon him.

"Jimmy can get the other one," she said.

"The hell I can," exclaimed Jimmy, starting to his feet and no longer considering time or place.

The two women gazed at him reproachfully.

"Jimmy!" cried Aggie, in a shocked, hurt voice. "That's the first time I've ever heard you swear."

"Well, it won't be the LAST time," declared Jimmy hotly, "if THIS keeps up." His eyes were blazing. He paced to and fro like an infuriated lion.

"Dearest," said Aggie, "you look almost imposing."

"Nonsense," interrupted Zoie, who found Jimmy unusually ridiculous. "If I'd known that Jimmy was going to put such an idea into Alfred's head, I'd have got the two in the first place."

"Will she let us HAVE the other?" asked Aggie with some misgiving.

"Of course she will," answered Zoie, leaving Jimmy entirely out of the conversation. "She's as poor as a church mouse. I'll pay her well. She'll never miss it. What could she do with one twin, anyway?"

A snort of rage from Jimmy did not disturb Zoie's enthusiasm. She proceeded to elaborate her plan.

"I'll adopt them," she declared, "I'll leave them all Alfred's money. Think of Alfred having real live twins for keeps."

"It would be nice, wouldn't it?" commented Jimmy sarcastically.

Zoie turned to Jimmy, as though they were on the best of terms.

"How much money have you?" she asked.

Before Jimmy could declare himself penniless, Aggie answered for him with the greatest enthusiasm, "He has a whole lot; he drew

some today."

"Good!" exclaimed Zoie to the abashed Jimmy, and then she continued in a matter-of-fact tone, "Now, Jimmy," she said, "you go give the washwoman what money you have on account, then tell her to come around here in the morning when Alfred has gone out and I'll settle all the details with her. Go on now, Jimmy," she continued, "you don't need another letter."

"No," chimed in Aggie sweetly; "you know her now, dear."

"Oh, yes," corroborated Jimmy, with a sarcastic smile and without budging from the spot on which he stood, "we are great pals now."

"What's the matter?" asked Zoie, astonished that Jimmy was not starting on his mission with alacrity. "What are you waiting for?"

Jimmy merely continued to smile enigmatically.

"You know what happened the last time you hesitated," warned Aggie.

"I know what happened when I DIDN'T hesitate," ruminated Jimmy, still holding his ground.

Zoie's eyes were wide with surprise. "You don't mean to say," she exclaimed incredulously, "that you aren't GOING--after we have thought all this out just to SAVE you?"

"Say," answered Jimmy, with a confidential air, "do me a favour, will you? Stop thinking out things to 'save me.' "

"But, Jimmy----" protested both women simultaneously; but before they could get further Alfred's distressed voice reached them from the next room.

"Aggie!" he called frantically.

CHAPTER XVIII

What seemed to be a streak of pink through the room was in reality Zoie bolting for the bed.

While Zoie hastened to snuggle comfortably under the covers, Aggie tried without avail to get Jimmy started on his errand.

Getting no response from Aggie, Alfred, bearing one infant in his arms, came in search of her. Apparently he was having difficulty with the unfastening of baby's collar.

"Aggie," he called sharply, "how on earth do you get this fool pin out?"

"Take him back, Alfred," answered Aggie impatiently; "I'll be there in a minute."

But Alfred had apparently made up his mind that he was not a success as a nurse.

"You'd better take him now, Aggie," he decided, as he offered the small person to the reluctant Aggie. "I'll stay here and talk to Jimmy."

"Oh, but Jimmy was just going out," answered Aggie; then she turned to her obdurate spouse with mock sweetness, "Weren't you, dear?" she asked.

"Yes," affirmed Zoie, with a threatening glance toward Jimmy. "He was going, just now."

Still Jimmy remained rooted to the spot.

"Out?" questioned Alfred. "What for?"

"Just for a little air," explained Aggie blandly.

"Yes," growled Jimmy, "another little heir."

"Air?" repeated Alfred in surprise. "He had air a while ago with my son. He is going to stay here and tell me the news. Sit down, Jimmy," he commanded, and to the intense annoyance of Aggie and Zoie, Jimmy sank resignedly on the couch.

Alfred was about to seat himself beside his friend, when the 'phone rang violently. Being nearest to the instrument, Alfred reached it first and Zoie and Aggie awaited the consequences in dread. What they heard did not reassure them nor Jimmy.

"Still down there?" exclaimed Alfred into the 'phone.

Jimmy began to wriggle with a vague uneasiness.

"Well," continued Alfred at the 'phone, "that woman has the wrong number." Then with a peremptory "Wait a minute," he turned to Zoie, "The hall boy says that woman who called a while ago is still down stairs and she won't go away until she has seen you, Zoie. She has some kind of an idiotic idea that you know where her baby is."

"How absurd," sneered Zoie.

"How silly," added Aggie.

"How foolish," grunted Jimmy.

"Well," decided Alfred, "I'd better go down stairs and see what's the matter with her," and he turned toward the door to carry out his intention.

"Alfred!" called Zoie sharply. She was half out of bed in her anxiety. "You'll do no such thing. 'Phone down to the boy to send her away. She's crazy."

"Oh," said Alfred, "then she's been here before? Who is she?"

"Who is she?" answered Zoie, trying to gain time for a new inspiration. "Why, she's-- she's----" her face lit up with satisfaction--the idea had arrived. "She's the nurse," she concluded emphatically.

"The nurse?" repeated Alfred, a bit confused.

"Yes," answered Zoie, pretending to be annoyed with his dull memory. "She's the one I told you about, the one I had to discharge."

"Oh," said Alfred, with the relief of sudden comprehension; "the crazy one?"

Aggie and Zoie nodded their heads and smiled at him tolerantly, then Zoie continued to elaborate. "You see," she said, "the poor creature was so insane about little Jimmy that I couldn't go near the child."

"What!" exclaimed Alfred in a mighty rage. "I'll soon tell the boy what to do with her," he declared, and he rushed to the 'phone. Barely had Alfred taken the receiver from the hook when the outer door was heard to bang. Before he could speak a distracted young woman, whose excitable manner bespoke her foreign origin, swept through the door without seeing him and hurled herself at the unsuspecting Zoie. The woman's black hair was dishevelled, and her large shawl had fallen from her shoulders. To Jimmy, who was crouching behind an armchair, she seemed a giantess.

"My baby!" cried the frenzied mother, with what was unmistakably an Italian accent. "Where is he?" There was no answer; her eyes sought the cradle. "Ah!" she shrieked, then upon finding the cradle empty, she redoubled her lamentations and again she bore down upon the terrified Zoie.

"You," she cried, "you know where my baby is!"

For answer, Zoie sank back amongst her pillows and drew the bed covers completely over her head. Alfred approached the bed to protect his young wife; the Italian woman wheeled about and

perceived a small child in his arms. She threw herself upon him.

"I knew it," she cried; "I knew it!"

Managing to disengage himself from what he considered a mad woman, and elevating one elbow between her and the child, Alfred prevented the mother from snatching the small creature from his arms.

"Calm yourself, madam," he commanded with a superior air. "We are very sorry for you, of course, but we can't have you coming here and going on like this. He's OUR baby and----"

"He's NOT your baby!" cried the infuriated mother; "he's MY baby. Give him to me. Give him to me," and with that she sprang upon the uncomfortable Alfred like a tigress. Throwing her whole weight on his uplifted elbow, she managed to pull down his arm until she could look into the face of the washerwoman's promising young offspring. The air was rent by a scream that made each individual hair of Jimmy's head stand up in its own defence. He could feel a sickly sensation at the top of his short thick neck.

"He's NOT my baby," wailed the now demented mother, little dreaming that the infant for which she was searching was now reposing comfortably on a soft pillow in the adjoining room.

As for Alfred, all of this was merely confirmation of Zoie's statement that this poor soul was crazy, and he was tempted to dismiss her with worthy forbearance.

"I am glad, madam," he said, "that you are coming to your senses."

Now, all would have gone well and the bewildered mother would no doubt have left the room convinced of her mistake, had not Jimmy's nerves got the better of his judgment. Having slipped cautiously from his position behind the armchair he was tiptoeing toward the door, and was flattering himself on his escape, when suddenly, as his forward foot cautiously touched the threshold, he heard the cry of the captor in his wake, and before he could possibly command the action of his other foot, he felt himself being forcibly drawn backward by what appeared to be his too tenacious coat-tails.

"If only they would tear," thought Jimmy, but thanks to the excellence of the tailor that Aggie had selected for him, they did NOT "tear."

Not until she had anchored Jimmy safely to the centre of the rug did the irate mother pour out the full venom of her resentment toward him. From the mixture of English and Italian that followed, it was apparent that she was accusing Jimmy of having stolen her baby.

"Take me to him," she demanded tragically; "my baby--take me to him!"

Jimmy appealed to Aggie and Zoie. Their faces were as blank as his own. He glanced at Alfred.

"Humour her," whispered Alfred, much elated by the evidence of his own self-control as compared to Jimmy's utter demoralisation under the apparently same circumstances.

Still Jimmy did not budge.

Alfred was becoming vexed; he pointed first to his own forehead, then to that of Jimmy's hysterical captor. He even illustrated his meaning by making a rotary motion with his forefinger, intended to remind Jimmy that the woman was a lunatic.

Still Jimmy only stared at him and all the while the woman was becoming more and more emphatic in her declaration that Jimmy knew where her baby was.

"Sure, Jimmy," said Alfred, out of all patience with Jimmy's stupidity and tiring of the strain of the woman's presence. "You know where her baby is."

"Ah!" cried the mother, and she towered over Jimmy with a wild light in her eyes. "Take me to him," she demanded; "take me to him."

Jimmy rolled his large eyes first toward Aggie, then toward Zoie and at last toward Alfred. There was no mercy to be found anywhere.

"Take her to him, Jimmy," commanded a concert of voices; and pursued by a bundle of waving colours and a medley of discordant sounds, Jimmy shot from the room.

CHAPTER XXIV

The departure of Jimmy and the crazed mother was the occasion for a general relaxing among the remaining occupants of the room. Exhausted by what had passed Zoie had ceased to interest herself in the future. It was enough for the present that she could sink back upon her pillows and draw a long breath without an evil face bending over her, and without the air being rent by screams.

As for Aggie, she fell back upon the window seat and closed her eyes. The horrors into which Jimmy might be rushing had not yet presented themselves to her imagination.

Of the three, Alfred was the only one who had apparently received exhilaration from the encounter. He was strutting about the room with the babe in his arms, undoubtedly enjoying the sensations of a hero. When he could sufficiently control his feeling of elation, he looked down at the small person with an air of condescension and again lent himself to the garbled sort of language with which defenceless infants are inevitably persecuted.

"Tink of dat horrid old woman wanting to steal our own little oppsie, wopsie, toppsie babykins," he said. Then he turned to Zoie with an air of great decision. "That woman ought to be locked up," he declared, "she's dangerous," and with that he crossed to Aggie and hurriedly placed the infant in her unsuspecting arms. "Here, Aggie," he said, "you take Alfred and get him into bed."

Glad of an excuse to escape to the next room and recover her self control, Aggie quickly disappeared with the child.

For some moments Alfred continued to pace up and down the room; then he came to a full stop before Zoie.

"I'll have to have something done to that woman," he declared emphatically.

"Jimmy will do enough to her," sighed Zoie, weakly.

"She's no business to be at large," continued Alfred; then, with a business-like air, he started toward the telephone.

"Where are you going?" asked Zoie.

Alfred did not answer. He was now calling into the 'phone, "Give me information."

"What on earth are you doing?" demanded Zoie, more and more disturbed by his mysterious manner.

"One can't be too careful," retorted Alfred in his most paternal fashion; "there's an awful lot of kidnapping going on these days."

"Well, you don't suspect information, do you?" asked Zoie.

Again Alfred ignored her; he was intent upon things of more importance.

"Hello," he called into the 'phone, "is this information?" Apparently it was for he continued, with a satisfied air, "Well, give me the Fullerton Street Police Station."

"The Police?" cried Zoie, sitting up in bed and looking about the

room with a new sense of alarm.

Alfred did not answer.

"Aggie!" shrieked the over-wrought young wife.

Alfred attempted to reassure her. "Now, now, dear, don't get nervous," he said, "I am only taking the necessary precautions." And again he turned to the 'phone.

Alarmed by Zoie's summons, Aggie entered the room hastily. She was not reassured upon hearing Alfred's further conversation at the 'phone.

"Is this the Fullerton Street Police Station?" asked Alfred.

"The Police!" echoed Aggie, and her eyes sought Zoie's inquiringly.

"Sh! Sh!" called Alfred over his shoulder to the excited Aggie, then he continued into the 'phone. "Is Donneghey there?" There was a pause. Alfred laughed jovially. "It is? Well, hello, Donneghey, this is your old friend Hardy, Alfred Hardy at the Sherwood. I've just got back," then he broke the happy news to the no doubt appreciative Donneghey. "What do you think?" he said, "I'm a happy father."

Zoie puckered her small face in disgust.

Alfred continued to elucidate joyfully at the 'phone.

"Doubles," he said, "yes--sure--on the level."

"I don't know why you have to tell the whole neighbourhood," snapped Zoie. Her colour was visibly rising.

But Alfred was now in the full glow of his genial account to his friend. "Set 'em up?" he repeated in answer to an evident suggestion from the other end of the line, "I should say I would. The drinks are on me. Tell the boys I'll be right over. And say, Donneghey," he added, in a more confidential tone, "I want to bring one of the men home with me. I want him to keep an eye on the house to-night"; then after a pause, he concluded confidentially, "I'll tell you all about it when I get there. It looks like a kidnapping scheme to me," and with that he hung up the receiver, unmistakably pleased with himself, and turned his beaming face toward Zoie.

"It's all right, dear," he said, rubbing his hands together with evident satisfaction, "Donneghey is going to let us have a Special Officer to watch the house to-night."

"I won't HAVE a special officer," declared Zoie vehemently; then

becoming aware of Alfred's great surprise, she explained half-tearfully, "I'm not going to have the police hanging around our very door. I would feel as though I were in prison."

"You ARE in prison, my dear," returned the now irrepressible Alfred. "A prison of love-- you and our precious boys." He stooped and implanted a gracious kiss on her forehead, then turned toward the table for his hat. "Now," he said, "I'll just run around the corner, set up the drinks for the boys, and bring the officer home with me," and drawing himself up proudly, he cried gaily in parting, "I'll bet there's not another man in Chicago who has what I have to- night."

"I hope not," groaned Zoie. as the door closed behind him. Then, thrusting her two small feet from beneath the coverlet and perching on the side of the bed, she declared to Aggie that "Alfred was getting more idiotic every minute."

"He's worse than idiotic," corrected Aggie. "He's getting dangerous. If he gets the police around here before we give that baby back, they'll get the mother. She'll tell all she knows and that will be the end of Jimmy!"

"End of Jimmy?" exclaimed Zoie, "it'll be the end of ALL of us."

"I can see our pictures in the papers, right now," groaned Aggie. "Jimmy will be the villain."

"Jimmy IS a villain," declared Zoie. "Where is he? Why doesn't he come back? How am I ever going to get that other twin?"

"There is only one thing to do," decided Aggie, "I must go for it myself." And she snatched up her cape from the couch and started toward the door.

"You?" cried Zoie, in alarm, "and leave me alone?"

"It's our only chance," argued Aggie. "I'll have to do it now, before Alfred gets back."

"But Aggie," protested Zoie, clinging to her departing friend, "suppose that crazy mother should come back?"

"Nonsense," replied Aggie, and before Zoie could actually realise what was happening the bang of the outside door told her that she was alone.

CHAPTER XXV

Wondering what new terrors awaited her, Zoie glanced uncertainly from door to door. So strong had become her habit of taking

refuge in the bed, that unconsciously she backed toward it now. Barely had she reached the centre of the room when a terrific crash of breaking glass from the adjoining room sent her shrieking in terror over the footboard, and head first under the covers. Here she would doubtless have remained until suffocated, had not Jimmy in his backward flight from one of the inner rooms overturned a large rocker. This additional shock to Zoie's overstrung nerves forced a wild scream from her lips, and an answering exclamation from the nerve-racked Jimmy made her sit bolt upright. She gazed at him in astonishment. His tie was awry, one end of his collar had taken leave of its anchorage beneath his stout chin, and was now just tickling the edge of his red, perspiring brow. His hair was on end and his feelings were undeniably ruffled. As usual Zoie's greeting did not tend to conciliate him.

"How did YOU get here?" she asked with an air of reproach.

"The fire-escape," panted Jimmy and he nodded mysteriously toward the inner rooms of the apartment.

"Fire-escape?" echoed Zoie. There was only one and that led through the bathroom window.

Jimmy explained no further. He was now peeping cautiously out of the window toward the pavement below.

"Where's the mother?" demanded Zoie.

Jimmy jerked his thumb in the direction of the street. Zoie gazed at him with grave apprehension.

"Jimmy!" she exclaimed. "You haven't killed her?"

Jimmy shook his head and continued to peer cautiously out of the window.

"What did you do with her?" called the now exasperated Zoie.

"What did I do with her?" repeated Jimmy, a flash of his old resentment returning. "What did SHE do with ME?"

For the first time, Zoie became fully conscious of Jimmy's ludicrous appearance. Her overstrained nerves gave way and she began to laugh hysterically.

"Say," shouted Jimmy, towering over the bed and devoutly wishing that she were his wife so that he might strike her with impunity. "Don't you sic any more lunatics onto me."

It is doubtful whether Zoie's continued laughter might not have provoked Jimmy to desperate measures, had not the 'phone at that moment directed their thoughts toward worse possibilities. After

the instrument had continued to ring persistently for what seemed to Zoie an age, she motioned to Jimmy to answer it. He responded by retreating to the other side of the room.

"It may be Aggie," suggested Zoie.

For the first time, Jimmy became aware that Aggie was nowhere in the apartment.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed, as he realised that he was again tete-a-tete with the terror of his dreams. "Where IS Aggie?"

"Gone to do what YOU should have done," was Zoie's characteristic answer.

"Well," answered Jimmy hotly, "it's about time that somebody besides me did something around this place."

"YOU," mocked Zoie, "all YOU'VE ever done was to hoodoo me from the very beginning."

"If you'd taken my advice," answered Jimmy, "and told your husband the truth about the luncheon, there'd never have been any 'beginning.' "

"If, if, if," cried Zoie, in an agony of impatience, "if you'd tipped that horrid old waiter enough, he'd never have told anyway."

"I'm not buying waiters to cover up your crimes," announced Jimmy with his most self-righteous air.

"You'll be buying more than that to cover up your OWN crimes before you've finished," retorted Zoie.

"Before I've finished with YOU, yes," agreed Jimmy. He wheeled upon her with increasing resentment. "Do you know where I expect to end up?" he asked.

"I know where you OUGHT to end up," snapped Zoie.

"I'll finish in the electric chair," said Jimmy. "I can feel blue lightning chasing up and down my spine right now."

"Well, I wish you HAD finished in the electric chair," declared Zoie, "before you ever dragged me into that awful old restaurant."

"Oh, you do, do you?" answered Jimmy shaking his fist at her across the foot of the bed. For the want of adequate words to express his further feelings, Jimmy was beginning to jibber, when the outer door was heard to close, and he turned to behold Aggie entering hurriedly with something partly concealed by her long

cape.

"It's all right," explained Aggie triumphantly to Zoie. "I've got it." She threw her cape aside and disclosed the fruits of her conquest.

"So," snorted Jimmy in disgust, slightly miffed by the apparent ease with which Aggie had accomplished a task about which he had made so much ado, "you've gone into the business too, have you?"

Aggie deigned no reply to him. She continued in a businesslike tone to Zoie.

"Where's Alfred?" she asked.

"Still out," answered Zoie.

"Thank Heaven," sighed Aggie, then she turned to Jimmy and addressed him in rapid, decided tones. "Now, dear," she said, "I'll just put the new baby to bed, then I'll give you the other one and you can take it right down to the mother."

Jimmy made a vain start in the direction of the fire-escape. Four detaining hands were laid upon him.

"Don't try anything like that," warned Aggie; "you can't get out of this house without that baby. The mother is down stairs now. She's guarding the door. I saw her." And Aggie sailed triumphantly out of the room to make the proposed exchange of babies.

Before Jimmy was able to suggest to himself an escape from Aggie's last plan of action, the telephone again began to cry for attention.

Neither Jimmy nor Zoie could summon courage to approach the impatient instrument, and as usual Zoie cried frantically for Aggie.

Aggie was not long in returning to the room and this time she bore in her arms the infant so strenuously demanded by its mad mother.

"Here you are, Jimmy," she said; "here's the other one. Now take him down stairs quickly before Alfred gets back." She attempted to place the unresisting babe in Jimmy's chubby arms, but Jimmy's freedom was not to be so easily disposed of.

"What!" he exclaimed, backing away from the small creature in fear and abhorrence, "take that bundle of rags down to the hotel office and have that woman hystericking all over me. No, thanks."

"Oh well," answered Aggie, distracted by the persistent ringing

of the 'phone, "then hold him a minute until I answer the 'phone."

This at least was a compromise, and reluctantly Jimmy allowed the now wailing infant to be placed in his arms.

"Jig it, Jimmy, jig it," cried Zoie. Jimmy looked down helplessly at the baby's angry red face, but before he had made much headway with the "jigging," Aggie returned to them, much excited by the message which she had just received over the telephone.

"That mother is making a scene down stairs in the office," she said.

"You hear," chided Zoie, in a fury at Jimmy, "what did Aggie tell you?"

"If she wants this thing," maintained Jimmy, looking down at the bundle in his arms, "she can come after it."

"We can't have her up here," objected Aggie.

"Alfred may be back at any minute. He'd catch her. You know what happened the last time we tried to change them."

"You can send it down the chimney, for all I care," concluded Jimmy.

"I have it!" exclaimed Aggie, her face suddenly illumined.

"Oh Lord," groaned Jimmy, who had come to regard any elation on Zoie's or Aggie's part as a sure forewarner of ultimate discomfort for him.

Again Aggie had recourse to the 'phone.

"Hello," she called to the office boy, "tell that woman to go around to the back door, and we'll send something down to her." There was a slight pause, then Aggie added sweetly, "Yes, tell her to wait at the foot of the fire-escape."

Zoie had already caught the drift of Aggie's intention and she now fixed her glittering eyes upon Jimmy, who was already shifting about uneasily and glancing at Aggie, who approached him with a business-like air.

"Now, dear," said Aggie, "come with me. I'll hand Baby out through the bathroom window and you can run right down the fire-escape with him."

"If I do run down the fire-escape," exclaimed Jimmy, wagging his large head from side to side, "I'll keep right on RUNNING."

"That's the last you'll ever see of me."

"But, Jimmy," protested Aggie, slightly hurt by his threat, "once that woman gets her baby you'll have no more trouble."

"With you two still alive?" asked Jimmy, looking from one to the other.

"She'll be up here if you don't hurry," urged Aggie impatiently, and with that she pulled Jimmy toward the bedroom door.

"Let her come," said Jimmy, planting his feet so as to resist Aggie's repeated tugs, "I'm going to South America."

"Why will you act like this," cried Aggie, in utter desperation, "when we have so little time?"

"Say," said Jimmy irrelevantly, "do you know that I haven't had any----"

"Yes," interrupted Aggie and Zoie in chorus, "we know."

"How long," continued Zoie impatiently, "is it going to take you to slip down that fire-escape?"

"That depends on how fast I 'slip,' " answered Jimmy doggedly.

"You'll 'slip' all right," sneered Zoie.

Further exchange of pleasantries between these two antagonists was cut short by the banging of the outside door.

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed Aggie, glancing nervously over her shoulder, "there's Alfred now. Hurry, Jimmy, hurry," she cried, and with that she fairly forced Jimmy out through the bedroom door, and followed in his wake to see him safely down the fire-escape.

CHAPTER XXVI

Zoie had barely time to arrange herself after the manner of an interesting invalid, when Alfred entered the room in the gayest of spirits.

"Hello, dearie," he cried as he crossed quickly to her side.

"Already?" asked Zoie faintly and she glanced uneasily toward the door, through which Jimmy and Aggie had just disappeared.

"I told you I shouldn't be long," said Alfred jovially, and he implanted a condescending kiss on her forehead. "How is the

little mother, eh?" he asked, rubbing his hands together in satisfaction.

"You're all cold," pouted Zoie, edging away, "and you've been drinking."

"I had to have one or two with the boys," said Alfred, throwing out his chest and strutting about the room, "but never again. From now on I cut out all drinks and cigars. This is where I begin to live my life for our sons."

"How about your life for me?" asked Zoie, as she began to see long years of boredom stretching before her.

"You and our boys are one and the same, dear," answered Alfred, coming back to her side.

"You mean you couldn't go on loving ME if it weren't for the BOYS?" asked Zoie, with anxiety. She was beginning to realise how completely her hold upon him depended upon her hideous deception.

"Of course I could, Zoie," answered Alfred, flattered by what he considered her desire for his complete devotion, "but----"

"But not so MUCH," pouted Zoie.

"Well, of course, dear," admitted Alfred evasively, as he sank down upon the edge of the bed by her side--

"You needn't say another word," interrupted Zoie, and then with a shade of genuine repentance, she declared shame-facedly that she hadn't been "much of a wife" to Alfred.

"Nonsense!" contradicted the proud young father, "you've given me the ONE thing that I wanted most in the world."

"But you see, dear," said Zoie, as she wound her little white arms about his neck, and looked up into his face adoringly, "YOU'VE been the 'ONE' thing that I wanted 'MOST' and I never realised until to-night how--how crazy you are about things."

"What things?" asked Alfred, a bit puzzled.

"Well," said Zoie, letting her eyes fall before his and picking at a bit of imaginary lint on the coverlet, "babies and things."

"Oh," said Alfred, and he was about to proceed when she again interrupted him.

"But now that I DO realise it," continued Zoie, earnestly, her fingers on his lips, lest he again interrupt, "if you'll only have a little patience with me, I'll--I'll----" again her eyes

fell bashfully to the coverlet, as she considered the possibility of being ultimately obliged to replace the bogus twins with real ones.

"All the patience in the world," answered Alfred, little dreaming of the problem that confronted the contrite Zoie.

"That's all I ask," declared Zoie, her assurance completely restored, "and in case anything SHOULD happen to THESE----" she glanced anxiously toward the door through which Aggie had borne the twins.

"But nothing is going to happen to these, dear," interrupted Alfred, rising and again assuming an air of fatherly protection. "I'll attend to that. There, there," he added, patting her small shoulder and nodding his head wisely. "That crazy woman has got on your nerves, but you needn't worry, I've got everything fixed. Donneghey sent a special officer over with me. He's outside watching the house, now."

"Now!" shrieked Zoie, fixing her eyes on the bedroom door, through which Jimmy had lately disappeared and wondering whether he had yet "slipped" down the fire-escape.

"Yes," continued Alfred, walking up and down the floor with a masterly stride. "If that woman is caught hanging around here again, she'll get a little surprise. My boys are safe now, God bless them!" Then reminded of the fact that he had not seen them since his return, he started quickly toward the bedroom door. "I'll just have a look at the little rascals," he decided.

"No, dear," cried Zoie. She caught Alfred's arm as he passed the side of her bed, and clung to him in desperation. "Wait a minute."

Alfred looked down at her in surprise.

She turned her face toward the door, and called lustily, "Aggie! Aggie!"

"What is it, dear?" questioned Alfred, thinking Zoie suddenly ill, "can I get you something?"

Before Zoie was obliged to reply, Aggie answered her summons.

"Did you call?" she asked, glancing inquiringly into Zoie's distressed face.

"Alfred's here," said Zoie, with a sickly smile as she stroked his hand and glanced meaningly at Aggie. "He's GOT the OFFICER!"

"The OFFICER?" cried Aggie, and involuntarily she took a step backward, as though to guard the bedroom door.

"Yes," said Alfred, mistaking Aggie's surprise for a compliment to his resource; "and now, Aggie, if you'll just stay with Zoie for a minute I'll have a look at my boys."

"No, no!" exclaimed Aggie, nervously, and she placed herself again in front of the bedroom door.

Alfred was plainly annoyed by her proprietary air.

"They're asleep," explained Aggie.

"I'll not WAKE them," persisted Alfred, "I just wish to have a LOOK at them," and with that he again made a move toward the door.

"But Alfred," protested Zoie, still clinging to his hand, "you're not going to leave me again-- so soon."

Alfred was becoming more and more restive under the seeming absurdity of their persistent opposition, but before he could think of a polite way of over-ruling them, Aggie continued persuasively.

"You stay with Zoie," she said. "I'll bring the boys in here and you can both have a look at them."

"But Aggie," argued Alfred, puzzled by her illogical behaviour, "would it be wise to wake them?"

"Just this once," said Aggie. "Now you stay here and I'll get them." Before Alfred could protest further she was out of the room and the door had closed behind her, so he resigned himself to her decision, banished his temporary annoyance at her obstinacy, and glanced about the room with a new air of proprietorship.

"This is certainly a great night, Zoie," he said.

"It certainly is," acquiesced Zoie, with an over emphasis that made Alfred turn to her with new concern.

"I'm afraid that mad woman made you very nervous, dear," he said.

"She certainly did," said Zoie.

Zoie's nerves were destined to bear still further strain, for at that moment, there came a sharp ring at the door.

Beside herself with anxiety Zoie threw her arms about Alfred, who had advanced to soothe her, drew him down by her side and buried her head on his breast.

"You ARE jumpy," said Alfred, and at that instant a wrangle of loud voices, and a general commotion was heard in the outer hall. "What's that?" asked Alfred, endeavouring to disentangle himself from Zoie's frantic embrace.

Zoie clung to him so tightly that he was unable to rise, but his alert ear caught the sound of a familiar voice rising above the din of dispute in the hallway.

"That sounds like the officer," he exclaimed.

"The officer?" cried Zoie, and she wound her arms more tightly about him.

CHAPTER XXVII

Propelled by a large red fist, attached to the back of his badly wilted collar, the writhing form of Jimmy was now thrust through the outer door.

"Let go of me," shouted the hapless Jimmy.

The answer was a spasmodic shaking administered by the fist; then a large burly officer, carrying a small babe in his arms, shoved the reluctant Jimmy into the centre of the room and stood guard over him.

"I got him for you, sir," announced the officer proudly, to the astonished Alfred, who had just managed to untwine Zoie's arms and to struggle to his feet.

Alfred's eyes fell first upon the dejected Jimmy, then they travelled to the bundle of long clothes in the officer's arms.

"My boy!" he cried. "My boy!" He snatched the infant from the officer and pressed him jealously to his breast. "I don't understand," he said, gazing at the officer in stupefaction. "Where was he?"

"You mean this one?" asked the officer, nodding toward the unfortunate Jimmy. "I caught him slipping down your fire-escape."

"I KNEW it," exclaimed Zoie in a rage, and she cast a vindictive look at Jimmy for his awkwardness.

"Knew WHAT, dear?" asked Alfred, now thoroughly puzzled.

Zoie did not answer. Her powers of resource were fast waning. Alfred turned again to the officer, then to Jimmy, who was still flashing defiance into the officer's threatening eyes.

"My God!" he exclaimed, "this is awful. What's the matter with you, Jimmy? This is the third time that you have tried to take my baby out into the night."

"Then you've had trouble with him before?" remarked the officer. He studied Jimmy with new interest, proud in the belief that he had brought a confirmed "baby-snatcher" to justice.

"I've had a little trouble myself," declared Jimmy hotly, now resolved to make a clean breast of it.

"I'm not asking about your troubles," interrupted the officer savagely, and Jimmy felt the huge creature's obnoxious fingers tightening again on his collar. "Go ahead, sir," said the officer to Alfred.

"Well," began Alfred, nodding toward the now livid Jimmy, "he was out with my boy when I arrived. I stopped him from going out with him a second time, and now you, officer, catch him slipping down the fire-escape. I don't know what to say," he finished weakly.

"_I_ do," exclaimed Jimmy, feeling more and more like a high explosive, "and I'll say it."

"Cut it," shouted the officer. And before Jimmy could get further, Alfred resumed with fresh vehemence.

"He's supposed to be a friend of mine," he explained to the officer, as he nodded toward the wriggling Jimmy. "He was all right when I left him a few months ago."

"You'll think I'm all right again," shouted Jimmy, trying to get free from the officer, "before I've finished telling all I----"

"That won't help any," interrupted the officer firmly, and with another twist of Jimmy's badly wilted collar he turned to Alfred with his most civil manner, "What shall I do with him, sir?"

"I don't know," said Alfred, convinced that his friend was a fit subject for a straight jacket. "This is horrible."

"It's absurd," cried Zoie, on the verge of hysterics, and in utter despair of ever disentangling the present complication without ultimately losing Alfred, "you're all absurd," she cried wildly.

"Absurd?" exclaimed Alfred, turning upon her in amazement, "what do you mean?"

"It's a joke," said Zoie, without the slightest idea of where the joke lay. "If you had any sense you could see it."

"I DON'T see it," said Alfred, with hurt dignity.

"Neither do I," said Jimmy, with boiling resentment.

"Can you call it a joke," asked Alfred, incredulously, "to have our boy----" He stopped suddenly, remembering that there was a companion piece to this youngster. "The other one!" he exclaimed, "our other boy----" He rushed to the crib, found it empty, and turned a terrified face to Zoie. "Where is he?" he demanded.

"Now, Alfred," pleaded Zoie, "don't get excited; he's all right."

"How do you know?" asked the distracted father.

Zoie did not know, but at that moment her eyes fell upon Jimmy, and as usual he was the source of an inspiration for her.

"Jimmy never cared for the other one," she said, "did you, Jimmy?"

Alfred turned to the officer, with a tone of command. "Wait," he said, then he started toward the bedroom door to make sure that his other boy was quite safe. The picture that confronted him brought the hair straight up on his head. True to her promise, and ignorant of Jimmy's return with the first baby, Aggie had chosen this ill-fated moment to appear on the threshold with one babe on each arm.

"Here they are," she said graciously, then stopped in amazement at sight of the horrified Alfred, clasping a third infant to his breast.

"Good God!" exclaimed Alfred, stroking his forehead with his unoccupied hand, and gazing at what he firmly believed must be an apparition, "THOSE aren't MINE," he pointed to the two red mites in Aggie's arms.

"Wh--why not, Alfred?" stammered Aggie for the want of something better to say.

"What?" shrieked Alfred. Then he turned in appeal to his young wife, whose face had now become utterly expressionless. "Zoie?" he entreated.

There was an instant's pause, then the blood returned to Zoie's face and she proved herself the artist that Alfred had once declared her.

"OURS, dear," she murmured softly, with a bashful droop of her lids.

"But THIS one?" persisted Alfred, pointing to the baby in his arms, and feeling sure that his mind was about to give way.

"Why--why--why," stuttered Zoie, "THAT'S the JOKE."

"The joke?" echoed Alfred, looking as though he found it anything but such.

"Yes," added Aggie, sharing Zoie's desperation to get out of their temporary difficulty, no matter at what cost in the future. "Didn't Jimmy tell you?"

"Tell me WHAT?" stammered Alfred, "what IS there to tell?"

"Why, you see," said Aggie, growing more enthusiastic with each elaboration of Zoie's lie, "we didn't dare to break it to you too suddenly."

"Break it to me?" gasped Alfred; a new light was beginning to dawn on his face.

"So," concluded Zoie, now thoroughly at home in the new situation, "we asked Jimmy to take THAT one OUT."

Jimmy cast an inscrutable glance in Zoie's direction. Was it possible that she was at last assisting him out of a difficulty?

"You 'ASKED Jimmy'?" repeated Alfred.

"Yes," confirmed Aggie, with easy confidence, "we wanted you to get used to the idea gradually."

"The idea," echoed Alfred. He was afraid to allow his mind to accept too suddenly the whole significance of their disclosure, lest his joy over- power him. "You--you--do--don't mean----" he stuttered.

"Yes, dear," sighed Zoie, with the face of an angel, and then with a languid sigh, she sank back contentedly on her pillows.

"My boys! My boys!" cried Alfred, now delirious with delight. "Give them to me," he called to Aggie, and he snatched the surprised infants savagely from her arms. "Give me ALL of them, ALL of them." He clasped the three babes to his breast, then dashed to the bedside of the unsuspecting Zoie and covered her small face with rapturous kisses.

Feeling the red faces of the little strangers in such close proximity to hers, Zoie drew away from them with abhorrence, but unconscious of her unmotherly action, Alfred continued his mad career about the room, his heart overflowing with gratitude toward Zoie in particular and mankind in general. Finding Aggie in the path of his wild jubilee, he treated that bewildered young

matron to an unwelcome kiss. A proceeding which Jimmy did not at all approve.

Hardly had Aggie recovered from her surprise when the disgruntled Jimmy was startled out of his dark mood by the supreme insult of a loud resounding kiss implanted on his own cheek by his excitable young friend. Jimmy raised his arm to resist a second assault, and Alfred veered off in the direction of the officer, who stepped aside just in time to avoid similar demonstration from the indiscriminating young father.

Finding a wide circle prescribed about himself and the babies, Alfred suddenly stopped and gazed about from one astonished face to the other.

"Well," said the officer, regarding Alfred with an injured air, and feeling much downcast at being so ignominiously deprived of his short-lived heroism in capturing a supposed criminal, "if this is all a joke, I'll let the woman go."

"The woman," repeated Alfred; "what woman?"

"I nabbed a woman at the foot of the fire-escape," explained the officer. Zoie and Aggie glanced at each other inquiringly. "I thought she might be an accomplice."

"What does she look like, officer?" asked Alfred. His manner was becoming more paternal, not to say condescending, with the arrival of each new infant.

"Don't be silly, Alfred," snapped Zoie, really ashamed that Alfred was making such an idiot of himself. "It's only the nurse."

"Oh, that's it," said Alfred, with a wise nod of comprehension; "the nurse, then she's in the joke too?" He glanced from one to the other. They all nodded. "You're all in it," he exclaimed, flattered to think that they had considered it necessary to combine the efforts of so many of them to deceive him.

"Yes," assented Jimmy sadly, "we are all 'in it.' "

"Well, she's a great actress," decided Alfred, with the air of a connoisseur.

"She sure is," admitted Donneghey, more and more disgruntled as he felt his reputation for detecting fraud slipping from him.

"She put up a phoney story about the kid being hers," he added.

"But I could tell she wasn't on the level. Good-night, sir," he called to Alfred, and ignoring Jimmy, he passed quickly from the room.

"Oh, officer," Alfred called after him. "Hang around downstairs."

I'll be down later and fix things up with you." Again Alfred gave his whole attention to his new-found family. He leaned over the cradle and gazed ecstatically into the three small faces below his. "This is too much," he murmured.

"Much too much," agreed Jimmy, who was now sitting hunched up on the couch in his customary attitude of gloom.

"You were right not to break it to me too suddenly," said Alfred, and with his arms encircling three infants he settled himself on the couch by Jimmy's side. "You're a cute one," he continued to Jimmy, who was edging away from the three mites with aversion. In the absence of any answer from Jimmy, Alfred appealed to Zoie, "Isn't he a cute one, dear?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, VERY," answered Zoie, sarcastically.

Shutting his lips tight and glancing at Zoie with a determined effort at self restraint, Jimmy rose from the couch and started toward the door.

"If you women are done with me," he said, "I'll clear out."

"Clear out?" exclaimed Alfred, rising quickly and placing himself between his old friend and the door. "What a chance," and he laughed boisterously. "You're not going to get out of my sight this night," he declared. "I'm just beginning to appreciate all you've done for me."

"So am I," assented Jimmy, and unconsciously his hand sought the spot where his dinner should have been, but Alfred was not to be resisted.

"A man needs someone around," he declared, "when he's going through a thing like this. I need all of you, all of you," and with his eyes he embraced the weary circle of faces about him. "I feel as though I could go out of my head," he explained and with that he began tucking the three small mites in the pink and white crib designed for but one.

Zoie regarded him with a bored expression

"You act as though you WERE out of your head," she commented, but Alfred did not heed her. He was now engaged in the unhoped for bliss of singing three babies to sleep with one lullaby.

The other occupants of the room were just beginning to relax and to show some resemblance to their natural selves, when their features were again simultaneously frozen by a ring at the outside door.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Annoyed at being interrupted in the midst of his lullaby, to three, Alfred looked up to see Maggie, hatless and out of breath, bursting into the room, and destroying what was to him an ideally tranquil home scene. But Maggie paid no heed to Alfred's look of inquiry. She made directly for the side of Zoie's bed.

"If you plaze, mum," she panted, looking down at Zoie, and wringing her hands.

"What is it?" asked Aggie, who had now reached the side of the bed.

" 'Scuse me for comin' right in"--Maggie was breathing hard--"but me mother sint me to tell you that me father is jus afther comin' home from work, and he's fightin' mad about the babies, mum."

"Sh! Sh!" cautioned Aggie and Zoie, as they glanced nervously toward Alfred who was rising from his place beside the cradle with increasing interest in Maggie's conversation.

"Babies?" he repeated, "your father is mad about babies?"

"It's all right, dear," interrupted Zoie nervously; "you see," she went on to explain, pointing toward the trembling Maggie, "this is our washerwoman's little girl. Our washerwoman has had twins, too, and it made the wash late, and her husband is angry about it."

"Oh," said Alfred, with a comprehensive nod, but Maggie was not to be so easily disposed of.

"If you please, mum," she objected, "it ain't about the wash. It's about our baby girls."

"Girls?" exclaimed Zoie involuntarily.

"Girls?" repeated Alfred, drawing himself up in the fond conviction that all his heirs were boys, "No wonder your pa's angry. I'd be angry too. Come now," he said to Maggie, patting the child on the shoulder and regarding her indulgently, "you go straight home and tell your father that what HE needs is BOYS."

"Well, of course, sir," answered the bewildered Maggie, thinking that Alfred meant to reflect upon the gender of the offspring donated by her parents, "if you ain't afther likin' girls, me mother sint the money back," and with that she began to feel for the pocket in her red flannel petticoat.

"The money?" repeated Alfred, in a puzzled way, "what money?"

It was again Zoie's time to think quickly.

"The money for the wash, dear," she explained.

"Nonsense!" retorted Alfred, positively beaming generosity, "who talks of money at such a time as this?" And taking a ten dollar bill from his pocket, he thrust it in Maggie's outstretched hand, while she was trying to return to him the original purchase money. "Here," he said to the astonished girl, "you take this to your father. Tell him I sent it to him for his babies. Tell him to start a bank account with it."

This was clearly not a case with which one small addled mind could deal, or at least, so Maggie decided. She had a hazy idea that Alfred was adding something to the original purchase price of her young sisters, but she was quite at a loss to know how to refuse the offer of such a "grand 'hoigh" gentleman, even though her failure to do so would no doubt result in a beating when she reached home. She stared at Alfred undecided what to do, the money still lay in her outstretched hand.

"I'm afraid Pa'll niver loike it, sir," she said.

"Like it?" exclaimed Alfred in high feather, and he himself closed her red little fingers over the bill, "he's GOT to like it. He'll GROW to like it. Now you run along," he concluded to Maggie, as he urged her toward the door, "and tell him what I say."

"Yes, sir," murmured Maggie, far from sharing Alfred's enthusiasm.

Feeling no desire to renew his acquaintance with Maggie, particularly under Alfred's watchful eye, Jimmy had sought his old refuge, the high backed chair. As affairs progressed and there seemed no doubt of Zoie's being able to handle the situation to the satisfaction of all concerned, Jimmy allowed exhaustion and the warmth of the firelight to have their way with him. His mind wandered toward other things and finally into space. His head dropped lower and lower on his chest; his breathing became laboured-- so laboured in fact that it attracted the attention of Maggie, who was about to pass him on her way to the door.

"Sure an it's Mr. Jinks!" exclaimed Maggie. Then coming close to the side of the unsuspecting sleeper, she hissed a startling message in his ear. "Me mother said to tell you that me fadder's hoppin' mad at you, sir."

Jimmy sat up and rubbed his eyes. He studied the young person at his elbow, then he glanced at Alfred, utterly befuddled as to what had happened while he had been on a journey to happier scenes. Apparently Maggie was waiting for an answer to something, but to what? Jimmy thought he detected an ominous look

in Alfred's eyes. Letting his hand fall over the arm of the chair so that Alfred could not see it, Jimmy began to make frantic signals to Maggie to depart; she stared at him the harder.

"Go away," whispered Jimmy, but Maggie did not move. "Shoo, shoo!" he said, and waved her off with his hand.

Puzzled by Jimmy's sudden aversion to this apparently harmless child, Alfred turned to Maggie with a puckered brow.

"Your father's mad at Jimmy?" he repeated. "What about?"

For once Jimmy found it in his heart to be grateful to Zoie for the prompt answer that came from her direction.

"The wash, dear," said Zoie to Alfred; "Jimmy had to go after the wash," and then with a look which Maggie could not mistake for an invitation to stop longer, Zoie called to her haughtily, "You needn't wait, Maggie; we understand."

"Sure, an' it's more 'an I do," answered Maggie, and shaking her head sadly, she slipped from the room.

But Alfred could not immediately dismiss from his mind the picture of Maggie's inhuman parent.

"Just fancy," he said, turning his head to one side meditatively, "fancy any man not liking to be the father of twins," and with that he again bent over the cradle and surveyed its contents. "Think, Jimmy," he said, when he had managed to get the three youngsters in his arms, "just think of the way THAT father feels, and then think of the way _I_ feel."

"And then think of the way _I_ feel," grumbled Jimmy.

"You!" exclaimed Alfred; "what have you to feel about?"

Before Jimmy could answer, the air was rent by a piercing scream and a crash of glass from the direction of the inner rooms.

"What's that?" whispered Aggie, with an anxious glance toward Zoie.

"Sounded like breaking glass," said Alfred.

"Burglars!" exclaimed Zoie, for want of anything better to suggest.

"Burglars?" repeated Alfred with a superior air; "nonsense! Nonsense! Here," he said, turning to Jimmy, "you hold the boys and I'll go see----" and before Jimmy was aware of the honour about to be thrust upon him, he felt three red, spineless

morsels, wriggling about in his arms. He made what lap he could for the armful, and sat up in a stiff, strained attitude on the edge of the couch. In the meantime, Alfred had strode into the adjoining room with the air of a conqueror. Aggie looked at Zoie, with dreadful foreboding.

"You don't suppose it could be?" she paused.

"My baby!" shrieked the voice of the Italian mother from the adjoining room. "Where IS he?"

Regardless of the discomfort of his three disgruntled charges, Jimmy began to circle the room. So agitated was his mind that he could scarcely hear Aggie, who was reporting proceedings from her place at the bedroom door.

"She's come up the fire-escape," cried Aggie; "she's beating Alfred to death."

"What?" shrieked Zoie, making a flying leap from her coverlets.

"She's locking him in the bathroom," declared Aggie, and with that she disappeared from the room, bent on rescue.

"My Alfred!" cried Zoie, tragically, and she started in pursuit of Aggie.

"Wait a minute," called Jimmy, who had not yet been able to find a satisfactory place in which to deposit his armful of clothes and humanity. "What shall I do with these things?"

"Eat 'em," was Zoie's helpful retort, as the trailing end of her negligee disappeared from the room.

CHAPTER XXIX

Now, had Jimmy been less perturbed during the latter part of this commotion, he might have heard the bell of the outside door, which had been ringing violently for some minutes. As it was, he was wholly unprepared for the flying advent of Maggie.

"Oh, plaze, sir," she cried, pointing with trembling fingers toward the babes in Jimmy's arms, "me fadder's coming right behind me. He's a-lookin' for you sir."

"For me," murmured Jimmy, wondering vaguely why everybody on earth seemed to be looking for HIM.

"Put 'em down, sir," cried Maggie, still pointing to the three babies, "put 'em down. He's liable to wallop you."

"Put 'em where?" asked Jimmy, now utterly confused as to which way to turn.

"There," said Maggie, and she pointed to the cradle beneath his very eyes.

"Of course," said Jimmy vapidly, and he sank on his knees and strove to let the wobbly creatures down easily.

Bang went the outside door.

"That's Pa now," cried Maggie. "Oh hide, sir, hide." And with that disconcerting warning, she too deserted him.

"Hide where?" gasped Jimmy.

There was a moment's awful silence. Jimmy rose very cautiously from the cradle, his eyes sought the armchair. It had always betrayed him. He glanced toward the window. It was twelve stories to the pavement. He looked towards the opposite door; beyond that was the mad Italian woman. His one chance lay in slipping unnoticed through the hallway; he made a determined dash in that direction, but no sooner had he put his head through the door, than he drew it back quickly. The conversation between O'Flarety and the maid in the hallway was not reassuring. Jimmy decided to take a chance with the Italian mother, and as fast as he could, he streaked it toward the opposite door. The shrieks and denunciations that he met from this direction were more disconcerting than those of the Irish father. For an instant he stood in the centre of the room, wavering as to which side to surrender himself.

The thunderous tones of the enraged father drew nearer; he threw himself on the floor and attempted to roll under the bed; the space between the railing and the floor was far too narrow. Why had he disregarded Aggie's advice as to diet? The knob of the door handle was turning--he vaulted into the bed and drew the covers over his head just as O'Flarety, trembling with excitement, and pursued by Maggie, burst into the room.

"Lave go of me," cried O'Flarety to Maggie, who clung to his arm in a vain effort to soothe him, and flinging her off, he made straight for the bed.

"Ah," he cried, gazing with dilated nostrils at the trembling object beneath the covers, "there you are, mum," and he shook his fist above what he believed to be the cowardly Mrs. Hardy. "'Tis well ye may cover up your head," said he, "for shame on yez! Me wife may take in washing, but when I comes home at night I wants me kids, and I'll be after havin' 'em too. Where ar' they?" he demanded. Then getting no response from the agitated covers, he glanced wildly about the room. "Glory be to God!" he exclaimed as his eyes fell on the crib; but he stopped short in

astonishment, when upon peering into it, he found not one, or two, but three "barren."

"They're child stalers, that's what they are," he declared to Maggie, as he snatched Bridget and Norah to his no doubt comforting breast. "Me little Bidy," he crooned over his much coveted possession. "Me little Norah," he added fondly, looking down at his second. The thought of his narrow escape from losing these irreplaceable treasures rekindled his wrath. Again he strode toward the bed and looked down at the now semi-quiet comforter.

"The black heart of ye, mum," he roared, then ordering Maggie to give back "every penny of that shameless creetur's money" he turned toward the door.

So intense had been O'Flarety's excitement and so engrossed was he in his denunciation that he had failed to see the wild-eyed Italian woman rushing toward him from the opposite door.

"You, you!" cried the frenzied woman and, to O'Flarety's astonishment, she laid two strong hands upon his arm and drew him round until he faced her. "Where are you going with my baby?" she asked, then peering into the face of the infant nearest to her, she uttered a disappointed moan. "'Tis not my baby!" she cried. She scanned the face of the second infant--again she moaned.

Having begun to identify this hysterical creature as the possible mother of the third infant, O'Flarety jerked his head in the direction of the cradle.

"I guess you'll find what you're lookin' for in there," he said. Then bidding Maggie to "git along out o' this" and shrugging his shoulders to convey his contempt for the fugitive beneath the coverlet, he swept quickly from the room.

Clasping her long-sought darling to her heart and weeping with delight, the Italian mother was about to follow O'Flarety through the door when Zoie staggered into the room, weak and exhausted.

"You, you!" called the indignant Zoie to the departing mother. "How dare you lock my husband in the bathroom?" She pointed to the key, which the woman still unconsciously clasped in her hand. "Give me that key," she demanded, "give it to me this instant."

"Take your horrid old key," said the mother, and she threw it on the floor. "If you ever try to get my baby again, I'll lock your husband in JAIL," and murmuring excited maledictions in her native tongue, she took her welcome departure.

Zoie stooped for the key, one hand to her giddy head, but Aggie, who had just returned to the room, reached the key first and

volunteered to go to the aid of the captive Alfred, who was pounding desperately on the bathroom door and demanding his instant release.

"I'll let him out," said Aggie. "You get into bed," and she slipped quickly from the room.

Utterly exhausted and half blind with fatigue Zoie lifted the coverlet and slipped beneath it. Her first sensation was of touching something rough and scratchy, then came the awful conviction that the thing against which she lay was alive.

Without stopping to investigate the identity of her uninvited bed-fellow, or even daring to look behind her, Zoie fled from the room emitting a series of screams that made all her previous efforts in that direction seem mere baby cries. So completely had Jimmy been enveloped in the coverlets and for so long a time that he had acquired a vague feeling of aloftness toward the rest of his fellows, and had lost all knowledge of their goings and comings. But when his unexpected companion was thrust upon him he was galvanised into sudden action by her scream, and swathed in a large pink comforter, he rolled ignominiously from the upper side of the bed, where he lay on the floor panting and enmeshed, awaiting further developments. Of one thing he was certain, a great deal had transpired since he had sought the friendly solace of the covers and he had no mind to lose so good a friend as the pink comforter. By the time he had summoned sufficient courage to peep from under its edge, a babel of voices was again drawing near, and he hastily drew back in his shell and waited.

Not daring to glance at the scene of her fright, Zoie pushed Aggie before her into the room and demanded that she look in the bed.

Seeing the bed quite empty and noticing nothing unusual in the fact that the pink comforter, along with other covers, had slipped down behind it, Aggie hastened to reassure her terrified friend.

"You imagined it, Zoie," she declared, "look for yourself."

Zoie's small face peeped cautiously around the edge of the doorway.

"Well, perhaps I did," she admitted; then she slipped gingerly into the room, "my nerves are jumping like fizzy water."

They were soon to "jump" more, for at this instant, Alfred, burning with anger at the indignity of having been locked in the bathroom, entered the room, demanding to know the whereabouts of the lunatic mother, who had dared to make him a captive in his own house.

"Where is she?" he called to Zoie and Aggie, and his eye roved wildly about the room. Then his mind reverted with anxiety to his newly acquired offspring. "My boys!" he cried, and he rushed toward the crib. "They're gone!" he declared tragically.

"Gone?" echoed Aggie.

"Not ALL of them," said Zoie.

"All," insisted Alfred, and his hands went distractedly toward his head. "She's taken them all."

Zoie and Aggie looked at each other in a dazed way. They had a hazy recollection of having seen one babe disappear with the Italian woman, but what had become of the other two?

"Where did they go?" asked Aggie.

"I don't know," said Zoie, with the first truth she had spoken that night, "I left them with Jimmy."

"Jimmy!" shrieked Alfred, and a diabolical light lit his features. "Jimmy!" he snorted, with sudden comprehension, "then he's at it again. He's crazy as she is. This is inhuman. This joke has got to stop!" And with that decision he started toward the outer door.

"But Allie!" protested Zoie, really alarmed by the look that she saw on his face.

Alfred turned to his trembling wife with suppressed excitement, and patted her shoulder condescendingly.

"Control yourself, my dear," he said. "Control yourself; I'll get your babies for you--trust me, I'll get them. And then," he added with parting emphasis from the doorway, "I'll SETTLE WITH JIMMY!"

By uncovering one eye, Jimmy could now perceive that Zoie and Aggie were engaged in a heated argument at the opposite side of the room. By uncovering one ear he learned that they were arranging a line of action for him immediately upon his reappearance. He determined not to wait for the details.

Fixing himself cautiously on all fours, and making sure that he was well covered by the pink comforter, he began to crawl slowly toward the bedroom door.

Turning away from Aggie with an impatient exclamation, Zoie suddenly beheld what seemed to her a large pink monster with protruding claws wriggling its way hurriedly toward the inner room.

"Look!" she screamed, and pointing in horror toward the dreadful creature now dragging itself across the threshold, she sank fainting into Aggie's outstretched arms.

CHAPTER XXX

Having dragged the limp form of her friend to the near-by couch, Aggie was bending over her to apply the necessary restoratives, when Alfred returned in triumph. He was followed by the officer in whose arms were three infants, and behind whom was the irate O'Flarety, the hysterical Italian woman, and last of all, Maggie.

"Bring them all in here, officer," called Alfred over his shoulder. "I'll soon prove to you whose babies those are." Then turning to Aggie, who stood between him and the fainting Zoie he cried triumphantly, "I've got them Aggie, I've got them." He glanced toward the empty bed. "Where's Zoie?" he asked.

"She's fainted," said Aggie, and stepping from in front of the young wife, she pointed toward the couch.

"Oh, my darling!" cried Alfred, with deep concern as he rushed to Zoie and began frantically patting her hands. "My poor frightened darling!" Then he turned to the officer, his sense of injury welling high within him, "You see what these people have done to my wife? She's fainted." Ignoring the uncomplimentary remarks of O'Flarety, he again bent over Zoie.

"Rouse yourself, my dear," he begged of her. "Look at me," he pleaded. "Your babies are safe."

"HER babies!" snorted O'Flarety, unable longer to control his pent up indignation.

"I'll let you know when I want to hear from you," snarled the officer to O'Flarety.

"But they're NOT her babies," protested the Italian woman desperately.

"Cut it," shouted the officer, and with low mutterings, the outraged parents were obliged to bide their time.

Lifting Zoie to a sitting posture Alfred fanned her gently until she regained her senses. "Your babies are all right," he assured her. "I've brought them all back to you."

"All?" gasped Zoie weakly, and she wondered what curious fate had been intervening to assist Alfred in such a prodigious undertaking.

"Yes, dear," said Alfred, "every one," and he pointed toward the three infants in the officer's arms. "See, dear, see."

Zoie turned her eyes upon what SEEMED to her numberless red faces. "Oh!" she moaned and again she swooned.

"I told you she'd be afraid to face us," shouted the now triumphant O'Flarety.

"You brute!" retorted the still credulous Alfred, "how dare you persecute this poor demented mother?"

Alfred's persistent solicitude for Zoie was too much for the resentful Italian woman.

"She didn't persecute me, oh no!" she exclaimed sarcastically.

"Keep still, you!" commanded the officer.

Again Zoie was reviving and again Alfred lifted her in his arms and begged her to assure the officer that the babies in question were hers.

"Let's hear her SAY it," demanded O'Flarety.

"You SHALL hear her," answered Alfred, with confidence. Then he beckoned to the officer to approach, explaining that Zoie was very weak.

"Sure," said the officer; then planting himself directly in front of Zoie's half closed eyes, he thrust the babies upon her attention.

"Look, Zoie!" pleaded Alfred. "Look!"

Zoie opened her eyes to see three small red faces immediately opposite her own.

"Take them away!" she cried, with a frantic wave of her arm, "take them away!"

"What?" exclaimed Alfred in astonishment.

"What did I tell you?" shouted O'Flarety. This hateful reminder brought Alfred again to the protection of his young and defenceless wife.

"The excitement has unnerved her," he said to the officer.

"Ain't you about done with my kids?" asked O'Flarety, marvelling how any man with so little penetration as the officer, managed to hold down a "good payin' job."

"What do you want for your proof anyway?" asked the mother. But Alfred's faith in the validity of his new parenthood was not to be so easily shaken.

"My wife is in no condition to be questioned," he declared.

"She's out of her head, and if you don't----"

He stepped suddenly, for without warning, the door was thrown open and a second officer strode into their midst dragging by the arm the reluctant Jimmy.

"I guess I've got somethin' here that you folks need in your business," he called, nodding toward the now utterly demoralised Jimmy.

"Jimmy!" exclaimed Aggie, having at last got her breath.

"The Joker!" cried Alfred, bearing down upon the panting Jimmy with a ferocious expression.

"I caught him slipping down the fire-escape," explained the officer.

"Again?" exclaimed Aggie and Alfred in tones of deep reproach.

"Jimmy," said Alfred, coming close to his friend, and fixing his eyes upon him in a determined effort to control the poor creature's fast failing faculties, "you know the truth of this thing. You are the one who sent me that telegram, you are the one who told me that I was a father."

"Well, aren't you a father?" asked Aggie, trying to protect her dejected spouse.

"Of course I am," replied Alfred, with every confidence, "but I have to prove it to the officer. Jimmy knows," he concluded. Then turning to the uncomfortable man at his side, he demanded imperatively, "Tell the officer the truth, you idiot. No more of your jokes. Am I a father or am I not?"

"If you're depending on ME for your future offspring," answered Jimmy, wagging his head with the air of a man reckless of consequences, "you are NOT a father."

"Depending on YOU?" gasped Alfred, and he stared at his friend in bewilderment. "What do you mean by that?"

"Ask them," answered Jimmy, and he nodded toward Zoie and Aggie.

Alfred appealed to Aggie.

"Ask Zoie," said Aggie.

Alfred bent over the form of the again prostrate Zoie. "My darling," he entreated, "rouse yourself." Slowly she opened her eyes. "Now," said Alfred, with enforced self-control, "you must look the officer squarely in the eye and tell him whose babies those are," and he nodded toward the officer, who was now beginning to entertain grave doubts on the subject.

"How should I know?" cried Zoie, too exhausted for further lying.

"What!" exclaimed Alfred, his hand on his forehead.

"I only borrowed them," said Zoie, "to get you home," and with that she sank back on the couch and closed her eyes.

"What did I tell you?" cried the triumphant O'Flarety.

"I guess they're your'n all right," admitted the officer doggedly, and he grudgingly released the three infants to their rightful parents.

"I guess they'd better be," shouted O'Flarety; then he and the Italian woman made for the door with their babes pressed close to their hearts.

"Wait a minute," cried Alfred. "I want an understanding."

O'Flarety turned in the doorway and raised a warning fist.

"If you don't leave my kids alone, you'll GIT 'an understanding.'
"

"Me too," added the mother.

"On your way," commanded the officer to the pair of them, and together with Maggie and the officer, they disappeared forever from the Hardy household.

Alfred gazed about the room. "My God!" he exclaimed; then he turned to Jimmy who was still in the custody of the second officer: "If I'm not a father, what am I?"

"I'd hate to tell you," was Jimmy's unsympathetic reply, and in utter dejection Alfred sank on the foot of the bed and buried his head in his hands.

"What shall I do with this one, sir?" asked the officer, undecided as to Jimmy's exact standing in the household.

"Shoot him, for all I care," groaned Alfred, and he rocked to and fro.

"How ungrateful!" exclaimed Aggie, then she signalled to the

officer to go.

"No more of your funny business," said the officer with a parting nod at Jimmy and a vindictive light in his eyes when he remembered the bruises that Jimmy had left on his shins.

"Oh, Jimmy!" said Aggie sympathetically, and she pressed her hot face against his round apoplectic cheek. "You poor dear! And after all you have done for us!"

"Yes," sneered Zoie, having regained sufficient strength to stagger to her feet, "he's done a lot, hasn't he?" And then forgetting that her original adventure with Jimmy which had brought about such disastrous results was still unknown to Aggie and Alfred, she concluded bitterly, "All this would never have happened, if it hadn't been for Jimmy and his horrid old luncheon."

Jimmy was startled. This was too much, and just as he had seemed to be well out of complications for the remainder of his no doubt short life. He turned to bolt for the door but Aggie's eyes were upon him.

"Luncheon?" exclaimed Aggie and she regarded him with a puzzled frown.

Zoie's hand was already over her lips, but too late.

Recovering from his somewhat bewildering sense of loss, Alfred, too, was now beginning to sit up and take notice.

"What luncheon?" he demanded.

Zoie gazed from Alfred to Aggie, then at Jimmy, then resolving to make a clean breast of the matter, she sidled toward Alfred with her most ingratiating manner.

"Now, Alfred," she purred, as she endeavoured to act one arm about his unsuspecting neck, "if you'll only listen, I'll tell you the REAL TRUTH."

A wild despairing cry from Alfred, a dash toward the door by Jimmy, and a determined effort on Aggie's part to detain her spouse, temporarily interrupted Zoie's narrative.

But in spite of these discouragements, Zoie did eventually tell Alfred the real truth, and before the sun had risen on the beginning of another day, she had added to her confession, promises whose happy fulfillment was evidenced for many years after by the chatter of glad young voices, up and down the stairway of Alfred's new suburban home, and the flutter of golden curls in and out amongst the sunlight and shadows of his ample, well kept grounds.

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Alfred gazed about the room. "My God!" he exclaimed; then he turned to Jimmy who was still in the custody of the second officer: "If I'm not a father, what am I?"

"I'd hate to tell you," was Jimmy's unsympathetic reply, and in utter dejection Alfred sank on the foot of the bed and buried his head in his hands.

"What shall I do with this one, sir?" asked the officer, undecided as to Jimmy's exact standing in the household.

"Shoot him, for all I care," groaned Alfred, and he rocked to and fro.

"How ungrateful!" exclaimed Aggie, then she signalled to the officer to go.

"No more of your funny business," said the of