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Title: Quill's Window

Author: George Barr McCutcheon

Release Date: July, 2004 [EBook #6044]
[Yes, we are more than one year ahead of schedule]
[This file was first posted on October 23, 2002]

Edition: 10

Language: English

Character set encoding: ASCII

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK, QUILL'S WINDOW ***

Charles Aldarondo, Charles Franks and the Online Distributed Proofreading
Team.

[Illustration: "What are you doing up here?"]

QUILL'S WINDOW

BY GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON

FRONTISPIECE BY

C. ALLAN GILBERT

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QUILL'S WINDOW

CHAPTER I

THE FORBIDDEN ROCK

A young man and an old one sat in the shade of the willows beside the wide, still river. The glare of a hot August sun failed to penetrate the shelter in which they idled; out upon the slow-gliding river it beat relentlessly, creating a pale, thin vapour that clung close to the shimmering surface and dazzled the eye with an ever-shifting glaze. The air was lifeless, sultry, stifling; not a leaf, not a twig in the tall, drooping willows moved unless stirred by the passage of some vagrant bird.

The older man sat on the ground, his back against the trunk of a tree that grew so near to the edge that it seemed on the point of toppling over to shatter the smooth, green mirror below. Some of its sturdy exposed roots reached down from the bank into the water, where they caught and held the drift from upstream,--reeds and twigs and matted grass,--a dirty, sickly mass that swished lazily on the flank of the slow-moving current.

The water here in the shade was deep and clear and limpid, contrasting sharply with the steel-white surface out beyond.

The young man occupied a decrepit camp stool, placed conveniently against the trunk of another tree hard by. A discarded bamboo rod lay beside him on the bank, the hook and line hopelessly tangled in the drift below. He smoked cigarettes.

His companion held a well-chewed black cigar in the vise-like corner of his mouth. His hook and line were far out in the placid water, an ordinary cork serving as a "bob" from which his dreary, unwavering gaze seldom shifted.

"I guess they're through bitin' for today," he remarked, after a long unbroken silence.

"How many have we got?" inquired the other languidly.

"Between us we've got twenty-four. That's a fair-sized mess. Sunfish don't make much of a showing unless you get a barrel of 'em."

"Good eating though," mused the young man.

"Fried in butter," supplemented the other. "What time is it?"

"Half-past nine."

"Well, that's just about what I'd figured. I've been fishin' in this 'hole' for something like forty years, off and on, and I've found out that these here sunfish get through breakfast at exactly

eighteen minutes past nine. I always allow about ten minutes' leeway in case one or two of 'em might have been out late the night before or something,--but as a general thing they're pretty dog-goned prompt for breakfast. Specially in August. Even a fish is lazy in August. Look at that fish-worm. By gosh, it's BOILED! That shows you how hot the water is."

He removed the worm from the hook and slowly began to twist the pole in the more or less perfunctory process of "winding up" the line. The young man looked on disinterestedly.

"Ain't you going to untangle that line?" inquired the old man, jerking his thumb.

"What's the use? The worm is dead by this time, and God knows I prefer to let him rest in peace. The quickest way to untangle a line is to do it like this."

He severed it with his pocket-knife.

"A line like that costs twenty-five cents," said the old man, a trace of dismay in his voice.

"That's what it cost when it was new," drawled the other. "You forget it's been a second-hand article since eight o'clock this morning,--and what's a second-hand fish-line worth?--tell me that. How much would you give, in the open market, or at an auction sale, for a second-hand fish-line?"

"I guess we'd better be gittin' back to the house," said the other, ignoring the question. "Got to clean these fish if we're expectin' to have 'em for dinner,--or lunch, as you fellers call it. I'll bet your grandfather never called it lunch. And as for him callin' supper DINNER,--why, by crickey, he NEVER got drunk enough for that."

"More than that," said the young man calmly, "he never saw a cigarette, or a telephone, or a Ford, or a safety-razor,--or a lot of other things that have sprung up since he cashed in his checks. To be sure, he did see a few things I've never seen,--such as clay-pipes, canal boats, horse-hair sofas, top-boots and rag-carpets,--and he probably saw Abraham Lincoln,--but, for all that, I'd rather be where I am today than where he is,--and I'm not saying he isn't in heaven, either."

The older man's eyes twinkled. "I don't think he's any nearer heaven than he was forty years ago,--and he's been dead just about that long. He wasn't what you'd call a far-seeing man,--and you've got to look a long ways ahead if you want to see heaven. Your grandma's in heaven all right,--and I'll bet she was the most surprised mortal that ever got inside the pearly gates if she found him there ahead of her. Like as not she would have backed out, thinking she'd got into the wrong place by mistake. And if he IS up there, I bet he's

making the place an everlastin' hell for her. Yep, your grandpa was about as mean as they make 'em. As you say, he didn't know anything about cigarettes, but he made up for it by runnin' after women and fast horses,--or maybe it was hosses and, fast women,--and cheatin' the eye teeth out of everybody he had any dealings with."

"I don't understand how he happened to die young, If all these things were true about him," said the other, lighting a fresh cigarette and drawing in a deep, full breath of the pungent smoke. The old man waited a few seconds for the smoke to be expelled, and then, as it came out in a far-reaching volume, carrying far on the still air, his face betrayed not only relief but wonder.

"You don't actually swaller it, do you?" he inquired.

"Certainly not. I inhale, that's all. Any one can do it."

"I'd choke to death," said the old man, shifting his cigar hastily from one side of his mouth to the other, and taking a fresh grip on it with his teeth,--as if fearing the consequences of a momentary lapse of control.

"You've been chewing that cigar for nearly two hours," observed the young man. "I call that a filthy habit."

"I guess you're right," agreed the other, amiably. "The best you can say for it is that it's a man's job, and not a woman's," he added, with all the scorn that the cigar smoker has for the man who affects nothing but cigarettes.

"You can't make me sore by talking like that," said his companion, stretching himself lazily. "Approximately ten million men smoked cigarettes over in France for four years and more, and I submit that they had what you might call a man's job on their hands."

"How many of them things do you smoke in a day?"

"It depends entirely on how early I get up in the morning,--and how late I stay up at night. Good Lord, it's getting hotter every minute. For two cents, I'd strip and jump in there for a game of hide and seek with the fish. By the way, I don't suppose there are any mermaids in these parts, are there?"

"You stay out of that water," commanded the old man. "You ain't strong enough yet to be takin' any such chances. You're here to get well, and you got to be mighty all-fired careful. The bed of that river is full of cold springs,--and it's pretty deep along this stretch. Weak as you are,--and as hot as you are,--you'd get cramps in less'n a minute."

"I happen to be a good swimmer."

"So was Bart Edgecomb,--best swimmer I ever saw. He could swim

back an' forth across this river half a dozen times,--and do you know what happened to him last September? He drowned in three foot of water up above the bend, that's what he did. Come on. Let's be movin'. It'll be hotter'n blazes by eleven o'clock, and you oughtn't to be walkin' in the sun."

The young man settled himself a little more comfortably against the tree.

"I think I'll stay here in the shade for a while longer. Don't be uneasy. I shan't go popping into the water the minute your back's turned. What was it you said early this morning about sniffing rain in the air?"

"Thunderstorms today, sure as my name's Brown. Been threatening rain for nearly a week. Got to come some time, and I figure today's--"

"Threats are all we get," growled the young man peevishly. "Lord, I never dreamed I could get so sick of white skies and what you call fresh air. You farmers go to bed every night praying for rain, and you get up in the morning still praying, and what's the result? Nothing except a whiter sky than the day before, and a greater shortage of fresh air. Don't talk to me about country air and country sunshine and country quiet. My God, it never was so hot and stifling as this in New York, and as for peace and quiet,--why, those rotten birds in the trees around the house make more noise than the elevated trains at the rush hour, and the rotten roosters begin crowing just about the time I'm going to sleep, and the dogs bark, and the cows,--the cows do whatever cows do to make a noise,--and then the crows begin to yawp. And all night long the katydids keep up their beastly racket, and the frogs in the pond back of the barns,--my God, man, the city is as silent as the grave compared to what you get in the country."

"I manage to sleep through it all," said the old man drily. "The frogs and katydids don't keep me awake."

"Yes, and that reminds me of another noise that makes the night hideous. It's the way you people sleep. At nine o'clock sharp, every night, the whole house begins to snore, and--Say, I've seen service in France, I've slept in barracks with scores of tired soldiers, I've walked through camps where thousands of able-bodied men were snoring their heads off,--but never have I heard anything so terrifying as the racket that lasts from nine to five in the land of my forefathers. Gad, it sometimes seems to me you're all trying to make my forefathers turn over in their graves up there on the hill."

"You're kind of peevish today, ain't you?" inquired the other, grinning. "You'll get used to the way we snore before long, and you'll kind of enjoy it. I'd be scared to death if I got awake in the night and didn't hear everybody in the house snoring. It's kind of restful to know that everybody's asleep,--and not dead. If they

wasn't snoring, I'd certainly think they was dead."

The young man smiled. "I'll say this much for you farmers,--you're a good-natured bunch. I ought to be ashamed of myself for grouching. I suppose it's because I've been sick. You're all so kind and thoughtful,--and so darned GENUINE,--even when you're asleep,--that I feel like a dog for finding fault. By the way, you said something awhile ago about that big black cliff over yonder having a history. I've been looking at that cliff or hill or rock, or whatever it is, and it doesn't look real. It doesn't look as though God had made it. It's more like the work of man. So far as I can see, there isn't another hill on either bank of the river, and yet that thing over there must be three or four hundred feet high, sticking up like a gigantic wart on the face of the earth. What is it? Solid rock?"

"Sort like slate rock, I guess. There's a stretch of about a mile on both sides of the river along here that's solid rock. This bank we're standin' on is rock, covered with six or eight foot of earth. You're right about that big rock over there being a queer thing. There's been college professors and all sorts of scientific men here, off and on, to examine it and to try to account for its being there. But, thunderation, if it's been there for a million years as they say, what's the sense of explaining it?"

"There's something positively forbidding about it. Gives you the willies. How did it come by the name you called it a while ago?"

"Quill's Window? Goes back to the days of the Indians. Long before the time of Tecumseh or The Prophet. They used to range up and down this river more than a hundred years ago. The old trail is over there on the other bank as plain as day, covered with grass but beaten down till it's like a macadam road. I suppose the Indians followed that trail for hundreds of years. There's still traces of their camps over there on that side, and a little ways down the river is a place where they had a regular village. Over here on this side, quite a little ways farther down, is the remains of an old earthwork fort used by the French long before the Revolution, and afterwards by American soldiers about the time of the War of 1812. We'll go and look at it some day if you like. Most people are interested in it, but for why, I can't see.

"There ain't nothing to see but some busted up breastworks and lunettes, covered with weeds, with here and there a sort of opening where they must have had a cannon sticking out to scare the squaws and papooses. You was askin' about the name of that rock. Well, it originally had an Indian name, which I always forget because it's the easiest way to keep from pronouncing it. Then the French came along and sort of Frenchified the name,--which made it worse, far as I'm concerned. I'm not much on French. About three-quarters of the way up the rock, facing the river, is a sort of cave. You can't see the opening from here, 'cause it faces north, looking up the river from the bend. There are a lot of little caves and cracks in the rock, but none of 'em amounts to anything except this one. It

runs back something like twenty foot in the rock and is about as high as a man's head.

"Shortly after General Harrison licked The Prophet and his warriors up on the Tippecanoe, a man named Quill,--an Irishman from down the river some'eres towards Vincennes,--all this is hearsay so far as I'm concerned, mind you,--but as I was saying, this man Quill begin to make his home up in that cave. He was what you might call a hermit. There were no white people in these parts except a few scattered trappers and some people living in a settlement twenty-odd miles south of here. As the story goes, this man Quill lived up there in that cave for about four or five years, hunting and trapping all around the country. White people begin to get purty thick in these parts soon after that, Indiana having been made a state. There was a lot of coming and going up and down the river. A feller named Digby started a kind of settlement or trading-post further up, and clearings were made all around,--farms and all that, you see. Your great grandfather was one of the first men to settle in this section. Coming down the river by night you could see the light, up there in Quill's Cave. You could see it for miles, they say. People begin to speak of it as the light in Quill's window,--and that's how the name happened. I'm over seventy, and I've never heard that hill called anything but Quill's Window."

"What happened to Quill?"

"Well, that's something nobody seems to be quite certain about. Whether he hung himself or somebody else done the job for him, nobody knows. According to the story that was told when I was a boy, it seems he killed somebody down the river and come up here to hide. The relations of the man he killed never stopped hunting for him. A good many people were of the opinion they finally tracked him to that cave. In any case, his body was found hanging by the neck up there one day, on a sort of ridge-pole he had put in. This was after people had missed seeing the light in Quill's Window for quite a spell. There are some people who still say the cave is ha'nted. When I was a young boy, shortly before the Civil War, a couple of horse thieves were chased up to that cave and--ahem!--I reckon your grandfather, if he was alive, could tell you all about what became of 'em and who was in the party that stood 'em up against the back wall of the cave and shot 'em. There's another story that goes back even farther than the horse thieves. The skeleton of a woman was found up there, with the skull split wide open. That was back in 1830 or 1840. So, you see, when all of them ghosts get together and begin scrapping over property rights, it's enough to scare the gizzard out of 'most anybody that happens to be in the neighbourhood. But I guess old man Quill was the first white man to shuffle off, so it's generally understood that his ghost rules the roost. Come on now, let's be moving. It's gettin' hotter every minute, and you oughtn't to be out in all this heat. For the Lord's sake, you ain't going to light another one of them things, are you?"

"Sure. It's the only vice I'm capable of enjoying at present. Being gassed and shell-shocked, and then having the flu and pneumonia and rheumatism,--and God knows what else,--sort of purifies a chap, you see."

"Well, all I got to say is--I guess I'd better not say it, after all."

"You can't hurt my feelings."

"I'm not so sure about that," said the old man gruffly.

"How do you get up to that cave?"

"You ain't thinking of trying it, are you?" apprehensively.

"When I'm a bit huskier, yes."

The old man removed his cigar in order to obtain the full effect of a triumphant grin.

"Well, in the first place, you can't get up to it. You've got to come down to it. The only way to get to the mouth of that cave is to lower yourself from the top of the rock. And in the second place, you can't get DOWN to it because it ain't allowed. The owner of all the land along that side of the river has got 'no trespass' signs up, and NOBODY'S allowed to climb to the top of that rock. She's all-fired particular about it, too. The top of that rock is sacred to her. Nobody ever thinks of violatin' it. All around the bottom of the slope back of the hill she's got a white picket fence, and the gate to it is padlocked. You see it's her family buryin'-ground."

"Her what?"

"Buryin'-ground. Her father and mother are buried right smack on top of that rock."

The young man lifted his eyebrows. "Does that mean there are a couple of married ghosts fighting on top of the rock every night, besides the gang down in the--"

"It ain't a joking matter," broke in the other sharply.

"Go on, tell me more. The monstrosity gets more and more interesting every minute."

The old man chewed his cigar energetically for a few seconds before responding.

"I'll tell you the story tonight after supper,--not now. The only thing I want to make clear to you is this. Everybody in this section respects her wishes about keeping off of that rock, and I want to ask you to respect 'em, too. It would be a dirty trick for you to

go up there, knowin' it's dead against her wishes."

"A dirty trick, eh?" said the young man, fixing his gaze on the blue-black summit of the forbidden rock.

CHAPTER II

THE STORY THE OLD MAN TOLD

David Windom's daughter Alix ran away with and married Edward Crown in the spring of 1894.

Windom was one of the most prosperous farmers in the county. His lands were wide, his cattle were many, his fields were vast stretches of green and gold; his granaries, his cribs and his mows, filled and emptied each year, brought riches and dignity and power to this man of the soil.

Back when the state was young, his forefathers had fared westward from the tide-water reaches of Virginia, coming at length to the rich, unbroken region along the river with the harsh Indian name, and there they built their cabins and huts on lands that had cost them little more than a song and yet were of vast dimensions. They were of English stock. (Another branch of the family, closely related, remains English to this day, its men sitting sometime in Parliament and always in the councils of the nation, far removed in every way from the Windoms in the fertile valley once traversed by the war-like redskins.) But these Windoms of the valley were no longer English. There had been six generations of them, and those of the first two fought under General Washington against the red-coats and the Hessians in the War of '76.

David Windom, of the fourth generation, went to England for a wife, however,--a girl he had met on the locally celebrated trip to Europe in the early seventies. For years he was known from one end of the county to the other as "the man who has been across the Atlantic Ocean." The dauntless English bride had come unafraid to a land she had been taught to regard as wild, peopled by savages and overrun by ravenous beasts, and she had found it populated instead by the gentlest sort of men and equally gentle beasts.

She did a great deal for David Windom. He was a proud man and ambitious. He saw the wisdom of her teachings and he followed them, not reluctantly but with a fierce desire to refine what God had given him in the shape of raw material: a good brain, a sturdy sense of honour, and above all an imagination that lifted him

safely,--if not always sanely,--above the narrow world in which the farmer of that day spent his entire life. Not that he was uncouth to begin with,--far from it. He had been irritatingly fastidious from boyhood up. His thoughts had wandered afar on frequent journeys, and when they came back to take up the dull occupation they had abandoned temporarily, they were broader than when they went out to gather wool. The strong, well-poised English wife found rich soil in which to work; he grew apace and flourished, and manifold were the innovations that stirred a complacent community into actual unrest. A majority of the farmers and virtually all of the farmers' wives were convinced that Dave Windom was losing his mind, the way he was letting that woman boss him around.

The women did not like her. She was not one of them and never could be one of them. Her "hired girls" became "servants" the day she entered the ugly old farmhouse on the ridge. They were no longer considered members of the family; they were made to feel something they had never felt before in their lives: that they were not their mistress's equals.

The "hired girl" of those days was an institution. As a rule, she moved in the same social circle as the lady of the house and it was customary for her to intimately address her mistress by her Christian name. She enjoyed the right to engage in all conversations; she was, in short, "as good as anybody." The new Mrs. Windom was not long in transporting the general housework "girl" into a totally unexampled state of astonishment. This "girl,"--aged forty-five and a prominent member of the Methodist Church,--announced to everybody in the community except to Mrs. Windom herself that she was going to leave. She did not leave. The calm serenity of the new mistress prevailed, even over the time-honoured independence in which the "girl" and her kind unconsciously gloried. Respect succeeded injury, and before the bride had been in the Windom house a month, Maria Bliss was telling the other "hired girls" of the neighbourhood that she wouldn't trade places with them for anything in the world.

Greatly to the consternation and disgust of other householders, a "second girl" was added to the Windom menage,--a parlour-maid she was called. This was too much. It was rank injustice. General housework girls began to complain of having too much work to do,--getting up at five in the morning, cooking for half a dozen "hands," doing all the washing and ironing, milking, sweeping and so on, and not getting to bed till nine or ten o'clock at night,--to say nothing of family dinners on Sunday and the preacher in every now and then, and all that. Moreover, Mrs. Windom herself never looked bedraggled. She took care of her hair, wore good clothes, went to the dentist regularly (whether she had a toothache or not), had meals served in what Maria Bliss loftily described as "courses," and saw to it that David Windom shaved once a day, dressed better than his neighbours, kept his "surrey" and "side-bar buggy" washed, his harness oiled and polished, and wore real riding-boots.

The barnyard took on an orderly appearance, the stables were

repaired, the picket fences gleamed white in the sun, the roof of the house was painted red, the sides a shimmering white, and there were green window shutters and green window boxes filled with geraniums. The front yard was kept mowed, and there were great flower-beds encircled by snow-white boulders; a hammock was swung in the shade of two great oaks, and--worst of all! a tennis-court was laid out alongside the house.

Tennis! That was a game played only by "dudes"! Passers-by looked with scorn upon young David Windom and his flaxen-haired wife as they played at the silly game before supper every evening. And they went frequently to the "opera house" at the county seat, ten miles up the river; they did not wait for summer to come with its circus, as all the other farmers were content to do; whenever there was a good "show" at the theatre in town they sent up for reserved seats and drove in for supper at the principal hotel. Altogether, young Mrs. Windom was simply "raising Cain" with the conventions.

Strange to say, David did not "go to smash." To the intense chagrin of the wiseacres he prospered despite an unprecedented disregard for the teachings of his father and his grandfather before him. The wolf stayed a long way off from his door, the prophetic mortgage failed to lay its blight upon his lands, his crops were bountiful, his acreage spread as the years went by,--and so his uncles, his cousins and his aunts were never so happy as when wishing for the good old days when his father was alive and running the farm as it should be run! If David had married some good, sensible, thrifty, hard-working farmer's daughter,--Well, it might not have meant an improvement in the crops but it certainly would have spared him the expense of a tennis court, and theatre-going, and absolutely unnecessary trips to Chicago or Indianapolis whenever SHE took it into her head to go. Besides, it wasn't natural that they should deliberately put off having children. It wasn't what God and the country expected. After a year had passed and there were no symptoms of approaching motherhood, certain narrow-minded relatives began to blame Great Britain for the outrage and talked a great deal about a worn-out, deteriorating race.

Then, after two years, when a girl baby was born to David and his wife, they couldn't, for the life of them, understand how it came to pass that it wasn't a boy. There had been nothing but boys in the Windom family for years and years. It appeared to be a Windom custom. And here was this fair-haired outsider from across the sea breaking in with a girl! They could not believe it possible. David,--a great, strong, perfect specimen of a Windom,--the father of a girl! Why, they emphasized, he was over six feet tall, strong as an ox, broad-shouldered,--as fine a figure as you would see in a lifetime. There was something wrong,--radically wrong.

The district suffered another shock when a nurse maid was added to David's household,--a girl from the city who had nothing whatever to do, except to take care of the baby while the unnatural mother tinkered with the flower-beds, took long walks about the farm,

rode horseback, and played tennis with David and a silly crowd of young people who had fallen into evil ways.

She died when her daughter was ten years old. Those who had misunderstood her and criticized her in the beginning, mourned her deeply, sincerely, earnestly in the end, for she had triumphed over prejudice, narrow-mindedness, and a certain form of malice. The whole district was the better for her once hateful innovations, and there was no one left who scoffed at David Windom for the choice he had made of a wife.

Her death wrought a remarkable, enduring change in Windom. He became a silent, brooding man who rarely smiled and whose heart lay up in the little graveyard on the ridge. The gay, larksome light fled from his eyes, his face grew stern and sometimes forbidding. She had taken with her the one great thing she had brought into his life: ineffable buoyancy. He no longer played, for there was no one with whom he would play; he no longer sang, for the music had gone out of his soul; he no longer whistled the merry tunes, for his lips were stiff and unyielding. Only when he looked upon his little daughter did the soft light of love well up into his eyes and the rigid mouth grow tender.

She was like her mother. She was joyous, brave and fair to look upon. She had the same heart of sunshine, the same heart of iron, and the blue in her eyes was like the blue of the darkening skies. She adored the grim, silent man who was her father, and she was the breath of life to him.

And then, when she was nineteen, she broke the heart of David Windom. For two years she had been a student in the University situated but half a score of miles from the place where she was born, a co-educational institution of considerable size and importance. Windom did not believe in women's colleges. He believed in the free school with its broadening influence, its commingling of the sexes in the search for learning, and in the divine right of woman to develop her mind through the channels that lead ultimately and inevitably to superiority of man. He believed that the girl trained and educated in schools devoted exclusively to the finer sex fails to achieve understanding as well as education. The only way to give a girl a practical education,--and he believed that every woman should have one,--was to start her off even with the boy who was training to become her master in all respects.

During her second year at the University she met Edward Crown, a senior. He was the son of a blacksmith in the city, and he was working his way through college with small assistance from his parent, who held to the conviction that a man was far better off if he developed his muscles by hard work and allowed the brain to take care of itself. Young Crown was a good-looking fellow of twenty-three, clean-minded, ambitious, dogged in work and dogged in play. He had "made" the football team in his sophomore year. Customary snobbishness had kept him out of the fraternities and

college societies. He may have been a good fellow, a fine student, and a cracking end on the eleven, and all that, but he was not acceptable material for any one of the half dozen fraternities.

When he left college with his hard-earned degree it was to accept a position with a big engineering company, a job which called him out to the far Northwest. Alix Windom was his promised wife. They were deeply, madly in love with each other. Separation seemed unendurable. She was willing to go into the wilderness with him, willing to endure the hardships and the discomforts of life in a construction camp up in the mountains of Montana. She would share his poverty and his trials as she would later share his triumphs. But when they went to David Windom with their beautiful dream, the world fell about their ears.

David Windom, recovering from the shock of surprise, ordered Edward from the house. He would sooner see his child dead than the wife of Nick Crown's son,--Nick Crown, a drunken rascal who had been known to beat his wife,--Nick Crown who was not even fit to lick the feet of the horses he shod!

One dark, rainy night in late June, Alix stole out of the old farmhouse on the ridge and met her lover at the abandoned tollgate half a mile up the road. He waited there with a buggy and a fast team of horses. Out of a ramshackle cupboard built in the wall of the toll-house, they withdrew the bundles surreptitiously placed there by Alix in anticipation of this great and daring event, and made off toward the city at a break-neck, reckless speed. They were married before midnight, and the next day saw them on their way to the Far West. But not before Alix had despatched a messenger to her father, telling him of her act and asking his forgiveness for the sake of the love she bore him. The same courier carried back to the city a brief response from David Windom. In a shaken, sprawling hand he informed her that if she ever decided to return to her home ALONE, he would receive her and forgive her for the sake of the love he bore her, but if she came with the coward who stole her away from him, he would kill him before her eyes.

II

The summer and fall and part of the winter passed, and in early March Alix came home.

David Windom, then a man of fifty, gaunt and grey and powerful, seldom had left the farm in all these months. He rode about his far-spread estate, grim and silent, his eyes clouded, his voice almost metallic, his manner cold and repellent. His tenants, his labourers, his neighbours, fearing him, rarely broke in upon his reserve. Only his animals loved him and were glad to see him,--his dogs, his horses, even his cattle. He loved them, for they were staunch and faithful. Never had he uttered his daughter's name in all these months, nor was there a soul in the community possessed of the hardihood to inquire about her or to sympathize with him.

It was a fierce, cruel night in March that saw the return of Alix. A fine, biting snow blew across the wide, open farmlands; the beasts of the field were snugly under cover; no man stirred abroad unless driven by necessity; the cold, wind-swept roads were deserted. So no one witnessed the return of Alix Crown and her husband. They came out of the bleak, unfriendly night and knocked at David Windom's door. There were lights in his sitting-room windows; through them they could see the logs blazing in the big fireplace, beside which sat the lonely, brooding figure of Alix's father. It was late,--nearly midnight,--and the house was still. Old Maria Bliss and the one other servant had been in bed for hours. The farmhands slept in a cottage Windom had erected years before, acting upon his wife's suggestion. It stood some two or three hundred yards from the main house.

A dog in the stables barked, first in anger and then with unmistakable joy. David's favourite, a big collie, sprang up from his place on the rug before the fire and looked uneasily toward the door opening onto the hall. Then came a rapping at the front door. The collie growled softly as he moved toward the door. He sniffed the air in the hall and suddenly began to whine joyously, wagging his tail as he bounded back and forth between his master and the door.

David Windom knew then that his daughter had come home.

He sprang to his feet and took two long strides toward the door. Abruptly, as if suddenly turned to stone, he stopped. For a long time he stood immovable in the middle of the room. The rapping was repeated, louder, heavier than before. He turned slowly, retraced his steps to the fireplace and took from its rack in the corner a great iron poker. His face was ashen grey, his eyes were wide and staring and terrible. Then he strode toward the door, absolutely unconscious of the glad, prancing dog at his side.

In the poor shelter of the little porch stood Alix, bent and shivering, and, behind her, Edward Crown, at whose feet rested two huge "telescope satchels." The light from within fell dimly upon the white, upturned face of the girl. She held out her hands to the man who towered above her on the doorstep.

"Daddy! Daddy!" she cried brokenly. "Oh, my daddy! Let me come in--let me,--I--I am freezing."

But David Windom was peering over her head at the indistinct face of the man beyond. He wanted to be sure. Lifting his powerful arm, he struck.

Edward Crown, stiff and numb with cold and weak from an illness of some duration, did not raise an arm to ward off the blow, nor was he even prepared to dodge. The iron rod crashed down upon his head. His legs crumpled up; he dropped in a heap at the top of the steps and rolled heavily to the bottom, sprawling out on the snow-covered

brick walk.

The long night wore on. Windom had carried his daughter into the sitting-room, where he placed her on a lounge drawn up before the fire. She had fainted. After an hour he left her and went out into the night. The body of Edward Crown was lying where it had fallen. It was covered by a thin blanket of snow. For a long time he stood gazing down upon the lifeless shape. The snow cut his face, the wind thrashed about his coatless figure, but he heeded them not. He was muttering to himself. At last he turned to re-enter the house. His daughter was standing in the open doorway.

"Is--is that Edward down there?" she asked, in weak, lifeless tones. She seemed dull, witless, utterly without realization.

"Go back in the house," he whispered, as he drew back from her in a sort of horror,--horror that had not struck him in the presence of the dead.

"Is that Edward?" she insisted, her voice rising to a queer, monotonous wail.

"I told you to stay in the house," he said. "I told you I would look after him, didn't I? Go back, Alix,--that's a good girl. Your--your daddy will--Oh, my God! Don't look at me like that!"

"Is he dead?" she whispered, still standing very straight in the middle of the doorway. She was not looking at the inert thing on the walk below, but into her father's eyes. He did not, could not answer. He seemed frozen stiff. She went on in the same dull, whispered monotone. "I begged him to let me come alone. I begged him to let me see you first. But he would come. He brought me all the way from the West and he--he was not afraid of you. You have done what you said you would do. You did not give him a chance. And always,--always I have loved you so. You will never know how I longed to come back and have you kiss me, and pet me, and call me those silly names you used--"

"What's done, is done," he broke in heavily. "He is dead. It had to be. I was insane,--mad with all these months of hatred. It is done. Come,--there is nothing you can do. Come back into the house. I will carry him in--and wake somebody. Tomorrow they will come and take me away. They will hang me. I am ready. Let them come. You must not stand there in the cold, my child."

She toppled forward into his arms, and he lifted her as if she were a babe and carried her into the house. The collie was whining in the corner. Windom sat down in the big armchair before the fire, still holding the girl in his arms. She was moaning weakly. Suddenly a great, overwhelming fear seized him,--the fear of being hanged!

A long time afterward,--it was after two,--he arose from his knees beside the lounge and prepared to go out into the night once more.

Alix had promised not to send her father to the gallows. She was almost in a stupor after the complete physical and mental collapse, but she knew what she was doing, she realized what she was promising in return for the blow that had robbed her of the man she loved.

No one will ever know just what took place in that darkened sitting-room, for the story as afterwards related was significantly lacking in details. The light had been extinguished and the doors silently closed by the slayer. The stiffening body of Edward Crown out in the snow was not more silent than the interior of the old farmhouse, apart from the room in which David Windom pleaded with his stricken daughter.

And all the while he was begging her to save him from the consequences of his crime, his brain was searching for the means to dispose of the body of Edward Crown and to provide an explanation for the return of Alix without her husband.

Circumstances favoured him in a surprising manner. Young Crown and his wife had travelled down from Chicago in a day coach, and they had left the train at a small way station some five miles west of the Windom farm. Crown was penniless. He did not possess the means to engage a vehicle to transport them from the city to the farm, nor the money to secure lodging for the night in the cheapest hotel. Alix's pride stood in the way of an appeal to her husband's father or to any one of his friends for assistance. It was she who insisted that they leave the train at Hawkins station and walk to Windom's house. They had encountered no one who knew them, either on the train or at the station; while on their cold, tortuous journey along the dark highway they did not meet a solitary human being.

No one, therefore, was aware of their return.

Edward Crown's presence in the neighbourhood was unknown. If David Windom's plan succeeded, the fact that Crown had returned with his wife never would be known. To all inquirers both he and his daughter were to return the flat but evasive answer: "It is something I cannot discuss at present," leaving the world to arrive at the obvious conclusion that Alix's husband had abandoned her. And presently people, from sheer delicacy, would cease to inquire. No one would know that Crown had been ill up in the mountains for weeks, had lost his position, and had spent his last penny in getting his wife back to the house in which she was born,--and where her own child was soon to be born.

Windom went about the task of secreting his son-in-law's body in a most systematic, careful manner. He first carried the two "telescopes" into the house and hid them in a closet. Then he put on an old overcoat and cap, his riding boots and gloves. Stealing out to the rear of the house, he found a lantern and secured it to his person by means of a strap. A few minutes later he was ready to start off on his ghastly mission. Alix nodded her head dumbly when he commanded her to remain in the sitting-room and to make no sound

that might arouse Maria Bliss. He promised to return in less than an hour.

"Your father's life depends on your silence, my child, from this moment on," he whispered in her ear.

She started up. "And how about my husband's life?" she moaned. "What of him? Why do you put yourself--"

"Sh! Your husband is dead. You cannot bring him to life. It is your duty,--do you hear?--your duty to spare the living. Remember what I said to you awhile ago. Never forget it, my child."

"Yes," she muttered. "Blood is thicker than water.' I remember."

III

He went out into the night, closing the door softly behind him. The collie was at his heels. He was afraid to go alone. Grimly, resolutely he lifted the body of Edward Crown from the ground and slung it across his shoulder, the head and arms hanging down his back. Desperation added strength to his powerful frame. As if his burden were a sack of meal, he strode swiftly down the walk, through the gate and across the gravel road. The night was as black as ink, yet he went unerringly to the pasture gate a few rods down the road. Unlatching it, he passed through and struck out across the open, wind-swept meadow. The dog slunk along close behind him, growling softly. Snow was still falling, but the gale from the north was sweeping it into drifts, obliterating his tracks almost as soon as they were made.

Straight ahead lay the towering, invisible rock, a quarter of a mile away. He descended the ridge slope, swung tirelessly across the swales and mounds in the little valley, and then bent his back to the climb up the steep incline to Quill's Window. Picking his way through a fringe of trees, he came to the tortuous path that led to the crest of the great rock. Panting, dogged, straining every ounce of his prodigious strength, he struggled upward, afraid to stop for rest, afraid to lower his burden. The sides and the flat summit of the rock were full of treacherous fissures, but he knew them well. He had climbed the sides of Quill's Window scores of times as a boy, to sit at the top and gaze off over the small world below, there to dream of the great world outside, and of love, adventure, travel. Many a night, after the death of his beloved Alix, he had gone up there to mourn alone, to be nearer to the heaven which she had entered, to be closer to her. He knew well of the narrow fissure at the top,--six feet deep and the length of a grave! Filled only with the leaves of long dead years!

He lowered his burden to the bare surface of the rock. The wind had swept it clean. Under the protecting screen of his overcoat he struck a match and lighted the lantern. Then for the first time he studied closely the grey, still face of the youth he had slain.

The skull was crushed. There was frozen blood down the back of the head and neck--He started up in sudden consternation. There would be blood-stains where the body had lain so long,--tell-tale, convicting stains! He must be swift with the work in hand. Those stains must be wiped out before the break of day.

Lowering himself into the opening, he began digging at one end with his hands, scooping back quantities of wet leaves. There was snow down there in the pit,--a foot or more of it. After a few minutes of vigorous clawing, a hole in the side of the fissure was revealed,--an aperture large enough for a man to crawl into. He knew where it led to: down into Quill's cave twenty feet below.

Some one,--perhaps an Indian long before the time of Quill, or it may have been Quill himself,--had chiselled hand and toe niches in the sides of this well and had used the strange shaft as means of getting into and out of the cave. Windom's father had closed this shaft when David was a small boy, after the venturesome youngster had gone down into the cave and, unable to climb out again, had been the cause of an all-day search by his distracted parent and every neighbour for miles around. The elder Windom had blocked the bottom of the hole with a huge boulder, shorn from the side of the cave by some remote wrench of nature. Then he had half filled the cavity from the top by casting in all of the loose stones to be found on the crest of the rock, together with a quantity of earth. The work had never been completed. There still remained a hole some ten feet deep.

David Windom clambered out, leaving his lantern below. Letting the dead man's body slide into the crevice, he followed, bent on at least partially finishing the job. When he climbed out a second time, Edward Crown was at the bottom of the hole and the wet, foul leaves again hid the opening. Tomorrow night, and the night after, he would come again to close the hole entirely with earth and stones, hiding forever the grewsome thing in Quill's "chimney," as the flue-like passage was called.

Extinguishing the lantern, he started down the hill at a reckless, break-neck speed. He had the uncanny feeling that he was being followed, that Edward Crown was dogging his footsteps. Halfway down, he stumbled and fell sprawling. As he started to rise, a sound smote his ears--the sound of footsteps. For many seconds he held his breath, terror clutching his throat. He WAS being followed! Some one was shuffling down the rock behind him. The collie! He had forgotten the dog. But even as he drew in the deep breath of relief, he felt his blood suddenly freeze in his veins. It was not the dog. Something approached that moaned and whimpered and was not mortal. It passed by him as he crouched to the earth,--a shadow blacker than the night itself. Suddenly the truth burst upon him.

"My God! Alix!"

Half an hour later he staggered into his house, bearing the form

of his daughter,--tenderly, carefully, not as he had borne the despised dead.

She had followed him to the top of Quill's Window, she had witnessed the ghastly interment, and she had whispered a prayer for the boy who was gone.

The next day her baby was born and that night she died. Coming out of a stupor just before death claimed her, she said to David Windom:

"I am going to Edward. I do not forgive you, father. You must not ask that of me. You say it is my duty to save you from the gallows,--a child's duty to her parent. I have promised. I shall keep my promise. It is not in my heart to send you to the gallows. You are my father. You have always loved me. This is my baby,--mine and Edward's. She may live,--God knows I wish I might have died yesterday and spared her the accursed breath of life,--she may grow up to be a woman, just as I grew up. I do not ask much of you in return for what I have done for you, father. You have killed my Edward. I loved him with all my soul. I do not care to live. But my child must go on living, I suppose. My child and his. She is his daughter. I cannot expect you to love her, but I do expect you to take care of her. You say that blood is thicker than water. You are right. I cannot find it in my heart to betray you. You may tell the world whatever story you like about Edward. He is dead, and I shall soon be dead. You can hurt neither of us, no matter what you do. I ask two things of you. One is that you will be good to my baby as long as you may live, and the other is that you will bury me up there where you put Edward last night. I must lie near him always. Say to people that I have asked you to bury me in that pit at the top of Quill's Window,--that it was my whim, if you like. Close it up after you have placed me there and cover it with great rocks, so that Edward and I may never be disturbed. I want no headstone, no epitaph. Just the stones as they were hewn by God."

David Windom promised. He was alone in the room with her when she died.

IV

Twenty years passed. Windom came at last to the end of his days. He had fulfilled his promises to Alix. He had taken good care of her daughter, he had given her everything in his power to give, and he had worshipped her because she was like both of the Alixes he had loved. She was Alix Crown,--Alix the Third, he called her.

On the day of his death, Windom confessed the crime of that far off night in March. In the presence of his lawyer, his doctor, his granddaughter and the prosecuting attorney of the county, he revealed the secret he had kept for a score of years. The mystery of Edward Crown's disappearance was cleared up, and for the first time in her young life Alix was shorn of the romantic notion that one day her missing father would appear in the flesh, out of the

silences, to claim her as his own. From earliest childhood, her imagination had dealt with all manner of dramatic situations; she had existed in the glamour of uncertainty; she had looked upon herself as a character worthy of a place in some gripping tale of romance. The mound of rocks on the crest of Quill's Window, surrounded by a tall iron paling fence with its padlocked gate, covered only the body of the mother she had never seen. She did not know until this enlightening hour that her father was also there and had been throughout all the years in which fancy played so important a part.

Like all the rest of the world, she was given to understand that her father had cruelly abandoned her mother. In her soul she had always cherished the hope that this heartless monster might one day stand before her, pleading and penitent, only to be turned away with the scorn he so richly deserved. She even pictured him as rich and powerful, possessed of everything except the one great boon which she alone could give him,--a daughter's love. And she would point to the top of Quill's Window and tell him that he must first look there for forgiveness,--under the rocks where his broken-hearted victim slept.

The truth stunned her. She was a long time in realizing that her grandfather, whom she both loved and feared,--this grim, adoring old giant,--not only had murdered her father but undoubtedly had killed her mother as well. The story that David Windom had written out and signed at the certain approach of death, read aloud in his presence by the shocked and incredulous lawyer, and afterwards printed word for word in the newspapers at the old man's command, changed the whole course of life for her. In fact, her nature underwent a sharp but subtle change. There was nothing left to her of the old life, no thought, no purpose, no fancy; all had been swept up in a heap and destroyed in the short space of half an hour. Everything in her life had to be reconstructed, made-over to suit the new order. She could no longer harbour vengeful thoughts concerning her father, she could no longer charge him with the wanton destruction of her mother's happiness.

The grandfather she had loved all her life assumed another shape entirely; he was no longer the same, and never again could be the same. She did not hate him. That was impossible. She had never seen her parents, so she had not known the love of either. They did not belong in her life except through the sheerest imagination. Her grandfather was the only real thing she had had in life, and she had adored him. He had killed two people who were as nothing to her, but he had taken the place of both. How could she bring herself to hate this man who had destroyed what were no more than names to her? Father,--Mother! Two words,--that was all. And for twenty long years he had been paying,--Oh, how he must have paid!

She recalled his reason for taking her to England when she was less than eight years old and leaving her there until she was twelve. She remembered that he had said he wanted her to be like her grandmother, to grow up among her people, to absorb from them all

that had made the first Alix so strong and fine and true. And then he had come to take her from them, back to the land of her birth, because, he said, he wanted her to be like her mother, the second Alix,--an American woman. She recalled his bitter antipathy to co-educational institutions and his unyielding resolve that she should complete her schooling in a Sacred Heart Convent. She remembered the commotion this decision created among his neighbours. In her presence they had assailed him with the charge that he was turning the girl over, body and soul, to the Catholic Church, and he had uttered in reply the never to be forgotten words:

"If I never do anything worse than that for her, I'll be damned well satisfied with my chance of getting into heaven as soon as the rest of you."

When David's will was read, it was found that except for a few small bequests, his entire estate, real and personal, was left to his granddaughter, Alix Crown, to have and to hold in perpetuity without condition or restriction of any sort or character.

The first thing she did was to have a strong picket fence constructed around the base of the hill leading up to Quill's Window, shutting off all accessible avenues of approach to the summit. Following close upon the publication of David Windom's confession, large numbers of people were urged by morbid curiosity to visit the strange burial-place of Edward and Alix Crown. The top of Quill's Window became the most interesting spot in the county. Alix the Third was likewise an object of vast interest, and the old, deserted farmhouse on the ridge came in for its share of curiosity.

Almost immediately after the double tragedy and the birth of little Alix, David Windom moved out of the house and took up his residence in the riverside village of Windomville, a mile to the south. The old house was closed, the window shutters nailed up, the doors barred, and all signs of occupancy removed. It was said that he never put foot inside the yard after his hasty, inexplicable departure. The place went to rack and ruin. In course of time he built a new and modern house nearer the village, and this was now one of the show places of the district.

The influence of Alix the First was expressed in the modelling of house and grounds, the result being a picturesque place with a distinctly English atmosphere, set well back from the highway in the heart of a grove of oaks,--a substantial house of brick with a steep red tile roof, white window casements, and a wide brick terrace guarded by a low ivy-draped wall. English ivy swathed the two corners of the house facing the road, mounting high upon the tall red chimneys at the ends. There were flower-beds below the terrace, and off to the right there was an old-fashioned garden. The stables were at the foot of the hill some distance to the rear of the house.

The village of Windomville lay below, hugging the river, a relic of

the days when steamboats plied up and down the stream and railways were remote, a sleepy, insignificant, intensely rural hamlet of less than six hundred inhabitants. Its one claim to distinction was the venerable but still active ferry that laboured back and forth across the river. Of secondary importance was the ancient dock, once upon a time the stopping place of steamboats, but now a rotten, rickety obstruction upon which the downstream drift lodged in an unsightly mass.

In the solid red-brick house among the oaks Alix the Third had spent her childhood days. She was taken to England when she was eight by her haunted grandfather, not only to receive the bringing-up of an English child, but because David Windom's courage was breaking down. As she grew older, the resemblance to Edward Crown became more and more startling. She had his dark, smiling eyes; his wavy brown hair; her very manner of speech was like his. To David Windom, she was the re-incarnation of the youth he had slain. Out of her eyes seemed to look the soul of Edward Crown. He could not stand it. She became an obsession, a curious source of fascination. He could not bear her out of his sight, and yet when she was with him, smiling up into his eyes,--he was deathly afraid of her. There were times when he was almost overcome by the impulse to drop to his knees and plead for forgiveness as he looked into the clear, friendly, questioning eyes of Edward Crown.

And her voice, her speech,--therein lay the true cause of his taking her to England. When she came home to him, after four years, there was no trace of Edward Crown in her voice or manner of speaking. She was almost as English as Alix the First. But her eyes had not changed; he was still a haunted man.

In the little graveyard on the outskirts of the village more than a score of Windoms lie. With them lies all that was mortal of fair Alix the First, and beside her is David Windom, the murderer.

CHAPTER III

COURTNEY THANE

"And what has become of Alix the Third?" inquired the young man, squinting at his wristwatch and making out in the semi-darkness that it was nearly half-past nine.

He had listened somewhat indulgently to the story of the three Alixes. The old man, prompted and sometimes disputed by other members of the family, had narrated in his own simple way the foregoing tale,

arriving at the end in a far more expeditious and certainly in a less studied manner than the present chronicler employs in putting the facts before his readers. The night was hot. He was occasionally interrupted by various members of the little group on the front porch of the big old farmhouse, the interruption invariably taking the form of a conjecture concerning the significance of certain signs ordinarily infallible in denoting the approach of rain. Heat lightning had been playing for an hour or more in the gloomy west; a tree-toad in a nearby elm was prophesying thunder in unmelodious song: night-birds fluttered restlessly among the lofty branches; widely separated whiffs of a freshening wind came around the corner of the house. All of these had a barometric meaning to the wistful group. There was a thunderstorm on the way. It was sure to come before morning. The prayers inaugurated a month ago were at last to be answered.

As old man Brown drily remarked: "There's one satisfaction about prayin' for rain. If you keep at it long enough, you're bound to get what you're askin' for. Works the same way when you're prayin' for it to stop rainin'. My grandfather once prayed for a solid two months before he got rain, and then, by gosh, he had to pray for nearly three weeks to get it to quit."

Supper over, the young man had reminded his venerable angling companion of his promise to relate the history of Quill's Window. Old Caleb Brown was the father of Mrs. Vick,--Lucinda Vick, wife of the farmer in whose house the young man was spending a month as a boarder.

The group on the porch included Amos Vick, anxious, preoccupied, and interested only in the prospect of rain; his daughter Rosabel, aged eighteen, a very pretty and vivacious girl, interested only in the young man from the far-off, mysterious city in the East; his son Caleb, a rugged youth of nineteen; Mrs. Vick, and a neighbour named White, who had come over for the sole purpose of finding out just what Amos Vick thought about the weather. Two dogs lay panting on the dry grass at the foot of the steps.

"Oh, she's living over there in the Windom house," said Mrs. Vick.

"Sort of running the place," explained Mr. Brown, a trace of irony in his voice.

"Well," put in Amos Vick, speaking for the first time in many minutes, "she's got a lot of sense, that girl has. She may be letting on that she's running the farm, but she ain't, you bet. That's where she's smart. She's got sense enough to know she don't know anything about running a farm, and while she puts on a lot of airs and acts kind of important like, the real truth is she leaves everything to old Jim Bagley. I guess you don't know who Jim Bagley is, do you, Courtney?"

"I can't say that I do," replied the young man.

"Well, he's about the slickest citizen you ever saw. From what father here says about your granddad, he must have been a purty hard customer to deal with, but, by ginger, if he was any worse than Jim Bagley in driving a bargain, I'm glad he died as long ago as he did."

"You're just sore, Amos," said his wife, "because Mr. Bagley got the best of you in that hog deal three years ago."

"Oh, Lord, ain't you ever going to get tired of throwin' that up to me?" groaned Mr. Vick. "I never mention Jim Bagley's name but what you up and say something about them hogs. Now, as a matter of fact, them hogs--"

"For goodness sake, Pa, you're not going to tell Mr. Thane about that hog business, are you?" cried Rosabel.

"Well, when your Ma begins to insinuate that I got the worst of--"

"I don't say that you got the worst of it, Amos," interrupted Mrs. Vick good-humouredly. "I only say that he got the best of it."

"Well, if that don't come to the same--"

"Looks to me, Amos, like we'd get her good and plenty before mornin'," broke in Mr. White. He was referring to the weather. "That ain't all heat lightnin' over there. Seems to me I heard a little thunder just now."

"Alix Crown is away a good part of the time, Courtney," said Mrs. Vick, taking up the thread where it had been severed by recrimination. "All through the war,--long before we went in,--she was up in town working for the Belgians, and then, when we did go in, she went East some'eres to learn how to be a nurse or drive an ambulance or something,--New York, I believe. And as for money, she contributed quite a bit--how much do they say it was, Amos?"

"Well, all I know is that Mary Simmons says she gave ten thousand dollars and Josie Fiddler says it was three hundred,--so you can choose between 'em."

"She did her share, all right," said young Caleb defensively. "That's more'n a lot of people around here did."

"Gale's in love with her, Mr. Thane," explained Rosabel. "She's five years older than he is, and don't know he's on earth."

"Aw, cut that out," growled Caleb.

"Is she good-looking?" inquired Courtney Thane.

"I don't like 'em quite as tall as she is," said Mr. White.

"She's got a good pair of legs," said old Caleb Brown, shifting his cigar with his tongue.

"We're not talking about horses, father," said Mrs. Vick sharply.

"Who said we was?" demanded old Caleb.

"Most people think she's good-looking," said Rosabel, somewhat grudgingly. "And she isn't any taller than I am, Mr. White."

"Well, you ain't no dwarf, Rosie," exclaimed Farmer White, with a brave laugh. "You must be five foot seven or eight, but you ain't skinny like she is. She'd ought to weigh about a hunderd and sixty, for her height, and I'll bet she don't weigh more'n a hunderd and thirty."

"I wouldn't call that skinny," remarked Courtney.

"She wears these here new-fangled britches when she's on horseback," said old Caleb, justifying his observation. "Rides straddle, like a man. You can't help seeing what kind of--"

"That will do, Pa," broke in his wife. "It's no crime for a woman to wear pants when she's riding, although I must say I don't think it's very modest. I never rode any way except side-saddle,--and neither has Rosabel. I've brought her up--"

"Don't you be too sure of that, Ma," interrupted young Caleb maliciously.

"I never did it but once, and you know it, Cale Vick," cried Rosabel, blushing violently.

The subject was abruptly changed by Mr. White.

"Well, I guess I'll be moseyin' along home, Amos. That certainly did sound like thunder, didn't it? And that tree-toad has stopped signallin',--that's a sure sign. Like as not I'll get caught in the rain if I don't,--what say, Lucindy?"

"Do you want an umberell, Steve?"

"I should say not! What do you want me to do? Scare the rain off? No, sir! Rain's the funniest thing in the world. If it sees you got an umberell it won't come within a hunderd miles of you. That's why I got my Sunday clothes on, and my new straw hat. Sometimes that'll bring rain out of a clear sky,--that an' a Sunday-school picnic. It's a pity we couldn't have got up a Sunday-school picnic,--but then, of course, that wouldn't have done any good. You can't fool a rainstorm. So long, Amos. Night, everybody. Night, Courtney. As I was sayin' awhile ago, I used to go to school with your pa when him an' me was little shavers,--up yonder at the old

Kennedy schoolhouse. Fifty odd years ago. Seems like yesterday. How old did you say you was?"

"Twenty-eight, Mr. White."

"And your pa's been dead--how long did you say?"

"He died when I was twenty-two."

"Funny your ma didn't bring him out here and bury him 'longside his father and all the rest of 'em up in the family burying-ground," was Mr. White's concluding observation as he ambled off down the gravel walk to the front gate.

"I wish you'd brought your croix de guerre along with you, Mr. Thane," said young Caleb, his eyes gleaming in the faint light from the open door. "I guess I don't pronounce it as it ought to be. I'm not much of a hand at French."

"You came pretty close to it," said Thane, with a smile. "You see, Cale, it's the sort of thing one puts away in a safe place. That's why I left it in New York. Mother likes to look at it occasionally. Mothers are queer creatures, you know. They like to be reminded of the good things their sons have done. It helps 'em to forget the bad things, I suppose."

"You're always joking," pouted Rosabel, leaning forward, ardour in her wide, young eyes. "If I was a boy and had been in the war, I'd never stop talking about it."

"And I'd have been in it, too, if pa hadn't up and told 'em I was only a little more than fifteen," said Cale, glowering at his father in the darkness.

"You mustn't blame your pa, Cale," rebuked his mother. "He knows what a soldier's life is better than you do. He was down in that camp at Chattanooga during the Spanish War, and almost died of typhoid, Courtney. And when I think of the way our boys died by the millions of the flu, I--well, I just know you would have died of it, sonny, and I wouldn't have had any cross or medal to look at, and--and--"

"Don't begin cryin', Lucindy," broke in old Caleb hastily. "He didn't die of the flu, so what's the sense of worryin' about it now? He didn't even ketch it, and gosh knows, the whole blamed country was full of it that winter."

"Well," began Mrs. Vick defensively, and then compressed her lips in silence.

"I think it was perfectly wonderful of you, Mr. Thane, to go over to France and fight in the American Ambulance so long before we went into the war." This from the adoring Rosabel. "I wish you'd

tell us more about your experiences. They must have been terrible. You never talk about them, though. I think the real heroes were the fellows who went over when you did,--when you didn't really have to, because America wasn't in it."

"The American Ambulance wasn't over there to fight, you know," explained Courtney.

"What did you get the cross for if you weren't fighting?" demanded young Cale.

"For doing what a whole lot of other fellows did,--simply going out and getting a wounded man or two in No-Man's Land. We didn't think much about it at the time."

"Was it very dangerous?" asked Rosabel.

"I suppose it was,--more or less so," replied Thane indifferently. He even yawned. "I'd rather talk about Alix the Third, if it's all the same to you. Is she light or dark?"

"She's a brunette," said Rosabel shortly. "All except her eyes. They're blue. How long were you up at the front, Mr. Thane?"

"Oh, quite a while,--several months, in fact. At first we were in a place where there wasn't much fighting. Just before the first big Verdun drive we were transferred to that sector, and then we saw a lot of action."

"Some battle, wasn't it?" exclaimed young Cale, a thrill in his voice.

"Certainly was," said Courtney. "We used to work forty-eight hours at a stretch, taking 'em back by the thousands."

"How near did the shells ever come to you?"

"Oh, sometimes as close as twenty or thirty feet. I remember one that dropped in the road about fifty feet ahead of my car, and before I could stop we ran plunk into the hole it made and upset. I suppose the Windom estate must be a pretty big one, isn't it, Mr. Vick?"

"Taking everything into consideration, it amounts to nearly a million dollars. David Windom had quite a bit of property up in the city, aside from his farm, and he owned a big ranch out in Texas. The grain elevator in Windomville belonged to him,--still belongs to Alix Crown,--and there's a three mile railroad connecting with the main line over at Smith's Siding. Every foot of it is on his land. He built the railroad about twenty year ago, and the elevator, too,--out of spite, they say, for the men that run the elevator at Hawkins a little further up the road. Hawkins is the place where his daughter and Edward Crown got off the train the night of the

murder."

"And this young girl owns all of it,--farms, ranch, railroad and everything?"

"Every cent's worth of it is her'n. There ain't a sign of a mortgage on any of it, either. It's as clear as a blank sheet of writin' paper."

"When was it you were gassed, Mr. Thane?" inquired young Caleb.

"Oh, that was when I was in the air service,--only a few weeks before the armistice."

"You left your wings at home, too, I suppose?"

"Yes. Mother likes to look at the only wings I'll probably ever have,--now or hereafter."

"How does it come, Court, that you went into the British air corpse, 'stead of in the U. S. A.?" inquired old Caleb.

"I joined the Royal Flying Corps, Mr. Brown, because the Americans wouldn't have me," replied Thane tersely. "I tried to get in, but they wouldn't pass me. Said I had a weak heart and a whole lot of rubbish like that. It's no wonder the American Air Service was punk. I went over to Toronto and they took me like a shot in the Royal British. They weren't so blamed finicky and old womanish. All they asked for in an applicant was any kind of a heart at all so long as it was with the cause. I don't suppose I ought to say it, but the American Air Service was a joke."

"I hope you ain't turning British in your feelings, Court," remarked Amos Vick. "It's purty difficult to be both, you know,--English and Yankee."

"I'm American through and through, Mr. Vick, even though I did serve under the British flag till I was gassed and invalided out."

"Affects the lungs, don't it?" inquired old Caleb.

"I don't like to talk about it, Mr. Brown. I'm trying to forget what hell was like. I was in hospital for four months. It took a lot more nerve to draw a breath then than it did to fly over the German lines with the Boches popping away from all sides. I didn't mind the wounds I sustained,--but the gas! Gee, it was horrible."

"Your ma said in her letter to me that you'd had pneumonia twice since you got back," said Mrs. Vick. "Was that due to the gas?"

"I suppose so. They thought I had tuberculosis for awhile, you see. Then, this spring, I had to go and have a bout with typhoid. I ought to be dead, with all I've had,--but here I am, alive and

happy, and if you keep on feeding me as you have been for the past three days, I'll live forever."

"You mustn't overdo, Courtney," warned the farmer's wife. "Your ma sent you out here to get well, and I feel a kind of responsibility for you. I guess it's about time you was off to bed. Come on, Amos. It isn't going to bring rain any sooner for you to be setting out here watching for it."

Old Caleb had his say. "I suppose it was all right for you to serve with the British, Court, but if you'd waited a little while longer you might have carried a gun over there under the Stars and Stripes. But, as you say, you couldn't bear to wait. I give you credit for it. I'm derved glad to see one member of the Thane family that had the nerve to volunteer. At the time of the Civil War your grandpa was what we call a slacker in these days. He hired a feller to go in his place, and when that feller was killed and a second call for volunteers come up, dogged if he didn't up and hire another one. One of your grandpa's brothers skipped off to Canada so's he wouldn't have to serve, and the other,--his name was George Washington Thane, by the way,--accidentally shot two of his fingers off while his company was in camp down at Crawfordsville, gettin' ready to go down and meet Morgan's Riders,--and that let him out. I admit it takes right smart of courage to accidentally shoot your fingers off, specially when nobody is lookin', but at any rate he had a uniform on when he done it. Course, there wasn't any wars during your pa's day, so I don't know how he would have acted. He wasn't much of a feller for fightin', though,--I remember that. I mean fist fightin'. I'm glad to know you don't take after your granddad. I never had any use for a coward, and that's why I'm proud to shake hands with you, my boy. There was a derved bad streak in your family back in your granddad's day, and it certainly is good to see that you have wiped it out. It don't always happen so. Yeller streaks are purty hard to wipe out. Takes more than two generations to do it as a rule. I'm happy to know you ain't gun shy."

The young man laughed. "I don't mind telling you, Mr. Brown, that I never went into action without being scared half out of my boots. But I wasn't alone in that, you see. I never knew a man over there who wasn't scared when he went over the top. He went, just the same,--and that's what I call courage."

"So do I," cried Rosabel.

"Did you ever know for sure whether you got a German?" asked the intense young Caleb. "I mean,--did you ever KILL one?"

"That's pretty hard to say, Cale. We never knew, you see,--we fellows up in the clouds. I was in a bombing machine. I'd hate to think that we WASTED any bombs."

"Come now,--all of you,--off to bed," interposed Mrs. Vick. "I don't want to hear any more, Courtney. I wouldn't sleep a wink."

"Strikin' ten," said Amos, arising from his rocking-chair and turning it upside down at the back of the porch.

"Don't do that, Amos," protested old Caleb. "It'll NEVER rain if you--Why, dog-gone it, ain't you learned that it's bad luck to turn a chair bottom-side up when rain's needed? Turn it right-side up and put it right out here in front again where the rain can get at it. Nothin' tickles the weather more'n a chance to spoil something. That's right. Now we c'n go to bed. Better leave them cushions on the steps too, Rosie."

Courtney Thane went to his room,--the spare-room on the second floor,--and prepared to retire. The process was attended by the smoking of three cigarettes. Presently he was stretched out on the bed without even so much as a sheet over him. The heat was stifling. Not a breath of air came in through the wide-open windows. He lay awake for a long time, staring out into the night.

"So my precious granddad had a yellow streak in him, did he? And father wasn't much of a fighter either. Takes more than two generations to wipe out a yellow streak, does it? I wonder what the old boob meant by that rotten slam at my people."

CHAPTER IV

DOWD'S TAVERN

The last week in August Courtney Thane left the Vick farm and, crossing the river, took lodgings at the boarding house conducted by the Misses Dowd in the town of Windomville.

In a letter to his mother, informing her of the change, he had said:

Of course, I appreciate the fact that you are paying the bills, old dear, and out of consideration for you I dare say I ought to stick it out with the Vicks till November as we arranged. But I simply cannot stand it any longer. The old woman almost puts me to bed, the girl almost sits on my lap, the boy drives me crazy with his infernal questions about the war, and old man Brown,--the one who went to school with father out in this gosh awful land of the grasshopper,--he is the limit. He never lets a day go by without some slur about my grandfather or some other member of the family who existed long before I was born. Thinks he's witty. He is always nagging at me about cigarette smoking. I wish you could see the

way he mishandles a cigar. As you know, I seldom smoke more than a half dozen cigarettes a day, but he swears to God I am everlastingly ruining my health, and it has got on my nerves so that if I stay on here another week I'll call the old jay so hard he'll drop dead from the shock. And, my heavens, how lonesome it is here. I almost die of homesickness. I just had to find a place where there is some one to talk to besides the cows and sheep and people who never think of anything but crops and the weather, last Sunday's sermon and Theodore Roosevelt. They are honest, but, my God, how could they be anything else? It would not be right for me to deny that I have improved a great deal in the last couple of weeks. I am beginning to feel pretty fit, and I've put on four or five pounds. Still, I'm getting sick of fresh eggs and fresh milk and their everlasting bacon,--they call it side-meat,--and preserves. She simply stuffs me with them. The air is wonderful, even during that awful hot spell I wrote you about. I am sure that another month or two out here,--perhaps three,--will put me back on my pins stronger than ever, and then I'll be in condition to go back to work. I am eager to get at it as soon as possible in order to pay back all you have put up for me during this beastly year. If I did not know you can well afford to do what you have been doing for me, mother dear, I wouldn't allow you to spend another penny on me. But you will get it all back some day, not in cash, of course,--for that means nothing to you,--but in the joy of knowing that it was worth while to bring your only son into the world. Now, as to this change I am going to make. I've been across the river several times and I like it over there much better than here. I think the air is better and certainly the surroundings are pleasanter. Windomville is a funny little village of five or six hundred people, about the same number of dogs (exaggeration!), and the sleepest place you've ever imagined. Old Caleb Brown says it was laid out back in 1830 or thereabouts by the first Windom to come to these parts. It has a public school, a town hall, a motion-picture house (with last year's reels), a drug store where you can get soda water, a grain elevator, and a wonderful old log hut that was built by the very first settler, making it nearly a hundred years old. Miss Alix Crown, who owns nearly everything in sight,--including the log hut,--has had the latter restored and turned into the quaintest little town library you've ever seen. But you ought to see the librarian! She is a dried-up, squinty old maid of some seventy summers, and so full of Jane Austen and the Bronte women and Mrs. Southworth that she hasn't an inch of room left in her for the modern writers. Her name caps the climax. It is Alaska Spigg. Can you beat it? No one ever calls her Miss Spigg,--not even the kids,--nor is she ever spoken of or to as Alaska. It is always Alaska Spigg. I wish you could see her. Miss Crown is the girl I wrote you about, the one with the dime novel history back of her. She has a house on the edge of the town,--a very attractive place. I have not seen her yet. She is up in Michigan,--Harbor Point, I believe,--but I hear she is expected home within a week or two. I am rather curious to see her. The place where I have taken a room is run by a couple of old maids named Dowd. It is really a sort of hotel. At least, you would insult them if you called it a boarding house. Their grandfather

built the house and ran it as a tavern back before the Civil War. When he died his son carried on the business. And now his two daughters run the place. They have built on a couple of wings and it is really an interesting old shack. Clean as a pin, and they say the grub is good. It will be, as I said, a little more expensive living here than with the Vicks but not enough to amount to anything. The Dowds ask only fifteen dollars a week for room and board, which is cheaper than the Ritz-Carlton or the Commodore, isn't it?...Here is my new address in the Metropolis of Windomville-by-the-Crick: Dowd's Tavern, Main Street.

Her reply was prompt. She wrote from Bar Harbor, where she was spending the summer:

...perfectly silly of you, dearest, to speak of repaying me. All I possess will be yours some day, so why begrudge you a little of what should be yours now? Your dear father perhaps thought he was doing the right thing for both of us when he left everything to me during my lifetime, but I do not believe it was fair....There will not be a great deal, of course. You understand how heavy my expenses have been....In any case, you are in wretched health, my dear boy. Nothing must stand in the way of your complete recovery. When you are completely recovered, well and strong and eager to take up life where this cruel war cut it off, I shall be the happiest mother alive. I am sure you will have no difficulty in establishing yourself. They tell me the returned soldiers are not having an easy time finding satisfactory and lucrative positions. It is a shame the way certain concerns have treated a good many of them, after actually promising to hold their places open for them. But with you it will be different. I spoke to Mr. Roberts yesterday about you. He wants to have a talk with you. I have an idea he wants to put you in charge of one of their offices in Spain. At any rate, he asked if you spoke Spanish well....So I can easily afford to increase your allowance to one hundred and fifty a month. More, if you should ask for it, but you are so proud and self-reliant I can do absolutely nothing with you, dear boy. I quite understand your unwillingness to accept more than you actually need from me. It is splendid, and I am very proud of you....This girl you wrote me about, is she so very rich?...Your father used to speak of a young man named Windom and how he envied him because he was so tall and handsome. Of course, your dear father was a small boy then, and that is always one of the laments of small boys. That, and falling in love with women old enough to be their mothers....Do write me often. But don't be angry with me if I fail to answer all of your letters. I am so frightfully busy. I rarely ever have more than a minute to myself. How I have managed to find the time to write this long letter to you I cannot imagine. It is really quite a nice long one, isn't it?...and don't be writing home to me in a few weeks to say you are engaged to be married to her. It took me a great many years to convert your dear father into what he was as you knew him. I don't relish the thought at my time of life of transforming a crude farmer's daughter into a Fifth Avenue lady, no matter how pretty she may be in the rough. The days of Cinderella are long

since past. One has so much to overcome in the way of a voice with these country girls, to say nothing of the letter r. Your poor father never quite got over being an Indiana farmer's son, but he did manage to subdue the aforesaid letter....And these country-girls take a harmless, amusing flirtation very seriously, dear boy.... Your adoring mother.

Courtney Thane's fame had preceded him to Windomville. By this time, the entire district had heard of the man who was gassed, and who had actually won two or three medals for bravery in the Great War. The young men from that section of the state who had seen fighting in France were still in New York City, looking for jobs. Most of them had "joined up" at the first call for volunteers. Some of them had been killed, many of them wounded, but not one of them had received a medal for bravery. The men who had been called by the draft into the great National Army were all home again, having got no nearer to the battle front than an embarkation camp in New Jersey,--and so this tall, slender young fellow from the East was an object not only of curiosity but of envy.

The Misses Dowd laid themselves out to make him comfortable,--as well as prominent. They gave him a corner room on the upper floor of Dowd's Tavern, dispossessing a tenant of twelve years' standing,--a photographer named Hatch, whose ability to keep from living too far in arrears depended on his luck in inveigling certain sentimental customers into taking "crayon portraits" of deceased loved ones, satisfaction guaranteed, frames extra. Two windows, looking out over the roof of the long front porch, gave him an unobstructed view of Main Street, including such edifices as the postoffice, the log-hut library, the ancient watering trough, the drug store, and the steeple of the Presbyterian Church rising proudly above the roofs of the houses in between.

Main Street ran almost parallel with the river. With commendable forethought, the first settlers had built their houses and stores some little distance back from the stream along the summit of a wooded ridge perhaps forty feet above the river at its midsummer low-water level. The tremendous, devastating floods that came annually with the breaking up of winter failed to reach the houses,--although in 1883,--according to the records,--the water came up to within a foot of Joe Roush's blacksmith shop, situated at that time halfway down the slope, compelling the smith to think seriously of "moving up a couple of hops," a precaution that was rendered unnecessary by a subsequent midsummer bolt of lightning that destroyed not only the forge but shocked Joe so severely that he "saw green" for a matter of six weeks and finally resulted in his falling off the dock into deep water in the middle of what was intended to be a protracted spree brought on by the discovery that his insurance policy did not cover "loss by lightning." To this day, the older inhabitants of Windomville will tell you about the way his widow "took on" until she couldn't stand it any longer,--and then married George Hooper, the butcher, four months after the shocking demise of Joseph.

Dowd's Tavern had few transient guests. "Drummers" from the city hard-by dropped in occasionally for a midday meal, but they never stayed the night. The guests were what the Misses Dowd called "regulars." They included Hatch, the photographer; an old and indigent couple, parents of a farmer whose wife objected so vehemently to their well-meant efforts to "run" her house for her that he was obliged to "board 'em" with the Dowd girls, an arrangement that seemed to satisfy every one concerned except the farmer himself, who never missed an opportunity to praise the food and the comforts to be enjoyed at the county "poorhouse" when he paid his semi-annual visit to the venerable dependents; Mr. Charlie Webster, the rotund manager of the grain elevator, who spent every Saturday night and Sunday in the city and showed up for duty on Monday with pinkish eyes and a rather tremulous whistle that was supposed to be reminiscent of ecclesiastical associations; Miss Flora Grady, the dress-maker; Doctor Simpson, the dentist, a pale young man with extremely bad teeth and a habit of smiling, even at funerals; Miss Miller, the principal of the school, who was content with a small room over the kitchen at ten dollars a week, thereby permitting her to save something out of her salary, which was fifty dollars a month; A. Lincoln Pollock, the editor, owner and printer of the Weekly Sun, and his wife, Maude Baggs Pollock, who besides contributing a poem to each and every issue of the paper, (over her own signature), collected news and society items, ran the postoffice for her husband, (he being the postmaster), and taught the Bible Class in the Presbyterian Sunday-school, as well as officiating as president and secretary of the Literary Society, secretary to the town board, secretary of the W. C. T. U., secretary of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society, secretary of the American Soldiers' and Sailors' Relief Fund, secretary of the Windomville Improvement Association, secretary of the Lady Maccabees, and, last but far from least, secretary of the local branch of the Society for the Preservation of the Redwood Forests of California. She was a born secretary.

A. Lincoln Pollock, being a good democrat and holding office under a democratic administration, had deemed it wise to abbreviate his first name, thereby removing all taint of republicanism. He reduced Abraham to an initial, but, despite his supreme struggle for dignity, was forced by public indolence to submit to a sharp curtailment of his middle name. He was known as Link.

The Weekly Sun duly reported the advent of Colonel Courtney Thane, of New York and London, and gave him quite a "send-off," at the same time getting in a good word for the "excellent hostelry conducted by the Misses Dowd," as well as a paragraph congratulating the readers of the Sun on the "scoop" that paper had obtained over the "alleged" newspapers up at the county seat. "If you want the news, read the Sun," was the slogan at the top of the editorial column on the second page, followed by a line in parenthesis: ("If you want the Sun, don't put off till tomorrow what you can do today. Price Three Dollars a Year in Advance.")

All of the boarders sat at the same table in the dining-room. Punctuality at meals was obligatory. Miss Jennie Dowd was the cook. She was assisted by Miss Margaret Slattery, daughter of Martin Slattery, the grocer. Miss Mary Dowd had charge of the dining-room. She was likewise assisted by Miss Slattery. Between meals Miss Slattery did the dish-washing, chamber-work, light cleaning and "straightening," and still found room for her daily exercise, which consisted of half a dozen turns up and down Main Street in her best frock. Old Jim House did the outside chores about the place. He had worked at Dowd's Tavern for thirty-seven years, and it was his proud boast that he had never missed a day's work,--drunk or sober.

The new guest was given the seat of honour at table. He was placed between Mrs. Pollock and Miss Flora Grady, supplanting Doctor Simpson, who had held the honour ever since Charlie Webster's unfortunate miscalculation as to the durability of an unfamiliar brand of bourbon to which he had been introduced late one Sunday evening. It was a brand that wore extremely well,--so well, in fact, that when he appeared for dinner at noon on Monday he was still in a lachrymose condition over the death of his mother, an event which took place when he was barely six years old. Doctor Simpson relinquished the seat cheerfully. He had held it a year and he had grown extremely tired of having to lean back as far as possible in his chair so that Mrs. Pollock and Miss Grady could converse unobstructedly in front of him, a position that called for the utmost skill and deliberation on his part, especially when it came to conveying soup and "floating island" to such an altitude. (He had once resorted to the expedient of bending over until his nose was almost in the plate, so that they might talk across his back, but gave it up when Miss Molly Dowd acridly inquired if he smelt anything wrong with the soup.)

Mr. Hatch invited Courtney down to the studio to have his photograph taken, free of charge; Mr. Pollock subjected him to a long interview about the War; Mr. Webster notified him that he had laid in a small stock just prior to July the first and that all he had to do was to "say the word,"--or wink if it wasn't convenient to speak; Miss Grady told him, at great length, of her trip to New York in 1895, and inquired about certain landmarks in the Metropolis,--such as the aquarium, the Hoffman House, Madison Square, Stewart's Drygoods Store, Tiffany's place,--revealing a sort of lofty nonchalance in being able to speak of things she had seen while the others had merely read about them; Mrs. Pollock had him write in her autograph album, and wondered if he would not consent to give a talk before the Literary Society at its next meeting; and Margaret Slattery made a point of passing things to him first at meals, going so far as to indicate the choicest bits of "white meat," or the "second joint," if he preferred the dark, whenever they had chicken for dinner,--which was quite often.

Old Mr. Nichols, (the indigent father), remembered Courtney's grandfather very well, and, being apt to repeat himself, told and retold the story of a horse-trade in which he got the better

of Silas Thane. Mrs. Nichols, living likewise in the remote past, remembered being in his grandmother's Sunday-school class, and how people used to pity the poor thing because Silas ran around considerable after other women,--'specially a lively-stableman's wife up in the city,--and what a terrible time she had when John Robinson's Circus came to town a little while before her first child was born and the biggest boa-constrictor in captivity escaped and eat up two lambs on Silas's farm before it went to sleep and was shot out in the apple orchard by Jake Billings. She often wondered whether her worrying about that snake had had any effect on the baby, who, it appears, ultimately grew up and became Courtney's father. The young man smilingly sought to reassure her, but after twice repeating his remark, looked so embarrassed that Mr. Hatch gloomily announced from the foot of the table:

"She's deaf."

Now, as to Mr. Courtney Thane. He was a tall, spare young man, very erect and soldierly, with an almost unnoticeable limp. He explained this limp by confessing that he had got into the habit of favouring his left leg, which had been injured when his machine came down in flames a short distance back of the lines during a vicious gas attack by the enemy--(it was on this occasion that he was "gassed" while dragging a badly wounded comrade to a place of safety)--but that the member was quite as sound as ever and it was silly of him to go on being so confounded timid about it, especially as it hadn't been anything to speak of in the beginning,--nothing more, in fact, than a cracked knee joint and a trifling fracture of the ankle.

His hair was light brown, almost straw-coloured, and was brushed straight back from the forehead. A small, jaunty moustache, distinctly English in character, adorned his upper lip. His eyes were brown, set well back under a perfectly level, rather prominent brow. His mouth was wide and faintly satirical; his chin aggressively square; his nose long and straight. His voice was deep and pleasant, and he spoke with what Miss Miller described as a "perfectly fascinating drawl." Mrs. Pollock, who was quite an extensive reader of novels and governed her conversation accordingly went so far as to say that he was "the sort of chap that women fall in love with easily,"--and advised Miss Miller to keep a pretty sharp watch on her heart,--a remark that drew from Miss Miller the confession that she had rejected at least half a dozen offers of marriage and she guessed if there was any watching to be done it would have to be done by the opposite sex. (As Miss Miller had repeatedly alluded to these fruitless masculine manifestations, Mrs. Pollock merely sniffed,--and afterwards confided to Miss Molly Dowd her belief that if any one had ever asked Angie Miller to marry him she'd be a grandmother by this time.) From this, it may be correctly surmised that Miss Miller was no longer in the first bloom of youth.

Whenever Courtney appeared on Main Street, he was the centre not only of observation but of active attention. Nearly every one had

some form of greeting for him. Introductions were not necessary. Women as well as men passed the time of day with him, and not a few of the former solicitously paused to inquire how he was feeling. Young girls stared at him and blushed, young boys followed his progress about town with wide, worshipful eyes,--for was he not a hero out of their cherished romance? He had to hear from the lips of ancient men the story of Antietam, of Chancellorsville and of Shiloh; eulogies and criticisms of Grant, McClellan and Meade; praise for the enemy chieftains, Lee, Stonewall Jackson and Johnston; comparisons in the matter of fatalities, marksmanship, generalship, hardships and all such, and with the inevitable conclusion that the Civil War was the greatest war ever fought for the simple reason that it was fought by men and not by machinery.

"And, what's more," declared old Captain House vigorously, "it was fit entirely by Americans, and not by every dodgasted nation on the face of the earth, no two of 'em able to understand a blamed word of what was being said by friend er foe." "And," added ex-Corporal Grimes, stamping the sidewalk with his peg leg, "what's more, there wasn't ary one of them Johnny Rebs that couldn't pick off a squirrel five hundred yards away with a rifle--a RIFLE, mind ye, not a battery of machine guns. Every time they was a fight, big er little, we used to stand out in the open and shoot at each other like soldiers--AND gentlemen--aimin' straight at the feller we'd picked out to kill. They tell me they was more men shot right smack between the eyes in the Civil War than all the other wars put together. Yes-sir-EE! And as fer REE-connoiterin', why it was nothin' for our men,--er the rebs, either, fer that matter,--to crawl up so close to the other side's camps that they could smell the vittels cookin',--and I remember a case when one of our scouts, bein' so overcome by the smell of a fried chicken, snuck right up and grabbed it offen the skillet when the cook's back was turned, and got away with it safe, too, b'gosh!"

CHAPTER V

TRESPASS

Courtney never was without the heavy English walking-stick on which he occasionally leaned for support. He took long strolls in the country, frequently passing the Windom place, and twice he had gone as far as the railed-in base of Quill's Window. From the footpath at the bottom he could look through the trees up to the bare crest of the rock. The gate through the high fence was padlocked, and contained a sign with the curt warning: "No Trespass." On the opposite side of the wide strip of meadow-land, in which cattle grazed placidly,

he could see the abandoned house where Alix Crown was born,--a colourless, weather-beaten, two-storey frame building with faded green window shutters and a high-pitched roof blackened by rain and rot. Every shutter was closed; an atmosphere of utter desolation hung over the place.

Across that brown, sunburnt stretch of meadow-land when it was white and cold, old David Windom had carried the stiff body of Edward Crown,--and returning had borne the soft, limp figure of his stricken child. Courtney permitted his fancy to indulge in calculation. He followed with his eye what must have been the path of the slayer on that dreadful night. It led, no doubt, to the spot on which he now was standing, for just behind him was the suggestion of a narrow, weed-lined path that wormed its way through the trees toward the top of the great rock. He decided that one day soon he would disregard that sign on the gate, and climb up to the strange burial place of Edward Crown and Alix the Second.

He had tested his increasing strength and endurance by rowing up the river with Rosabel for a fair view of the hole in the face of the rock--Quill's Window. It was plainly visible from the river, a wide black gash in the almost perpendicular wall that reached well above the fringe of trees and underbrush along the steep bank of the stream.

He tried to picture Quill as he sat in his strange abode, a hundred years ago, cowering over the fire or reading perhaps by the light of a huge old-fashioned lanthorn. He thought of him hanging by the neck back in the dark recess, victim either of his own conscience or the implacable hatred of the enemy "down the river." And then there were the others who had found death in the heart of that mysterious cavern,--ugly death.

He wondered what the interior of the cave was like, and whether he could devise some means of entering it. A rope ladder attached to a substantial support at the top of the cliff would afford the easiest way of reaching the mouth of the cave,--in fact, he recalled that Quill employed some such means of descending to his eerie home. The entrance appeared to be no more than twenty feet below the brow of the cliff. It would not even be a hazardous undertaking. Besides, if Quill and his successors were able to go up and down that wall safely and repeatedly, why not he? No doubt scores of men,--perhaps even schoolboys of the Tom Sawyer type,--had made frequent visits to the cave. He knew he would be disregarding the command of Alix Crown,--a command that all people respected and observed,--if he passed the barrier and climbed to the top of the rock, but who, after all, was Alix Crown that she should say "no trespass" to the world at large?

The thought of Edward Crown wedged in at the bottom of Quill's Chimney, weighted down with stones and earth, alone served as an obstacle to the enterprise. He shrank from certain gruesome possibilities,--such as the dislodgment of stones at the bottom of the crevice and the

consequent exposure of a thing that would haunt him forever. And even though the stones remained in place there would still remain the fact that almost within arm's length was imprisoned the crushed, distorted remains of the murdered man.

Toward the end of his second week at Dowd's Tavern, he set out to climb to the top of the big rock. He had no intention of descending to the cavern's mouth on this occasion. That feat was to be reserved for another day. Arriving at the gate, he was surprised and gratified to discover that it was unlocked. While it was latched, the padlock and chain hung loosely from the post to which the latter was attached. Without hesitation, he opened the gate and strode boldly into proscribed territory.

The ascent was gradual at first, then steep and abrupt for a matter of fifty or sixty feet to the bald summit of the hill. Once at the top, he sat down panting and exhausted upon the edge of the shallow fissure he had followed as a path up the rock, and again his thoughts went back to the night of the murder. This had been David Windom's route to the top of the hill. He found himself discrediting one feature at least of the man's confession. Only a fabled giant could have carried the body of a man up that steep, tortuous incline. Why, he was exhausted, and he had borne no heavier burden than his stout walking-stick. That part of Windom's story certainly was "fishy."

Presently he arose and strode out upon the rough, uneven "roof" of the height. He could look in all directions over the tops of the trees below. The sun beat down fiercely upon the unsheltered rock. Off to the north lay the pall of smoke indicating the presence of the invisible county seat. Thin, anfractuous highways and dirt roads scarred the green and brown landscape, and as far as the eye could reach were to be seen farmhouses and barns and silos.

Avoiding the significant heap of rocks near the centre of the little plateau, he made his way to the brink of the cliff overlooking the river. There he had a wonderful view of the winding stream, the harvest fields, the groves, and the herds in the far-reaching stretches of what was considered the greatest corn raising "belt" in the United States. Some yards back from the edge of the cliff he discovered the now thoroughly rotted section of a tree trunk, eight or ten inches in diameter, driven deeply into a narrow fissure and rendered absolutely immovable by a solid mass of stones and gravel that completely closed the remainder of the crevice. He was right in surmising that this was the support from which Quill's rope or vine ladder was suspended a hundred years ago. Nearby were two heavy iron rings attached to standards sunk firmly into the rock, a modern improvement on the hermit's crude device. (He afterwards learned that David Windom, when a lad of fifteen, had drilled the holes in the rock and imbedded the stout iron shafts, so that he might safely descend to the mouth of the cave.)

Turning back, he approached the heap of boulders that covered the

grave of Edward and Alix Crown. No visible sign of the cleft in the surface of the rock remained. Six huge boulders, arranged in a row, rose above a carefully made bed of stones held in place by a low, soundly mortared wall.

Chiselled on one of the end boulders was the name of Alix Windom Crown, with the date of her birth and her death, with the line: "Rock of Ages Cleft for Me." Below this inscription was the recently carved name of Edward Joseph Crown, Born July 7, 1871. Died March 22, 1895. Three words followed this. They were "Abide With Me."

II

Thane stood for a long time looking at the pile. He was not sentimental. His life had been spent in an irreverent city, among people hardened by pleasure or coarsened by greed. His thoughts as he stood there were not of the unhappy pair who reposed beneath those ugly rocks; they were of the far-off tragedy that had brought them to this singular resting-place. The fact that this was a grave, sacred in the same sense that his father's grave in Woodlawn was supposed to be sacred to him and to his mother, was overlooked in the silent contemplation of what an even less sophisticated person might have been justified in describing as a "freak." Nothing was farther from his mind, however, than the desire or impulse to be disrespectful. And yet, as he was about to turn away from this sombre pile, he leaned over and struck a match on one of the huge boulders. As he was conveying the lighted sulphur match,--with which Dowd's Tavern abounded,--to the cigarette that hung limply from his lips, he was startled by a sharp, almost agonized cry. It seemed to come from nowhere. He experienced the uncanny feeling that a ghost,--the ghost that haunted Quill's Window,--standing guard over the mound, had cried out under the pain inflicted by that profane match.

Even as he turned to search the blazing, sunlit rock with apprehensive eyes, a voice, shrill with anger, flung these words at him:

"What are you doing up here?"

His gaze fell upon the speaker, standing stockstill in the cloven path below him, not twenty feet away. In his relief, he laughed. He beheld a slim figure in riding-togs. Nothing formidable or ghostlike in that! Nevertheless, a pair of dark blue eyes transfixed him with indignation. They looked out from under the rim of a black sailor hat, and they were wide and inimical.

"Did you not see that sign on the gate?" demanded the girl.

"I did," he replied, still smiling as he removed his hat,--one of Knox's panamas. "And I owe you an apology."

She advanced to the top. He noted the riding-crop gripped rather firmly in her clenched hand.

"No one is permitted to come up here," she announced, stopping a few feet away. She was quite tall and straight. She panted a little from the climb up the steep. He saw her bosom rise and fall under the khaki jacket; her nostrils were slightly distended. In that first glimpse of her, he took in the graceful, perfect figure; the lovely, brilliant face; the glorious though unsmiling eyes. "You must leave at once. This is private property. Go, please."

"I cannot go before telling you how rotten I feel for striking that match. I beg of you, Miss Crown,--you ARE Miss Crown?--I can only ask you to believe that it was not a conscious act of desecration. It was sheer thoughtlessness. I would not have done it for the world if I had--"

"It is not necessary for you to explain," she broke in curtly. "I saw what you did,--and it is just because of such as you that this spot is forbidden ground. Idle curiosity, utter disregard for the sacredness of that lonely grave,--Oh, you need not attempt to deny it. You are a stranger here, but that is no excuse for your passing through that gate. I AM Miss Crown. This hill belongs to me. It was I who had that fence put up and it was I who directed the sign to be put on the gate. They are meant for strangers as well as for friends. It was not thoughtlessness that brought you up here. You thought a long time before you came. Will you be good enough to go?"

He flushed under the scornful dismissal.

"The gate was unlocked--" he began.

"That doesn't matter. It might have been wide open, sir,--but that did not grant you any special privileges."

"I can only ask your pardon, Miss Crown, and depart in disgrace," said he, quite humbly. As he started down the path, he paused to add: "I did not know you had returned. I daresay I should have been less venturesome had I known you were in the neighbourhood."

The thinly veiled sarcasm did not escape her.

"I suppose you are the young man from New York that every one is talking about. That may account for your ignorance. In order that you may not feel called upon to visit this place again to satisfy your curiosity, I will point out to you the objects of interest. This pile of rocks marks the grave of my father and mother. The dates speak for themselves. You may have noticed them when you scratched your match just above my mother's name. My father was murdered by my grandfather before I was born. My mother died on the day I was born. I never saw them. I do not love them, because I never knew them. But I DO respect and honour them. They were good people. I have no reason to be ashamed of them. If you will look out over those trees and across that pasture, you will see the house

in which my mother died and where I was born. Directly in front of the little porch my father died as the result of a blow delivered by my grandfather. As to the disposal of the body, you may obtain all the information necessary from Alaska Spigg, our town librarian, who will be more than delighted to supply you with all the ghastly details. To your right is the post to which a man named Quill attached his ladder in order to reach the cave in the face of this rock,--where he lived for many years. This is the path leading down to the gate, which you will still find unlocked. It will not be necessary for you to come up here again. You have seen all there is to see."

With that, she deliberately turned her back on him and walked toward the edge of the cliff. He stared after her for a few seconds, his lips parted as if to speak, and then, as the flush of mortification deepened in his cheeks, he began picking his way rather blindly down the steep path.

He was never to forget his first encounter with Alix the Third.

CHAPTER VI

CHARLIE WEBSTER ENTERTAINS

That evening at the supper table, Mr. Pollock politely informed him that Alix Crown had returned from Michigan, looking as fit as a fiddle.

"You've been so sort of curious about her, Court?" (it had not taken the male boarders long to dispense with formalities), "that I thought you'd be interested in knowing that she's home. Got back last evening. Her Packard automobile met her at the depot up in the city. You'll know her when you see her. Tall girl and fairly good-looking. Puts on an awful lot of 'dog.' What is it you fellows in the Army call it? Swunk?"

"Swank," said Courtney, rather shortly. He was still smarting under the sting of his afternoon's experience.

"Lemme help you to some more squash, Mr. Thane," said Margaret Slattery in his ear. "And another biscuit."

"Thank you, no," said he.

"What's the matter with your appetite?" she demanded. "You ain't hardly touched anything this evenin'. Sick?"

"I'm not hungry, Margaret."

"Been out in the sun too much, that's what's the matter with you. First thing you know you'll get a sunstroke, and THEN! My Uncle Mike was sunstruck when I was--"

"Pass me the biscuits, Maggie, and don't be all night about it," put in Mr. Webster. "I'm hungry, even if Court isn't. I can distinctly remember when you used to pass everything to me first, and almost stuff it--"

"Yes, and she used to do the same for me before you shaved off your chin whiskers, Charlie," said Mr. Hatch gloomily. "How times have changed."

"It ain't the times that's changed," said Margaret. "It's you men. You ain't what you used to be, lemme tell you that."

"True,--oh so true," lamented Mr. Webster. "I used to be nice and thin and graceful before you began showering me with attention. Now look at me. You put something like fifty pounds on me, and then you desert me. I was a handsome feller when I first came here, wasn't I, Flora? I leave it to you if I wasn't."

"I don't remember how you looked when you first came here," replied Miss Grady loftily.

"Can you beat that?" cried Charlie to Courtney across the table. "And she used to say I was the handsomest young feller she'd ever laid eyes on. Used to say I looked like,--who was it you used to say I looked like, Flora?"

"The only thing I ever said you looked like was a mud fence, Charlie Webster."

"What did she say, Pa? Hey?" This from old Mrs. Nichols, holding her hand to her ear. "What are they laughing at?"

"She says Charlie looks like a mud fence," shouted old Mr. Nichols, his lips close to her ear.

"His pants? What about his pants?"

This time Courtney joined in the laugh.

After supper he sat on the front porch with the Pollocks and Miss Grady. It was a warm, starry night. Charlie Webster and Doc Simpson had strolled off down the street. Mr. Hatch and Miss Miller sat in the parlour.

"She's going to land Furman Hatch, sure as you're a foot high," confided Mr. Pollock, with a significant jerk of his head in the

direction of the parlour.

"Heaven knows she's been trying long enough," said Miss Grady. "I heard him ask Doc and Charlie to wait for him, but she nabbed him before he could get out. Now he's got to sit in there and listen to her tell about how interested she is in art,--and him just dyin' for a smoke. Why, there's Alix Crown now. She's comin' in here."

A big touring car drew up to the sidewalk in front of the Tavern. Miss Crown sprang lightly out of the seat beside the chauffeur and came up the steps.

"How do you do, Mrs. Pollock? Hello, Flora. Good evening, Mr. Editor," was her cheery greeting as she passed by and entered the house.

"She comes around every once in a while and takes the Dowd girls out riding in her car," explained Mrs. Pollock.

"Mighty nice of her," said Mr. Pollock, taking his feet down from the porch-rail and carefully brushing the cigar ashes off of his coat sleeve. "Takes old Alaska Spigg out too, and the Nicholises, and--"

"We've been out with her a great many times," broke in Mrs. Pollock. "I think a Packard is a wonderful car, don't you, Mr. Thane? So smooth and--"

"I think I'll take a little stroll," said Courtney abruptly; and snatching up his hat from the floor beside his chair he hurried down the steps.

She had not even glanced at him as she crossed the porch. He had the very uneasy conviction that so far as she was concerned he might just as well not have been there at all. In the early dusk, her face was clearly revealed to him. There was nothing cold or unfriendly about it now. Instead, her smile was radiant; her eyes,--even in the subdued light,--glowed with pleasure. Her voice was clear and soft and singularly appealing. In the afternoon's encounter he had been struck by its unexpected combination of English and American qualities; the sharp querulousness of the English and the melodious drawl of the American were strangely blended, and although there had been castigation in her words and manner, he took away with him the disturbing memory of a voice he was never to forget. And now he had seen the smile that even the most envious of her kind described as "heavenly." It was broad and wholesome and genuine. There was a flash of white, even teeth between warm red lips, a gleam of merriment in the half-closed eyes, a gay tilt to the bare, shapely head. Her dark hair was coiled neatly, and the ears were exposed. He liked her ears. He remembered them as he had seen them in the afternoon, fairly large, shapely and close to the head. No need for her to follow the prevailing fashion of the day! She had no reason to hide her ears beneath a mat of hair.

In the evening glow her face was gloriously beautiful,--clear-cut as a cameo, warm as a rose. It was no longer clouded with anger. She seemed taller. The smart riding costume had brought her trim figure into direct contrast with his own height and breadth, and she had looked like a slim, half-grown boy beside his six feet and over. Now, in her black and white checked sport skirt and dark sweater jacket, she was revealed as a woman quite well above the average height.

He was standing in front of the drug store when the big car went by a few minutes later, filled with people. She was driving, the chauffeur sitting in the seat beside her. In the tonneau he observed the two Dowd sisters, Mr. and Mrs. Pollock and Flora Grady.

As the car whizzed by, A. Lincoln Pollock espied him. Waving his hand triumphantly, the editor called out:

"Hello, Court!"

The object of this genial shout did not respond by word or action. He looked to see if the girl at the wheel turned her head for a glance in his direction. She did not, and he experienced a fresh twinge of annoyance. He muttered something under his breath. The car disappeared around a bend as he turned to enter the store.

"That was Alix Crown, Court," remarked Charlie Webster from the doorway. "Little too dark to get a good look at her, but wait till she flashes across you in broad daylight some time. She'll make you forget all those Fifth Avenue skirts so quick your head'll swim."

"Is THAT so?" retorted Courtney, allowing rancour to get the better of fairness. Down in his heart he had said that Alix Crown was the loveliest girl he had ever seen. "What do you know about Fifth Avenue?"

Charlie Webster grinned amiably. He was not offended by the other's tone.

"Well, I've seen it in the movies," he explained. "What are you sore about?"

"Sore? I'm not sore. What put that into your head?"

The rotund superintendent of the elevator fanned himself lazily with his straw hat.

"If I was fifteen years younger and fifty pounds lighter," said he, "I'd be sore too. But what's the use of a fat old slob like me getting peeved because Miss Alix Crown don't happen to notice me? Oh, we're great friends and all that, mind you, and she thinks a lot of me,--as manager of her grain elevator. Same as she thinks a lot of Jim Bagley, her superintendent,--and Ed Stevens, her

chauffeur, and so on. Now, as for you, it's different. You're from New York and it goes against the grain to be overlooked, you might say, by a girl from Indiana. Oh, I know what you New Yorkers think of Indiana,--and all that therein is, as the Scriptures would say. You think that nothing but boobs and corn-fed squaws come from Indiana, but if you hang around long enough you'll find you're mistaken. This state is full of girls like Alix Crown,--bright, smart, good-looking girls that have been a hell of a ways farther east than New York. Of course, there are boobs like me and Doc Simpson and Tintype Hatch who get up to Chicago once every three or four years and have to sew our return trip tickets inside our belly-bands so's we can be sure of getting back home after Chicago gets through admiring us, but now since prohibition has come in I don't know but what we're as bright and clever as anybody else. Most of the fellers I've run across in Chicago seem to be brightest just after they change feet on the rail and ask the bartender if he knows how to make a cucumber cocktail, or something else as clever as that. But that ain't what we were talking about. We were talking about--"

"I wasn't talking about anything," interrupted Courtney.

"Oh, yes, you were," said Charlie. "Not out loud, of course,--but talking just the same. You were talking about Alix Crown and the way she forgot to invite you to take a ride with the rest of--"

"See here, Webster,--are you trying to be offensive?"

"Offensive? Lord, no! I'm just TELLING you, that's all. On the level now, am I right or wrong?"

"I do not know Miss Crown," replied Thane stiffly. "Why should I expect her to ask me,--a total stranger,--to go out in her car?"

"Didn't Maude Pollock introduce you a while ago?"

"No," said the other succinctly.

"Well, by gosh, that ain't like Maude," exclaimed Charlie. "I'd 'a' bet two dollars she said 'I want to present my friend from New York, Mr. Courtney Thane, the distinguished aviator, Miss Crown,' or something like that. I can't understand Maude missing a chance like that. She just LOVES it."

Courtney smiled. "I daresay she wasn't quick enough," he said drily. "Miss Crown was in a hurry. And I left before she came out of the house. Now is your curiosity satisfied?"

"Absolutely," said Charlie. "Now I'll sleep soundly tonight. I was afraid the darned thing would keep me awake all night. Remember me saying I had a small stock hid away up in my room? What say to going up,--now that the coast is clear,--and having a nip or two?"

"No, thanks, old man. I don't drink. Doctor's orders. Besides, I've got some letters to write. I'll walk home with you if you're ready to go."

II

Mr. Webster shook his head sadly. "That's the one drawback to livin' in Windomville," he said. "People either want to drink too much or they don't want to drink at all. Nobody wants to drink in moderation. Now, here's you, for instance. You look like a feller that could kiss a highball or two without compromising yourself, and there's Hatch that has to hold his nose so's he won't get drunk if he comes within ten feet of a glass of whiskey." They were strolling slowly toward the Tavern. "Now you up and claim you're on the water wagon. I'd been counting on you, Court,--I certainly had. The last time I took Hatch and Doc Simpson up to my room,--that was on the Fourth of last July,--I had to sleep on the floor. Course, if I was skinny like Doc and Hatch that wouldn't have been necessary. But I can't bear sleepin' three in a bed. Doctor's orders, eh? That comes of livin' in New York. There ain't a doctor in Indiana that would stoop so low as that,--not one. Look at old man Nichols. He's eighty-two years old and up to about a year ago he never missed a day without taking a couple o' swigs of rye. He swears he wouldn't have lived to be more than seventy-five if he hadn't taken his daily nip. That shows how smart and sensible our doctors are out here. They--"

"By the way, Mrs. Nichols appears to be a remarkably well-preserved old lady,--aside from her hearing. How old is she?"

"Eighty-three. Wonderful old woman."

"I suppose she has always had her daily swig of rye."

Charlie Webster was silent for a moment. He had to think. This was a very serious and unexpected complication.

"What did you say?" he inquired, fencing for time.

"Has she always been a steady drinker, like the old man?"

Charlie was a gentleman. He sighed.

"I guess it's time to change the subject," he said. "The only way you could get a spoonful of whiskey down that old woman would be to chloroform her. If I'm any good at guessin', she'll outlive the old man by ten years,--so what's the sense of me preachin' to you about the life preserving virtues of booze? Oh, Lordy! There's another of my best arguments knocked galley-west. It's no use. I've been playing old man Nichols for nearly fifteen years as a bright and shining light, and he turns out to be nothing but a busted flush. She's had eleven children and he's never had anything worse than a headache, and, by gosh, he's hangin' onto her with both hands

for support to keep his other foot from slippin' into the grave. But,"--and here his face brightened suddenly,--"there's one thing to be said, Court. She didn't consult any darned fool doctor about it."

Courtney was ashamed of his churlishness toward this good-natured little man.

"Say no more, Charlie. I'll break my rule this once if it will make you feel any better. One little drink, that's all,--in spite of the doctor. He's a long way off, and I daresay he'll never know the difference. Lead the way, old chap. Anything to cheer up a disconsolate comrade."

A few minutes later they were in Webster's room, second floor back. The highly gratified host had lighted the kerosene lamp on the table in the centre of the room, and pulled down the window shades. Then, putting his fingers to his lips to enjoin silence, he tip-toed to the door and threw it open suddenly. After peering into the hall and listening intently for a moment, he cautiously closed it again.

"All's well, as the watchman says at midnight," he remarked, as he drew his key ring from his hip pocket and selected a key with unerring precision from the extensive assortment. "I always do that," he added. "I don't suppose it was necessary tonight, because Angie Miller has got Hatch where he can't possibly escape. Long as she knows where he is, she don't do much snooping. She used to be the same way with me,--and Doc, too, for that matter. Poor Hatch,--setting down there in the parlour,--listening to her talk about birds and flowers and trying to help her guess what she's going to give him for next Christmas. It's hell to be a bachelor, Court."

He unlocked a trunk in the corner of the room, and after lifting out two trays produced a half empty whiskey bottle.

"I had a dozen of these to begin with," said he, holding the bottle up to the light. "Dollar sixty a quart. Quite a nifty little stock, eh?"

"Is that all you have left?"

Charlie scratched his ear reflectively.

"Well, you see, I've had a good deal of toothache lately," he announced. "And as soon as Doc Simpson and Hatch found out about it, they begin to complain about their teeth achin' too. Seemed to be a sort of epidemic of toothache, Court. Nothing like whiskey for the toothache, you know."

"But Simpson is a dentist. Why don't you have him treat your teeth?"

"Seems as though he'd sooner have me treat his," said Charlie, with a slight grimace. Rummaging about in the top tray of the trunk, he produced a couple of bar glasses, which he carefully rinsed at the washstand. "Tastes better when you drink it out of a regular glass," he explained. "Always seems sort of cowardly to me to take it with water,--almost as if you were trying to drown it so's it won't be able to bite back when you tackle it. Needn't mind sayin' 'when' The glass holds just so much, and I know enough to stop when it begins to run over. Well! Here's hoping your toothache will be better in the morning, Court."

"I don't think I ought to rob you like this, Charlie,--"

"Lord, man, you're not robbing me. If you're robbing anybody, it's Doc Simpson,--and he's been absolutely free from toothache ever since I told him this room was dry. Excuse me a second, Court. I always propose a toast before I take a drink up here. Here's to Miss Alix Crown, the finest girl in the U. S. A., and the best boss a man ever had. Course I've never said that in a saloon, but up here it's different,--and kind of sacred."

"I usually make a wry face when I drink it neat like this," said Courtney.

"You'll like her just as well as I do when you get to know her, boy. I've known her since she was a little kid,--long before she was sent abroad,--and she's the salt of the earth. That's one thing on which Doc and Hatch and me always agree. We differ on most everything else, but--well, as I was saying, you wait till you get to know her."

He tossed off the whiskey in one prodigious gulp, smacked his lips, and then stood watching his guest drink his.

Tears came into Courtney's eyes as he drained the last drop of the fiery liquid. A shudder distorted his face.

"Pretty hot stuff, eh?" observed Charlie sympathetically.

Courtney's reply was a nod of the head, speech being denied him.

"Don't try to talk yet," said Charlie, as if admonishing a child who has choked on a swallow of water. "Anyhow," he went on quaintly, after a moment, "it makes you forget all about your toothache, don't it?"

The other cleared his throat raucously. "Now I know why the redskins call it fire water," said he.

"Have another?"

"Not on your life," exclaimed the New Yorker. "Put it back in the trunk,--and lock it up!"

"No sooner said than done," said Charlie amicably. "Now I'll pull up the shades and let in a little of our well-known hoosier atmosphere,--and some real moonshine. Hello! There go Hatch and Angie, out for a stroll. Yep! She's got him headed toward Foster's soda water joint. I'll bet every tooth in his head is achin'."

"How long have you been running the grain elevator, Charlie?"

"Ever since David Windom built it, back in 1897,--twenty-two years. I took a few months off in '98, expecting to see something of Cuba, but the darned Spaniards surrendered when they heard I was on the way, so I never got any farther than Indianapolis. Twenty-two years. That's almost as long as Alix Crown has lived altogether."

"Have you ever seen the grave at the top of Quill's Window?"

"When I first came here, yes. Nobody ever goes up there now. In the first place, she don't like it, and in the second place, most people in these parts are honourable. We wouldn't any more think of trespassin' up there than we'd think of pickin' somebody's pocket. Besides which, there's supposed to be rattlesnakes up there among the rocks. And besides that, the place is haunted."

"Haunted? I understood it was the old Windom house that is haunted."

"Well, spooks travel about a bit, being restless sort of things. Thirty or forty years back, people swore that old Quill and the other people who croaked up there used to come back during the dark of the moon and hold high revels, as the novel writers would say. Strange to say, they suddenly stopped coming back when the sheriff snook up there one night with a couple of deputies and arrested a gang of male and female mortals and confiscated a couple of kegs of beer at the same time. Shortly after old David Windom confessed that he killed Alix's father and buried him on the rock, people begin to talk about seeing things again. Funny that Eddie Crown's ghost neglected to come back till after he'd been dead eighteen years or so. Ghosts ain't usually so considerate. Nobody ever claims to have seen him floating around the old Windom front yard before Mr. Windom confessed. But, by gosh, the story hadn't been printed in the newspapers for more than two days before George Heffner saw Eddie in the front yard, plain as day, and ran derved near a mile and a half past his own house before he could stop, as he told some one that met him when he stopped for breath. Course, that story sort of petered out when George's wife went down and cowhided a widow who lived just a mile and a half south of their place, and that night George kept on running so hard the other way that he's never been heard of since. Since then there hasn't been much talk about ghosts,--'specially among the married men."

"And the rattlesnakes?" said Courtney, grinning.

"Along about 1875 David Windom killed a couple of rattlers up

there. It's only natural that their ghosts should come back, same as anybody else's. Far as I can make out, nobody has ever actually seen one, but the Lord only knows how many people claim to have heard 'em."

He went on in this whimsical fashion for half an hour or more, and finally came back to Alix Crown again.

"She did an awful lot of good during the war,--contributed to everything, drove an ambulance in New York, took up nursing, and all that, and if the war hadn't been ended by you fellers when it was, she'd have been over in France, sure as you're a foot high."

"Strange she hasn't married, young and rich and beautiful as she is," mused Courtney.

"Plenty of fellers been after her all right. She don't seem to be able to see 'em though. Now that the war's over maybe she'll settle down and pay some attention to sufferin' humanity. There's one thing sure. If she's got a beau he don't belong around these parts. Nobody around here's got a look-in."

"Does she live all alone in that house up there? I mean, has she no--er--chaperon?"

"Nancy Strong is keeping house for her,--her husband used to run the blacksmith shop here and did all of David Windom's work for him. He's been dead a good many years. Nancy is one of the finest women you ever saw. Her father was an Episcopal minister up in the city up to the time he died. Nancy had to earn her own living, so she got a job as school teacher down here. Let's see, that was over thirty years ago. Been here ever since. Tom Strong wasn't good enough for her. Too religious. He was the feller that led the mob that wiped out Tony Zimmerman's saloon soon after I came here. I'll never forget that night. I happened to be in the saloon,--just out of curiosity, because it was new and everybody was dropping in to see the bar and fixtures he'd got from Chicago,--but I got out of a back window in plenty of time. But as I was saying, Nancy Strong keeps house for Alix. She's got a cook and a second girl besides, and a chauffeur."

"An ideal arrangement," said Courtney, looking at his wrist-watch.

"I wonder if you ever came across Nancy Strong's son over in France. He was in the Medical Corps in our Army. He's a doctor. Went to Rush Medical College in Chicago and afterwards to some place in the East,--John Hopkins or some such name as that. Feller about your age, I should say. David Strong. Mr. Windom sent him through college. They say he's paying the money back to Alix Crown as fast as he makes it. Alix hates him worse'n poison, according to Jim Bagley, her foreman. Of course, she don't let on to David's mother on account of her being housekeeper and all. Seems that Alix is as sore as can be because he insists on paying the money to her, when

she claims her grandpa gave it to him and it's none of her business. Davy says he promised to pay Mr. Windom back as soon as he was able, and can't see any reason why the old man's death should cancel the obligation. Jim was telling me some time ago about the letter Alix showed him from Davy. She was so mad she actually cried. He said in so many words he didn't choose to be beholden to her, and that he was in the habit of paying his debts, and she needn't be so high and mighty about refusin' to accept the money. He said he didn't accept anything from Mr. Windom as charity,--claiming it was a loan,--and he'd be damned if he'd accept charity from her. I don't believe he swore like that, but then Jim can't say good morning to you without getting in a cuss word or two. Alix is as stubborn as all get out. Jim says that every time she gets a cheque from Davy she cashes it and hands the money over to Mrs. Strong for a present, never letting on to Nancy that it came from Davy. Did I say that Davy is practisin' in Philadelphia? He was back here for a week to see his mother after he got out of the Army, but when Alix heard he was coming she beat it up to Chicago. I thought maybe you might have run across him over in France."

"I was not with the American Army,--and besides there were several million men in France, Charlie," said Courtney, arising and stretching himself. "Well, good night. Thanks for the uplift. I'll skip along now and write a letter or two."

"Snappy dreams," said Charlie Webster.

Just as Courtney was closing a long letter to his mother, the automobile drew up in front of the Tavern and Alix Crown's guests got out. There were "good-nights" and "sleep-tights" and then the car went purring down the dimly lighted road. He had no trouble in distinguishing Alix's clear, young voice, and thereupon added the following words of comfort to his faraway mother: "You will love her voice, mater dear. It's like music. So put away your prejudice and wish me luck. I've made a good start. The fact that she refused to look at me on the porch tonight is the best sign in the world. Just because she deliberately failed to notice me is no sign that she didn't expect me to notice her. It is an ancient and time-honoured trick of your adorable sex."

III

The next morning his walk took him up the lane past the charming, red-brick house of Alix the Third. His leg was troubling him. He walked with quite a pronounced limp, and there were times when his face winced with pain.

"It's that confounded poison you gave me last night," he announced to Charlie Webster as they stood chatting in front of the warehouse office.

"First time I ever heard of booze going to the knee," was Charlie's laconic rejoinder. "It's generally aimed at the head."

He made good use of the corner of his eye as he strolled leisurely past the Windom house, set well back at the top of a small tree-surrounded knoll and looking down upon the grassy slope that formed the most beautiful "front yard" in the whole county, according to the proud and boastful denizens of Windomville. Along the bottom of the lawn ran a neatly trimmed privet hedge. There were lilac bushes in the lower corners of the extensive grounds, and the wide gravel walk up to the house was lined with flowers. Rose bushes guarded the base of the terrace that ran the full length of the house and curved off to the back of it.

A red and yellow beach umbrella, tilted against the hot morning sun, lent a gay note of colour to the terrace to the left of the steps. Some one,--a woman,--sat beneath the big sunshade, reading a newspaper. A Belgian police dog posed at the top of the steps, as rigid as if shaped of stone, regarding the passer-by who limped. Halfway between the house and the road stood two fine old oaks, one at either side of the lawn. Their cool, alluring shadows were like clouds upon an emerald sea. Down near the hedge a whirling garden spray cast its benevolent waters over the grateful turf, and, reaching out in playful gusts, blew its mist into the face of the man outside. Back of the house and farther up the timbered slope rose a towering windmill and below it the red water tank, partially screened by the tree-tops. The rhythmic beat of a hydraulic pump came to the stroller's ears.

Courtney's saunterings had taken him past this charming place before,--half a dozen times perhaps,--but never had it seemed so alluring. Outwardly there was no change that he could detect, and yet there was a subtle difference in its every aspect. The spray, the shadows, the lazy windmill, the flowers,--he had seen them all before, just as they were this morning. They had not changed. But now, by some strange wizardry, the tranquil setting had been transformed into a vibrant, exquisite fairyland, throbbing with life, charged with an appeal to every one of the senses. It was as if some hand had shaken it out of a sound sleep.

But, for that matter, the whole village of Windomville had undergone a change. It was no longer the dull, sleepy place of yesterday. Over night it had blossomed. Courtney Thane alone was aware of this amazing transformation. It was he who felt the thrill that charged the air, who breathed in the sense-quickening spice, who heard the pipes of Pan. All these signs of enchantment were denied the matter-of-fact, unimaginative inhabitants of Windomville. And you would ask the cause of this amazing transformation?

Before he left the breakfast table Courtney had consented to give a talk before the Literary Society on the coming Friday night. Mrs. Maude Baggs Pollock had been at him for a week to tell of his experiences at the front. She promised a full attendance.

"I've never made a speech in my life," he said, "and I know I'd be

scared stiff, Mrs. Pollock."

"Pooh! Don't you talk to me about being scared! Anybody who did the things you did over in France--"

"Ah, but you forget I was armed to the teeth," he reminded her, with a grin.

"Well," put in Charlie Webster, "we'll promise to leave our pistols at home. The only danger you'll be in, Court, will come from a lot of hysterical women trying to kiss you, but I think I can fix it to have the best lookin' ones up in front so that--"

"I wish you wouldn't always try to be funny, Charlie Webster," snapped Mrs. Pollock. "Mr. Thane and I were discussing a serious matter. If you can postpone--"

"I defy anybody to prove that there's anything funny about being kissed by practically half the grown-up population of Windomville with the other half lookin' on and cussin' under their breath."

"Don't pay any attention to him, Mr. Thane," said the poetess of Windomville. "Alix Crown said last night she was coming to the meeting this week, and I'd so like to surprise her. Now please say you will do it."

"I really wouldn't know what to talk about," pleaded the young man. "You see, as a rule, we fellows who were over there don't feel half as well qualified to talk about the war as those who stayed at home and read about it in the papers."

"Nonsense! All you will have to do is just to tell some of your own personal experiences. Nobody's going to think you are bragging about them. We'll understand."

"Next Friday night, you say? Well, I'll try, Mrs. Pollock, if you'll promise to chloroform Charlie Webster," said he, and Charlie promptly declared he would do the chloroforming himself.

CHAPTER VII

COURTNEY APPEARS IN PUBLIC

The meetings of the Literary Society were held once a month in the Windomville schoolhouse, a two story brick building situated some distance back from the main street at the upper edge of the town.

There were four classrooms and three teachers, including the principal, Miss Angie Miller, who taught the upper grade. Graduates from her "room" were given diplomas admitting them to the first year of High School in the city hard-by in case they desired to take advantage of the privilege. As a rule, however, the parents of such children were satisfied to call it an honour rather than a privilege, with the result that but few of them ever saw the inside of the High School. They were looked upon as being quite sufficiently educated for all that Windomville could possibly expect or exact of them. When the old schoolhouse was destroyed by fire in the winter of 1916, Alix Crown contributed fifteen thousand dollars toward the construction of this new and more or less modern structure, with the provision that the town board should appropriate the balance needed to complete the building. On completion the schoolhouse was found to have cost exactly \$14,989.75, and so, at the next township election, the board was unanimously returned to office by an appreciative constituency, and Miss Crown graciously notified by the assessor that she had been credited with ten dollars and twenty-five cents against her next year's road tax.

The Literary Society always met in Miss Miller's "room," not because it was more imposing or commodious than any of the others but on account of its somewhat rarified intellectual atmosphere. Miss Angie's literary attainments, while confined to absorption rather than to production, were well known. She was supposed to have read all of the major poets. At any rate she was able to quote them. Besides, she had made a study of Dickens and Thackeray and Trollope, being qualified to discuss the astonishing shortcomings of those amiable mid-Victorians in a most dependable manner. She made extensive use of the word "erudite," and confused a great many people by employing "vicarious" and "didactic" and "raison d'etre" in the course of ordinary conversation. For example, in complaining to Mr. Hodges, the school trustee, about the lack of heat in mid-January, she completely subdued him by remarking that there wasn't "the least *raison d'etre* for such a condition." In view of these and other intellectual associations, Miss Miller's "room" was obviously the place for the Literary Society to meet.

Mr. George Ade, Mr. Booth Tarkington, Mr. James Whitcomb Riley, Mr. Meredith Nicholson and other noted Indiana authors had been invited to "read from their works" before the Society, and while none of them had been able to accept, each and every one had written a polite note of regret to the secretary, who not only read them aloud to the Society but preserved them in her own private scrap book and spoke feelingly of her remarkable "collection."

The room was crowded to hear the "celebrated air-man" relate his experiences at the front. The exercises were delayed for nearly an hour while Mr. Hatch, the photographer, prepared and fozzled three attempts to get a flashlight picture of the gathering. Everybody was coughing violently when A. Lincoln Pollock arose to introduce the speaker of the evening. In conclusion he said:

"Mr. Thane was not only wounded in the service of humanity but he was also gassed. I wish to state here and now that it was not laughing gas the Germans administered. Far from it, my friends. Mr. Thane will tell you that it was no laughing matter. He has come to God's own country to recuperate and to regain his once robust health. After looking the world over, he chose the health-giving climate of his native state,--ahem! I should say, his father's native state,--and here he is not only thriving but enjoying himself. I take it upon myself to announce that he left all of his medals at his home in New York. They are too precious to be carried promiscuously about the country. It is my pleasure, ladies and gentlemen, to introduce to you one of the real heroes of the Great War, Mr. Courtney Thane, of New York City, who will now speak to you."

Alix Crown sat at the back of the room. There were no chairs, of course. Each person present occupied a scholar's seat and desk. Courtney had seen her come in. She was so late that he began to fear she was not coming at all. The little thrill of exultation that came with her arrival was shortly succeeded by an even greater fear that she would depart as soon as the meeting was over, without stopping to meet him at the "reception" which was to follow.

In his most agreeable drawl and with the barest reference to his own exploits, he described, quite simply, a number of incidents that had come under his personal observation while with the American Ambulance and afterwards in the British Flying Corps. Most of his talk was devoted to the feats of others and to the description of scenes and events somewhat remote from the actual fighting zone. He confessed that he knew practically nothing of the work of the American Expeditionary Force, except by hearsay, as he did not come in contact with the American armies, except an occasional unit brigaded with British troops in the Cambrai section of the great line. His listeners, no doubt, knew a great deal more about the activities and achievements of the Americans than he, so he was quite sure there was nothing he could say that would interest or enlighten them. In concluding he very briefly touched upon his own mishap.

"We were returning from a bombing flight over the German positions when somebody put a bullet into our petrol and down we came in flames. There was a gas attack going on at the time. We managed to land in a cloud of it, and--somehow we got back to our own lines, a little the worse for wear and all that sort of thing, you know. It wasn't as bad as you'd think,--except for the gas, which isn't what you would call palatable,--and I came out not much worse off than a chap who has been through a hard football scrimmage. Knee and ankle bunged up a little,--and a dusty uniform,--that's about all. I hope you will excuse me from talking any longer. My silly throat goes back on me, you see. My mother probably would tell you, 'too many cigarettes.' Perhaps she is right. Thank you for listening to all this rot, ladies and gentlemen. You are very kind to have given me this undeserved honour."

Not once during his remarks did he allow his gaze to rest upon Alix Crown. It was his means of informing her that she had not made the slightest impression upon him.

As he resumed his seat beside Mr. Pollock, and while the generous hand-clapping was still going on, Pastor Mavity arose and benignly waited for the applause to cease. Mr. Mavity invariably claimed the ecclesiastical privilege of speech. No meeting was complete, no topic exhausted, until he had exercised that right. It did not matter whether he had anything pertinent to say, the fact still remained that he felt called upon to say something:

"I should like to ask Mr. Thane if he thinks the Germans are preparing for another war. We have heard rumours to that effect. Many of our keenest observers have declared that it is only a matter of a few years before the Germans will be in a position to make war again, and that they will make it with even greater ferocity than before. We all know of the conflict now raging in Russia, and the amazing rebellion of De Annunzio in Fiume, and the--er--as I was saying, the possibility of the Kaiser seizing his bloody throne and calling upon his minions to--ah--er--renew the gigantic struggle. The history of the world records no such stupendous sacrifice of life on the cruel altars of greed and avarice and--er--ambition. We may turn back to the vast campaigns of Hannibal and Hamilcar and Julius Caesar and find no--er--no war comparable to the one we have so gloriously concluded. Our own Civil War, with all its,--but I must not keep you standing, Mr. Thane. Do you, from your experience and observation, regard another war as inevitable?"

"I do," was Courtney's succinct reply.

There was a distinctly audible flutter throughout the room. Here, at last, was something definite to support the general contention that "we aren't through with the Germans yet." A lady up in front leaned across the aisle and whispered piercingly to her husband:

"There! What did I tell you?"

Another lady arose halfway from her seat and anxiously inquired:

"How soon do you think it will come, Mr. Thane?"

She had a son just turning seventeen.

"That is a question I am afraid you will have to put to God or the German Emperor," said Courtney, with a smile.

"When David Strong was home this spring I asked him what he thought about it," said Editor Pollock. "I published the interview in the Sun. He was of the opinion that the Germans had had all they wanted of war. I tried to convince him that he was all wrong, but all I could get him to say was that if they ever did make war again it

would be long after the most of us were dead."

"David Strong didn't see anything of the war except what he saw in the hospitals," said a woman contemptuously.

"Permit me to correct you, Mrs. Primmer," said Alix Crown, without arising. "David Strong was under fire most of the time. He was not in a base hospital. He was attached to a field hospital,--first with the French, then with the British, and afterwards with the Americans."

"In that case," said Courtney, facing her, "he was in the thick of it. Every man in the army, from general down to the humblest private, takes his hat off to the men who served in the field hospitals. While we may differ as to the next war, I do not hesitate to say that Dr. Strong saw infinitely more of the last one than I did. It may sound incredible to you, ladies and gentlemen, but my job was a picnic compared to his. As a matter of fact, I have always claimed that I was in greater danger when I was in the American Ambulance than when I was flying, quite safely, a couple of miles up in the air. At any rate, I FELT safer."

"Oh, but think of falling that distance," cried Miss Angie Miller.

"It was against the rules to think of falling," said he, and every one laughed.

The "reception" followed. Every one came up and shook hands with Courtney and told him how much his address was enjoyed. As the group around him grew thicker and at the same time more reluctant to move on, he began to despair of meeting Alix Crown. He could see her over near the door conversing with Alaska Spigg and Charlie Webster. Then he saw her wave her hand in farewell to some one across the room and bow to Charlie. There was a bright, gay smile on her lips as she said something to Charlie which caused that gentleman to laugh prodigiously. All hope seemed lost as she and little old Alaska turned toward the open door.

It was not fate that intervened. It was Pastor Mavity. Disengaging himself from the group and leaving a profound sentence uncompleted, he dashed over to her, calling out her name as he did so.

"Alix! Just a moment, please!"

She paused,--and Courtney discreetly turned his back. Presently a benevolent hand was laid on his shoulder and the voice of the shepherd fell upon his ear.

"I want you to meet Miss Crown, Mr. Thane. She has just been telling me how interested she was in your remarks. Miss Crown, my very dear friend, Mr. Courtney Thane. Mr. Thane, as you may already know, is sojourning in our midst for--"

"I am delighted to meet you, Miss Crown," broke in Courtney,

with an abashed smile. "Formally, I mean. I have a very distinct recollection of meeting you informally," he added wryly.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mr. Mavity, elevating his eyebrows.

Courtney's humility disarmed her. She allowed her lips to curve slightly in a faint smile. The merest trace of a dimple flickered for an instant in her smooth cheek.

"I suppose it was the old story of forbidden fruit, Mr. Thane," said she. Then, impulsively, she extended her hand. He clasped it firmly, and there was peace between them.

"On the contrary, Miss Crown, it was an unpardonable piece of impudence, for which I am so heartily ashamed that I wonder how I can look you in the face."

"I was tremendously interested in your talk tonight," she said, coolly dismissing the subject. "Thank you for giving us the pleasure. It is just such adventures as you have had that makes me wish more than ever that I had not been born a girl."

He bowed gallantly. "What would the world be like if God had neglected to create the rose?"

"Bravo!" cried Mr. Mavity, slapping him on the back. "Spoken like a knight of old."

"Good night, Mr. Thane,--and thank you again," she said. Nodding to Mr. Mavity, she turned to leave the group.

Again the parson intervened. "My dear Alix, I can't let you go without saying a word about your splendid defence of David Strong. It was fine. And you, sir, were--ah--what shall I say?--you were most generous in saying what you did. David is a fine fellow. He--"

"I should have said the same about any doctor who was up at the front," said Courtney simply. "Is he an old friend, Miss Crown?"

"I have known him ever since I can remember," she replied, and he detected a slight stiffness in her manner.

"Ahem! Er--ah--" began Mr. Mavity tactfully. "David was born here, Mr. Thane. Well, good night, Alix,--good night."

When she was quite out of hearing, the flustered parson lowered his voice and said to Courtney:

"They--er--don't get along very well, you see. I couldn't explain while she was here. Something to do with money matters,--nothing of consequence, I assure you,--but very distressing, most distressing. It is too bad,--too bad."

Mrs. Pollock overheard. "They're both terribly set in their ways," she remarked. "Stubborn as mules. For my part, I think Alix is too silly for words about it. Especially with his mother living in the same house with her. Now, mind you, I'm not saying anything against Alix. I love her. But just the same, she can be the most unreasonable--"

"They haven't spoken to each other for over three years," inserted Angie Miller. "When they were children they were almost inseparable. David Windom took a fancy to little David. The story is that he was trying to ease his conscience by being nice to a blacksmith's son. You see, his own daughter ran away with a blacksmith's son,--and you've heard what happened, Mr. Thane. David was in my class for two years before he went up to High School, and I remember he always used to get long letters from Alix when she was in England. Then, when she came home,--she was about twelve I think,--they were great friends. Always together, playing, studying, reading, riding and--"

"Everybody used to say old David Windom was doing his best to make a match of it," interrupted Mrs. Pollock, who had been out of the conversation longer than she liked. "Up to the time the old man died, we used to take it for granted that some day they would get married,--but, my goodness, it's like waving a red flag at a bull to even mention his name to Alix now. She hates him,--and I guess he hates her."

"Oh, my dear friend," cried Mr. Mavity, "I really don't think you ought to say that. Hate is a very dreadful word. I am sure Alix is incapable of actually hating any one. And as for David, he is kindness, gentleness itself. It is just one of those unfortunate situations that cannot be accounted for."

Charlie Webster came up at that juncture.

"Say, Court, why didn't you tell 'em about the time you called Colonel What's-His-Name down,--the French guy that--" The scowl on Courtney's brow silenced the genial Charlie. He coughed and sputtered for a moment or two and then said something about "taking a joke."

As Charlie moved away, Miss Angie Miller sniffed and said, without appreciably lowering her voice:

"I wonder where he gets it. There isn't supposed to be a drop in Windomville." Suddenly her eyes flew wide open. "Furman! Oh, Furman Hatch!" she called out to a man who was sidling toward the door in the wake of the pernicious Mr. Webster.

While there was nothing to indicate that Mr. Hatch heard her, the most disinterested spectator would have observed a perceptible acceleration of speed on his part.

"You promised to tell me how to--" But Mr. Hatch was gone. Mr.

Webster turned a surprised and resentful look upon him as he felt himself being pushed rather roughly through the door ahead of the hurrying photographer. When Miss Angie reached the door,--she had lost some little time because of the seats and the stupidity of Mrs. Primmer who blocked the way by first turning to the right, then to the left, and finally by not turning at all,--Mr. Hatch was nowhere in sight, even though Mr. Webster was barely two-thirds of the way down the stairs.

A pleasant, courteous voice accosted her from behind as she stood glaring after the chubby warehouseman.

"Do you mind if I walk home with you, Miss Miller?"

"Oh, is--is that you, Mr. Thane?" she fairly gasped. Then she simpered. "I'm really not a bit afraid. Still,"--hastily--"if you really wish to, I should be delighted."

If Mr. Hatch was lurking anywhere in the shadows, he must have been profoundly impressed by the transformation in Miss Angie Miller as she strode homeward at the side of the tall young New Yorker, her hand on his arm, her head held high,--he might also have noticed that she stepped a little higher than usual.

CHAPTER VIII

ALIX THE THIRD

October came, with its red and golden trees, its brown pastures, its crisp nights and its hazy, smoky days. Fires were kindled in old-fashioned fireplaces; out in the farmyards busy housewives were making soap and apple butter in great iron kettles suspended over blazing logs; wagons laden with wheat and corn rumbled through country roads and up to the Windom elevator; stores were thriving under the spur of new-found money; the school was open, Main Street childless for hours at a time,--and Courtney Thane was still in Windomville.

He was a frequent, almost constant visitor at the red-brick house on the knoll. The gossips were busy. Sage winks were exchanged when Alix and he were seen together in her automobile; many a head was lowered so that its owner might peer quizzically over the upper rims of spectacles as they strolled past the postoffice and other public porches; convicting feminine smiles pursued the young man up the lane leading to Alix's home. There were some doubtful head-shakings, but in the main Windomville was rather well pleased

with the prospect. Opinion, though divided, was almost unanimous: few there were who held that "nothin' would come of it."

Charlie Webster was one of the latter. His early intimacy with the ex-aviator had suffered a decided slump. His jovial attempts to plague the young man about his intentions met with the frostiest reception. Indeed, on one memorable occasion, the object of these good-natured banterings turned upon him coldly and said:

"See here, Webster, you're getting to be considerable of a nuisance. Cut it out, will you? You are not half as funny as you think you are. I'm pretty well fed up with your freshness--understand?"

It was a slap in the face that Charlie DID understand, and one he never forgot. As the rebuke was uttered on the porch of Dowd's Tavern and in the presence of Flora Grady, Maude Baggs Pollock and one or two others, the sting was likely to endure.

While Courtney's manner had undergone a decided change so far as nearly all of his fellow-lodgers were concerned, he still maintained a very friendly and courteous attitude toward the Dowd sisters and Mr. and Mrs. Pollock. For some reason known only to himself,--(but doubtless plain to the reader of this narrative),--he devoted most of his attention to the editor and his wife and to the two spinsters who were such close friends of the young lady of his dreams. As for the others, he made no attempt to conceal his disdain.

It was not long before the Irish in Miss Flora Grady was aroused. She announced to Miss Angie Miller that he was a "stuck up smart-Aleck," and sooner or later he'd get a piece of her mind that would "take him down a couple of pegs." Miss Miller, while in complete accord with Flora's views, was content to speak of him as "supercilious."

Charlie Webster grew more and more thoughtful under the weight of indignity.

"I certainly missed my guess as to that feller," he remarked to Doc Simpson and Hatch one day. "I had him sized up as a different sort of feller altogether. Why, up to a couple of weeks ago, he was as nice as pie to all of us,--'specially to me. He used to come over to my office and sit around for hours, chatting and smoking cigarettes and joshing like a good feller. But I've got it all figured out, boys. He was simply workin' me. He always led the conversation round to Alix Crown, and then, like a dern' fool, I'd let him pump me dry. Why, there's nothing he don't know about that girl,--and all through me. Now he's got in with her,--just as he wanted to all along,--and what does he do but tie a can to me and give me a swift kick. And there's another thing I might as well say to you fellers while I'm about it. I've been doing a lot of thinking lately,--sort of putting things together in my mind,--and it's my opinion that he is one of the blamedest liars I've ever come across."

He paused to see the effect of this startling assertion. Hatch removed the corn-cob pipe from between his lips and laconically observed:

"Well, I know of one lie he's told."

"You do?"

"Remember him telling us at the supper table one night that a German submarine fired three torpedoes at the steamer he was coming home on with a lot of other sick and wounded? Well, a couple of nights ago he forgot himself and made the statement that he was in a hospital in England for nearly two months after the armistice was signed."

"By gosh, that's right," cried Doc Simpson.

"And what's more," went on Hatch, "wasn't he serving in the British Army? What I'd like to know is this: why would England be sending her wounded soldiers over to America? You can bet your life England wasn't doing anything like that."

"There's another thing that don't sound just right to me," said Charlie, his brow furrowed. "He says one night he got lost driving his ambulance and the first thing he knew he was away behind the German lines. I may be wrong, but I've always thought both sides had trenches. What puzzles me is how the dickens he managed to drive that Ford of his over the German trenches without noticin' 'em,--and back again besides."

"Well," said Doc, desiring to be fair, "it seems to be the habit of soldiers to lie a little. That's where we get the saying, 'he lied like a trooper.' I know my Uncle George lied so much about what he did in the Civil War that he ought to have had twenty pensions instead of one. Still, there's a big change in Court, as you say, Charlie. I wonder if Alix is really keen about him. He's up there all the time, seems to me. Or is she just stringin' him?"

Charlie frowned darkly. "He's a slick one. I--I'd hate to see Alix fall for him."

The sententious Mr. Hatch: "The smartest women in the world lose their heads over a feller as soon as they find out he's in poor health."

"He's in perfect health," exploded Charlie.

"I know,--but that don't prevent him from coughing and holding his side and walking with a cane, does it? That's what gets 'em, Charlie. The quickest way to get a girl interested is to let her think you're in need of sympathy."

"It don't work when you're as fat as I am," said Charlie gloomily.

Conscious or unconscious of the varying opinions that were being voiced behind his back, Courtney went confidently ahead with his wooing. He congratulated himself that he was in Alix's good graces. If at times she was perplexingly cool,--or "upstage," as he called it,--he flattered himself that he knew women too well to be discouraged by these purely feminine manifestations.

This was a game he knew how to play. The time was not yet ripe for him to abandon his well-calculated air of indifference. That he was desperately in love with her goes without saying. If at the outset of his campaign he was inspired by the unworthy motive of greed, he was now consumed by an entirely different desire,--the desire to have her for his own, even though she were penniless.

Those whirlwind tactics that had swept many another girl off her feet were not to be thought of here. Alix was different. She was not an impressionable, hair-brained flapper, such as he had come in contact with in past experiences. Despite her sprightly, thoroughly up-to-the-moment ease of manner, and an air of complete sophistication, she was singularly old-fashioned in a great many respects. While she was bright, amusing, gay, there was back of it all a certain reserve that forbade familiarity,--sufficient, indeed, to inspire unexampled caution on his part. She invited friendship but not familiarity; she demanded respect rather than admiration.

He was not slow in arriving at the conclusion that she knew men. She knew how to fence with them. He was distinctly aware of this. Other men, of course, had been in love with her; other men no doubt had dashed their hopes upon the barrier in their haste to seize the treasure. It was inconceivable that one so lovely, so desirable, so utterly feminine should fail to inspire in all men that which she inspired in him. The obvious, therefore, was gratifying. Granted that she had had proposals, here was the proof that the poor fools who laid their hearts at her feet had gone about it clumsily. Such would not be the case with him. Oh no! He would bide his time, he would watch for the first break in her enchanted armour,--and then the conquest!

There were times, of course, when he came near to catastrophe,--times when he was almost powerless to resist the passion that possessed him. These were the times when he realized how easy it would have been to join that sad company of fools in the path behind her.

He had no real misgivings. He felt confident of winning. True, her moods puzzled him at times, but were they not, after all, omens of good fortune? Were they not indications of the mysterious changes that were taking place in her? And the way was clear. So far as he knew, there was no other man. Her heart was free. What more could he ask?

On her side, the situation was not so complex. He came from the great outside world, he brought the outside world to the lonely

little village on the bank of the river. He was bright, amusing, cultivated,--at least he represented cultivation as it exists in open places and on the surface of a sea called civilization. He possessed that ineffable quality known as "manner." The spice of the Metropolis clung to him. He could talk of the things she loved,--not as she loved the farm and village and the home of her fathers, but of the things she loved because they stood for that which represented the beautiful in intellect, in genius, in accomplishment. The breath of far lands and wide seas came with him to the town of Windomville, grateful and soothing, and yet laden with the tang of turmoil, the spice of iniquity.

Alix was no Puritan. She had been out in the world, she had come up against the elemental in life, she had learned that God in His wisdom had peopled the earth with saints and sinners,--and she was tolerant of both! In a word, she was broad-minded. She had been an observer rather than a participant in the passing show. She had absorbed knowledge rather than experience.

The conventions remained unshaken so far as she was personally concerned. In others she excused much that she could not have excused in herself,--for the heritage of righteousness had come down to her through a long line of staunch upholders.

She loved life. She craved companionship. She could afford to gratify her desires. Week-ends found two or more guests at her home,--friends from the city up the river. Sometimes there were visitors from Chicago, Indianapolis and other places,--girls she had met at school, or in her travels, or in the canteen. Early in the war her house was headquarters for the local Red Cross workers, the knitters, the bandage rollers, and so on, but after the entry of the United States into the conflict, most of her time was spent away from Windomville in the more intense activities delegated to women.

She attended the theatre when anything worth while came to the city, frequently taking one or two of the village people with her. Once, as she was leaving the theatre, she heard herself discussed by persons in the aisle behind.

"That's Alix Crown. I'll tell you all about her when we get home. Her father and mother were murdered years ago and buried in a well or something. I wish she'd turn around so that you could get a good look at her face. She's quite pretty and--"

And she had deliberately turned to face the speaker, who never forgot the cold, unwavering stare that caused her to lower her own eyes and her voice to trail off into a confused mumble.

Alix was a long time in recovering from the distress caused by the incident. She avoided the city for weeks. It was her first intimation that she was an object of unusual interest to people, that she was the subject of whispered comment, that she was a "character" to be

pointed out to strangers. Even now, with the sting of injury and injustice eased by time and her own good sense, there still remained the disturbing consciousness that she was,--for want of a milder term,--a "marked woman."

She was thoroughly acquainted with every detail connected with the extensive farms and industries that had been handed down to her. A great deal of her time was devoted to an intelligent and comprehensive interest in the management of the farms. She was never out of touch with conditions. Her tenants respected and admired her; her foremen and superintendents consulted with her as they would not have believed it possible to consult with a woman; her bankers deferred to her.

She would have laughed at you if you had suggested to her that she had more than a grain of business-sense, or ability, or capacity, and yet she was singularly far-sighted and capable,--without being in the least aware of it. Her pleasures were not allowed to interfere with her obligations as a landlord, a citizen and a taxpayer.

A certain part of each day was set aside for the business of the farms. She repaired bright and early to the little office at the back of the house where her grandfather had worked before her, and there she struggled over accounts, reports, claims,--and her cheque-book. And like her grim, silent grandsire, she "rode" the lanes that twined through field and timber,--only she rode gaily, blithely, with sunshine in her heart. The darkness was always behind her, never ahead.

Courtney undoubtedly had overcome the prejudice his visit to Quill's Window had inspired in her. They never spoke of that first encounter. It was as a closed book between them. He had forgotten the incident. At any rate, he had put it out of his mind. He sometimes wondered, however, if she would ever invite him to accompany her to the top of that forbidden hill. In their rambles they had passed the closed gate on more than one occasion. The words, "No Trespass," still met the eye. Some day he would suggest an adventure: the descent to the cave in quest of treasure! The two of them! Rope ladder and all! It would be great fun!

He was assiduous in his efforts to amuse her house guests. He laid himself out to be entertaining. If he resented the presence of young men from the city, he managed to conceal his feelings remarkably well. On one point he was firm: he would not accompany her on any of her trips to the city. Once she had invited him to motor in with her to a tea, and another time she offered to drive him about the city and out to the college on a sight-seeing tour. It was then that he said he was determined to obey "doctor's orders." No city streets for him! Even SHE couldn't entice him! He loved every inch of this charming, restful spot,--every tree and every stone,--and he would not leave it until the time came for him to go away forever.

He was very well satisfied with the fruits of this apparently ungracious refusal. She went to the city less frequently than before,

and only when it was necessary. This, he decided, was significant. It could have but one meaning.

Her dog, Sergeant, did not like him.

CHAPTER IX

A MID-OCTOBER DAY

One chilly, rainy afternoon in mid-October Courtney appeared at the house on the knoll half an hour earlier than was his custom. Alix was expecting friends down from the city for tea. From the hall where he was removing his raincoat he had a fair view through an open door of the north end of the long living-room. Logs were blazing merrily in the fireplace. Alix was standing before the fire, tearing a sheet of paper into small pieces. She was angry. She threw rather than dropped the bits of paper into the flames,--unmistakably she was furious. He waited a moment before entering the room. Her back was toward him. She turned in response to his discreet cough. Even in the dim light that filtered in from the grey, leaden day outside, he could detect the heightened colour in her cheeks, and as he advanced he saw that her eyes were wet with illy-suppressed tears. She bit her lip and forced a smile.

He possessed the philanderer's tact. There was nothing in his manner to indicate that he noticed anything unusual. He greeted her cheerfully and then, affecting a shiver, passed on to spread his hands out over the fire.

"This is great," he exclaimed, his back to her. He was giving her a chance to compose herself. "Nothing like a big log fire to warm the cockles of your heart,--although it isn't my heart that needs warming. Moreover, I don't know what cockles are. I must look 'em up in the dictionary. Come here, Sergeant,--there's a good dog! Come over and get warm, old fellow. Toast your cockles. By Jove, Miss Crown, isn't he ever going to make friends with me?"

"They are 'one man' dogs, Mr. Thane," she replied. "Come, Sergeant,--if you're going to be impolite you must leave the room. Excuse me a moment. Sergeant! Do you hear me, sir? Come!"

The big grey dog followed her slowly, reluctantly, from the room. Courtney heard her going up the stairs.

"That nasty brute is going to take a bite out of me some day," he muttered under his breath. "Fat chance I'd have to kiss her with

that beast around."

He heard the closing of an upstairs door. His thoughts were still of the police dog.

"There's one thing sure," he said to himself. "That dog and I can't live in the same house." Then his thoughts rose swiftly to that upstairs room,--he was sure it was a dainty, inviting room,--to picture her before the mirror erasing all visible evidence of agitation. He found himself wondering what it was that caused this exhibition of temper. A letter? Of course,--a letter. A letter that contained something she resented, something that infuriated her. A personal matter, not a business one. She would not have treated a business matter in such a way. He knew her too well for that. The leaping flames gave no hint of what they had destroyed. Was it an anonymous letter? Had it anything to do with him?

His eye fell upon several envelopes on the library table. After a moment's hesitation and a quick glance toward the door, he strode over to inspect them. They were all unopened. Two were postmarked Chicago, one New York; on the others the postmarks were indistinct. The handwriting was feminine on most of them. A narrow, folded slip of paper lay a little detached from the letters. He picked it up and quickly opened it. It proved to be a check on a Philadelphia bank. A glance sufficed to show that it was for two hundred and fifty dollars, payable to the order of Alix Crown, and signed "D. W. Strong."

The door upstairs was opened and closed. Replacing the bit of paper on the table, he resumed his position before the fire. Quite a different Alix entered the room a few seconds later. She was smiling, her eyes were soft and tranquil. All traces of the passing tempest were gone.

"Sit down,--draw this big chair up to the fire,--do. It IS raw and nasty today, isn't it? I think the Mallons are coming out in an open car. Isn't it too bad?"

"Bad for the curls," he drawled. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Certainly not. Don't you know that by this time?"

He had drawn a chair up beside hers. Her reply afforded him a very definite sense of elation.

"It seems to me that the world is getting to be a rather heavenly place to live in," he said, and there was a trace of real feeling in his voice. "You don't mind my saying it's entirely due to you, do you?"

"Not in the least," she said calmly. "Charlie Webster once paraphrased a time-honoured saying. He said 'In the fall an old man's fancy slightly turns to thoughts of comfort.' I sha'n't deprive my fireplace

and my big armchair of their just due by believing a word of what you say."

He tossed the match into the fire, drew in a deep breath of smoke, settled himself comfortably in the chair before exhaling, and then remarked:

"But I don't happen to be an old man. I happen to be a rather young one,--and a very truthful one to boot."

"Do you always tell the truth?"

He grinned. "More or less always," was his reply. "I never lie in October."

"And the other eleven months of the year?"

"Oh, I merely change the wording. In July I say 'I never lie in July,'--and so on throughout the twelve-month. I don't slight a single month. By the by, I hope I didn't pop in too far ahead of time this afternoon. You asked me to come at four. I'm half an hour early. Were you occupied with anything--"

"I was not busy. A few letters,--but they can wait." He caught the faint shadow of a cloud as it flitted across her eyes. "They are all personal,--nothing important in any of them, I am sure."

She shot a quick glance at the folded check and, arising abruptly, went over to the table where, with apparent unconcern, she ran through the little pile of letters. He saw her pick up the check and thrust it into the pocket of her sport skirt. Then she returned to the fireplace. The cloud was on her brow again as she stared darkly into the crackling flames. He knew now that it was Strong's letter she had destroyed in anger. He would have given much to know what the man she despised so heartily had written to her. If he could have seen that brief note he would have read:

DEAR ALIX:

I enclose my cheque for two-fifty. If all goes well I hope to clean up the indebtedness by the first of the year. In any case, I am sure it can be accomplished by early spring. You may thank the flu for my present prosperity. It has been pretty bad here in the East again, although not so virulent as before. Please credit me with the amount. This leaves me owing you five hundred dollars. It should not take long to wipe it out entirely, interest and all.

Sincerely yours,

DAVID.

Courtney eyed her narrowly as she stood for a moment looking into the fire before resuming her seat. He realized that her thoughts

were far away and that they were not pleasant.

"It's queer," he said presently, "that you have never learned to smoke."

She started slightly at the sound of his voice. As she turned to sit down, he went on:

"Almost every girl I know smokes. I will not say that I like to see it,--especially in restaurants and all that sort of thing,--but it's rather jolly if there's a nice, cosy fire like this,--see what I mean? Sort of intimate, and friendly, and--soothing. Don't you want to try one now?"

"Thank you, no. If it weren't so shocking, I think I should like to learn how to smoke a pipe,--but I suppose that isn't to be thought of. Somehow I feel that a pipe might be a pal, a good old stand-by, or even a relative,--something to depend upon in all sorts of weather, fair and foul. I've noticed that the men on the place who smoke pipes appear to be contented and jolly and good humoured,--and efficient. Yes, I think I should like to smoke a pipe."

"Would you like me better if I cut out the cigarettes, and took up the pipe of peace--and contentment?" he inquired thoughtfully.

"I doubt it," she replied, smiling. "I can't imagine you smoking a pipe."

"Is that supposed to be flattering or scornful?"

"Neither. It is an impression, that's all."

He frowned slightly. "I used to smoke a pipe,--in college, you know. Up to my sophomore year. It was supposed to indicate maturity. But I don't believe I'd have the courage to tackle one now, Miss Crown. Not since that little gas experience over there. You see, my throat isn't what it was in those good old freshman days. Pipe smoke,--you may even say tobacco smoke, for heaven only knows what these cigarettes are made of,--pipe smoke is too strong. My throat is so confounded sensitive I--well, I'd probably cough my head off. That beastly gas made a coward of me, I fear. You've no idea what it does to a fellow's throat and lungs. If I live to be a thousand years old, I'll never forget the tortures I went through for weeks,--yes, ages. Every breath was like a knife cutting the very--But what a stupid fool I am! Distressing you with all these wretched details. Please forgive me."

She was looking at him wonderingly. "You are so different from the poor fellows I saw in New York," she said slowly. "I mean the men who had been gassed and shell-shocked. I saw loads of them in the hospitals, you know,--and talked with them. I was always tremendously affected by their silence, their moodiness, their unwillingness to speak of what they had been through. The other men, the ones who

had lost legs or arms or even their eyes,--were as a rule cheerful and as chatty as could be,--oh, how my heart used to ache for them,--but the shell-shock men and the men who had been gassed, why, it was impossible to get them to talk about themselves. I have seen some of them since then. They are apparently well and strong, and yet not one word can you get out of them about their sufferings. You are almost unique, Mr. Thane. I am glad you feel disposed to talk about it all. It is a good sign. It--"

"I didn't say much about it at first," he interrupted hurriedly. "Moreover, Miss Crown," he went on, "a lot of those chaps,--the majority of them, in fact,--worked that dodge for all it was worth. It was a deliberate pose with them. They had to act that way or people wouldn't think they'd been hurt at all. Bunk, most of it."

"I don't believe that, Mr. Thane. I saw too many of them. The ones with whom I came in contact certainly were not trying to deceive anybody. They were in a pitiable condition, every last one of them,--pitiable."

"I do not say that all of them were shamming,--but I am convinced that a great many of them were."

"The doctors report that the shell-shock cases--"

"Ah, the doctors!" he broke in, shrugging his shoulders. "They were all jolly good fellows. All you had to do was to even hint that you'd been knocked over by a shell that exploded two hundred yards away and--zip! they'd send you back for repairs. As for myself, the only reason I didn't like to talk about my condition at first was because it hurt my throat and lungs. It wasn't because I was afflicted with this heroic melancholy they talk so much about. I was mighty glad to be alive. I couldn't see anything to mope about,--certainly not after I found out I wasn't going to die."

"I daresay there were others who took it as you did. I wish there could have been more."

He hesitated a moment before speaking again. Then he hazarded the question:

"What does your friend, Dr. Strong, have to say about the general run of such cases?"

"I don't know. I have not seen Dr. Strong since the war ended."

He looked mildly surprised. "Hasn't he been home since the war?"

"I believe so. I was away at the time."

"How long was he in France?"

"He went over first in 1916 and again in the fall of 1917, and

remained till the end of the war. His mother is here with me, you know."

"Yes, I know. By Jove, I envy him one thing,--lucky dog." She remained silent. "You were playmates, weren't you?"

"Yes," she said, lifting her chin slightly.

"Well, that's why I envy him. To have been your playmate,--Why, I envy him every minute of his boyhood. When I think of my own boyhood and how little there was to it that a real boy should have, I--I--confound it, I almost find myself hating chaps like Strong, chaps who lived in the country and had regular pals, and girl sweethearts, and went fishing and hunting, and played hookey as it ought to be played, and grew up with something fine and sweet and wholesome to look back upon,--and to have had you for a playmate,--maybe a sweetheart,--you in short frocks, with your hair in pigtails, barefooted in summertime, running--"

She interrupted him. "Your imagination is at fault there, Mr. Thane," she said, smiling once more. "I never went barefooted in my life."

"At any rate, HE did. And he played all sorts of games with you; he--"

"My impression of David Strong is that he was a boy's boy," she broke in rather stiffly. "His games were with the boys of the town,--and they were rough games. Football, baseball, shinney, circus,--things like that."

"I don't mean sports, Miss Crown. I was thinking of those wonderful boy and girl games,--such as 'playing house,' 'getting married,' 'hide-and-go-seek,'--all that sort of thing."

"Yes, I know," she admitted. "We often played at getting married, and we had very large but inanimate families, and we quarrelled like real married people, and I used to cry and take my playthings home, and he used to stand outside our fence and make faces at me till I hated him ferociously. But all that was when we were very small, you see."

"And as all such things turn out, I suppose he grew up and went off and got married to some one else."

"He is not married, Mr. Thane."

"Well, for that matter, neither are you," said he, leaning forward, his eyes fixed intently on hers. She did not flinch. "I wonder just how you feel toward him today, Miss Crown."

She was incapable of coquetry. "We are not the best of friends," she said quietly. "Now, if you please, let us talk of something

else. Did I tell you that an old Ambulance man is coming down for a day or two next week? A Harvard man who lives in Chicago. His sister and I went to New York together to take our chances there on getting over to France. I think I've told you about her,--Mary Blythe?"

"Blythe?" repeated Courtney thoughtfully. "Blythe. Seems to me I heard of a chap named Blythe over there in the Ambulance, but I don't remember whether I ran across him anywhere or not. He may have been after my time, however. I was with the Ambulance in '15 and the early part of '16, you see."

"Addison Blythe. He was afterwards a Field Artillery captain. I've known Mary Blythe for years, but I know him very slightly. He went direct from Harvard to France, you see."

"What section was he with?"

"I don't know. I only know he was at Pont-a-Mousson for several months. You were there too at one time, I remember. I've heard him speak of the Bois le Pretre. You may have been there at the same time."

"Hardly possible. I should have known him in that case. My section was sent up to Bar le Duc just before the first big Verdun battle."

"Why, he was all through the first battle of Verdun. His section was transferred from Pont-a-Mousson at an hour's notice. Were there more than one section at Pont-a-Mousson?"

"I don't know how they were fixed after I left. You see, I was trying to get into the aviation end of the game along about that time. I was in an aviation camp for a couple of months, but went back to the Ambulance just before the Verdun scrap. They slapped me into another section, of course. I used to see fellows from my own section occasionally, but I don't recall any one named Blythe. He probably was sent up while I was at Toul,--or it may have been during the time I was with a section in the Vosges. I was up near Dunkirk too for a while,--only for a few weeks. When did you say he was coming?"

"Next Tuesday. They are stopping off on their way to attend a wedding in Louisville. You two will have a wonderful time reminiscing."

"Blythe. I'll rummage around in my memory and see if I can place him. There was a fellow named Bright up there at one time,--at least I got the name as Bright. It may have been Blythe. I'll be tickled to death to meet him, Miss Crown."

"You will love Mary Blythe. She is a darling."

"I may be susceptible, Miss Crown, but I am not inconstant," said he, with a gallant bow.

She was annoyed with herself for blushing.

"Will you throw another log or two on the fire, please?" she said, arising. "I think I hear a car coming up the drive. The poor Mallons will be chilled to the bone."

He smiled to himself as he took the long hickory logs from the wood box and placed them carefully on the fire. He had seen the swift flood of colour mount to her cheeks, and the odd little waver in her eyes before she turned them away. She was at the window, looking out, when he straightened himself and gingerly brushed the wood dust from his hands. Instead of joining her, he remained with his back to the fire, his feet spread apart, his hands in his coat pockets, comforting himself with the thought that she was wondering why he had not followed her. It was, he rejoiced, a very clever bit of strategy on his part. He waited for her to turn away from the window and say, with well-assumed perplexity: "I was sure I heard a car, Mr. Thane."

And that is exactly what she did say after a short interval, adding:

"It must have been the wind in the chimney."

"Very likely," he agreed.

She remained at the window. He held his position before the fire.

"If I were just a plain damned fool," he was saying to himself, "I'd rush over there and spoil everything. It's too soon,--too soon. She's not ready yet,--not ready."

Alix, looking out across the porch into the grey drizzle that drenched the lawn, thrust her hand into her skirt pocket and, clutching the bit of paper in her fingers, crumpled it into a small ball. Her eyes were serene, however, as she turned away and walked back to the fireplace.

"I don't believe they are coming, after all. I think they might have telephoned," she said, glancing up at the old French ormula clock on the mantelpiece. "Half-past four. We will wait a few minutes longer and then have tea."

His heart gave a sudden thump. Was it possible--but no! She would not stoop to anything like that. The little thrill of exultation departed as quickly as it came.

"Tire trouble, perhaps," he ventured.

Tea was being brought in when the belated guests arrived. Courtney, spurred by the brief vision of success ahead, was never in better form, never more entertaining, never so well provided with polite cynicisms. Later on, when he and Alix were alone and he was putting

on his raincoat in the hall, she said to him impulsively:

"I don't know what I should have done without you, Mr. Thane. You were splendid. I was in no mood to be nice or agreeable to anybody."

"Alas!" he sighed. "That shows how unobserving I am. I could have sworn you were in a perfectly adorable mood."

"Well, I wasn't," she said stubbornly. "I was quite horrid."

"Has anything happened to--to distress you, Miss Crown?" he inquired anxiously. His voice was husky and a trifle unsteady. "Can't you tell me? Sometimes it helps to--"

"Nothing has happened," she interrupted nervously. "I was--just stupid, that's all."

"When am I to see you again?" he asked, after a perceptible pause. "May I come tonight?"

"Not tonight," she said, shaking her head.

She gave no reason,--nothing more than the two little words,--and yet he went away exulting. He walked home through the light, gusty rain, so elated that he forgot to use his cane,--and he had limped quite painfully earlier in the afternoon, complaining of the dampness and chill. He had the habit of talking to himself when walking alone in the darkness. He thought aloud:

"She wants to be alone,--she wants to think. She has suddenly realized. She is frightened. She doesn't understand. She is bewildered. She doesn't want to see me tonight. Bless her heart! I'll bet my head she doesn't sleep a wink. And tomorrow? Tomorrow I shall see her. But not a word, not a sign out of me. Not tomorrow or next day or the day after that. Keep her thinking, keep her guessing, keep her wondering whether I really care. Pretty soon she'll realize how miserable she is,--and then!"

CHAPTER X

THE CHIMNEY CORNER

A. Lincoln Pollock was full of news at supper that evening. Courtney, coming in a little late,--in fact, Miss Margaret Slattery already had removed the soup plates and was beginning to wonder audibly whether a certain guy thought she was a truck-horse or something

like that,--found the editor of the Sun anticipating by at least twelve hours the forthcoming issue of his paper. He was regaling his fellow-boarders with news that would be off the press the first thing in the morning,--having been confined to the composing-room for the better part of a week,--and he was enjoying himself. Charlie Webster once made the remark that "every time the Sun goes to press, Link Pollock acts for all the world like a hen that's just laid an egg, he cackles so."

"I saw Nancy Strong this morning and she was telling me about a letter she had from David yesterday. He wants her to pack up and come to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to live with him. He says he'll take a nice little apartment, big enough for the two of 'em, if she'll only come. She can't make up her mind what to do. She's so fond of Alix she don't see how she can desert her,--at least, not till she gets married,--and yet she feels she owes it to her son to go and make a home for him. Every once in a while Alix makes her a present of a hundred dollars or so,--once she gave her three hundred in cold, clean cash,--and actually loves her as if she was her own mother. Nancy's terribly upset. She is devoted to Alix, and at the same time she's devoted to her son. She seemed to want my advice, but of course I couldn't give her any. It's a thing she's got to work out for herself. I couldn't advise her to leave Alix in the lurch and I couldn't advise her to turn her back on her only son,--could I?"

"How soon does David want her to come?" inquired Miss Molly Dowd.

"Before Christmas, I believe. He wants her to be with him on Christmas day."

"Well, it would work out very nicely," said Mrs. Pollock, "if Alix would only get married before that time."

"I guess that's just what Nancy is kind of hoping herself," stated Mr. Pollock. "It would simplify everything. Of course, when she told Alix about David's letter and what he wanted her to do, Alix was mighty nice about it. She told Nancy to go by all means, her place was with her son if he needed her, and she wouldn't stand in the way for the world. Nancy says she had about made up her mind to go, but changed it last night. She was telling me about sneaking up to Alix's bedroom door and listening. Alix was crying, sort of sobbing, you know. That settled it with Nancy,--temporarily at any rate. Now she's up in the air again, and don't know what to do. She's gone and told Alix she won't leave her, but all the time she keeps wondering if Davy can get along without her in that great big city, surrounded by all kinds of perils and traps and pitfalls,--night and day. Evil women and--"

"Has Alix said anything to you about it, Mr. Thane?" inquired Maude Baggs Pollock.

"Not a word," replied Courtney, secretly irritated by the discovery

that Alix had failed to take him into her confidence. "She doesn't discuss servant troubles with me."

"Oh, good gracious!" cried Miss Dowd. "If Nancy Strong ever heard you speak of her as a servant she'd--".

"She'd bite your head off," put in Miss Margaret Slattery. "Are you through with your soup, Mr. Thane?" Without waiting for an answer, she removed the plate with considerable abruptness.

"Are you angry with me, Margaret?" he asked, with a reproachful smile. His smile was too much for Margaret. She blushed and mumbled something about being sorry and having a headache.

"Say, Court, do you know this Ambulance feller that's coming to visit Alix next week?" asked the editor, with interest.

"You mean Addison Blythe? He was up at Pont-a-Mousson for a while, I believe, but it was after I had left for the Vosges section. I've heard of him. Harvard man."

"You two ought to have a good time when you get together," said Doc Simpson.

"I've got an item in the Sun about him this week, and next week we'll have an interview with him."

The usually loquacious Mr. Webster had been silent since Courtney's arrival. Now he lifted his voice to put a question to Miss Angie Miller, across the table.

"Did you write that letter I spoke about the other day, Angie?"

"Yes,--but there hasn't been time for an answer yet."

"Speaking about David Strong," remarked Mr. Pollock, "I'll never forget what he did when Mr. Windom gave him a silver watch for his twelfth birthday. Shows what a bright, progressive, enterprising feller he was even at that age. You remember, Miss Molly? I mean about his setting his watch fifteen minutes ahead the very day he got it."

Miss Molly smiled. "It WAS cute of him, wasn't it?"

"What was the idea?" inquired Mr. Hatch.

"So's he would know what time it was fifteen minutes sooner than anybody else in town," said Mr. Pollock.

"My, what a handsome boy he was," said Miss Angie Miller.

"Do you really think so?" cried Mrs. Pollock. "I never could see anything good looking about him,--except his physique. He has a

splendid physique, but I never liked his face. It's so--so--well, so, raw-boned and all. I like smooth, regular features in a man. I--"

"Like mine," interjected the pudgy Mr. Webster, with a very serious face.

"David Strong has what I call a very rugged face," said Miss Miller. "I didn't say it was pretty, Maude."

"He takes a very good photograph," remarked Mr. Hatch. "Specially a side-view. I've got one side-view of him over at the gallery that makes me think of an Indian every time I look at it."

"Perhaps he has Indian blood in him," suggested Courtney, who was tired of David Strong.

"Well, every drop of blood he's got in him is red," said Charlie Webster; "so maybe you're right."

"The most interesting item in the Sun tomorrow," said Mr. Pollock, "is the word that young Cale Vick, across the river, has enlisted in the navy. He leaves on Monday for Chicago to join some sort of a training school, preparatory to taking a job on one of Uncle Sam's newest battleships,--the biggest in the world, according to his grandfather, who was in to see me a day or two ago. I have promised to send young Cale the Sun for a year without charging him a cent. Old man Brown says Amos Vick's daughter Rosabel isn't at all well. Something like walking typhoid, he says,--mopes a good deal and don't sleep well."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," exclaimed Courtney, real concern in his voice. "She was such a lively, light-hearted girl when I was over there. I can't imagine her moping. I hope Amos Vick isn't too close-fisted to consult a doctor. He's an awful tight-wad--believe me."

"Doctor can't seem to find anything really the matter with her, so old Cale Brown told me," said Mr. Pollock. "But don't you think it's fine of young Cale to join the navy, Court? Maybe your tales about the war put it into his head."

"It's more likely that he'd got fed up with life on a farm," said Courtney. "He'll find himself longing for the farm and mother a good many times before he's through with the navy."

Instead of going up to his room immediately after supper, as was his custom of late, Courtney joined the company in the "lounging room," so named by Mr. Webster who contended that no first-class hotel ever had such a thing as a parlour any more. The Misses Dowd, of course, called it the parlour, but as they continued to refer to the fireplace as the "chimney corner," one may readily forgive their reluctance to progress. Smoking was permitted in the "lounging

room" during the fall and winter months only.

A steady rain was beating against the windows, and a rising wind made itself heard in feeble wails as it turned the dark corners of the Tavern. Presently it was to howl and shriek, and, as the rain ceased, to rattle the window shutters and the ancient, creaking sign that hung out over the porch,--for on the wind tonight came the first chill touch of winter.

"A fine night to be indoors," remarked Courtney in his most genial manner as he moved a rocking chair up to the fireplace and gallantly indicated to old Mrs. Nichols that it was intended for her.

"Ain't you going out tonight, Court?" inquired Mr. Hatch.

"Iron horses couldn't drag me out tonight," he replied. "Sit here, Mrs. Pollock. Doc, pull up that sofa for Miss Grady and Miss Miller. Let's have a chimney-corner symposium. Is symposium the right word, Miss Miller? Ah, I see it isn't. Well, I did my best. I could have got away with it in New York, but no chance here. And speaking of New York reminds me that at this very instant the curtains are going up and the lights are going down in half a hundred theatres,--and I don't mind confessing I'd like to be in one of them."

"That's one thing I envy New York for," said Mrs. Pollock. "Hand me my knitting off the table, Lincoln, please. I love the theatre. I could go every night--"

"You get tired of them after a little while, Maude," said Flora Grady, a trifle languidly. "Isn't that so, Mr. Thane?"

"Quite," agreed Courtney. "You get fed up with 'em."

"I remember once when I was in New York going six nights in succession, seeing all the best things on the boards at that time, and I give you my word," said Miss Grady, "they DID feed me up terribly."

"I know just what you mean, Miss Grady," said Courtney, without cracking a smile. "One gets so bored with the best plays in town. What one really ought to do, you know, is to go to the worst ones."

"I've always wanted to see 'The Blue Bird,'" said Miss Miller wistfully. "It's by Maeterlinck, Mr. Nichols."

Old Mr. Nichols looked interested. "You don't say so," he ejaculated. "Give me a good minstrel show,--that's what I like. Haverly's or Barlow, Wilson, Primrose & West, or Billy Emerson's or--say, did you ever see Luke Schoolcraft? Well, sir, there was the funniest end man I ever see. There used to be another minstrel man named,--er--lemme see,--now what was that feller's name? It begin with L, I think--or maybe it was W. Now--lemme--think. Go on talkin', the rest of you. I'll think of his name before bedtime." Whereupon the ancient Mr. Nichols relapsed into a profound state

of thought from which he did not emerge until Mr. Webster shook his shoulder some fifteen or twenty minutes later and informed him that if he got any worse Mrs. Nichols would be able to hear him, and then she couldn't go 'round telling people that he slept just like a baby.

Courtney was in his element. He liked talking about the stage, and stage people. And on this night,--of all nights,--he wanted to talk, he wanted company. The clock on the mantel-piece struck ten and half-past and was close to striking eleven before any one made a move toward retiring,--excepting Mr. and Mrs. Nichols who had gone off to bed at eight-thirty. The Misses Dowd had joined the little company in the "parlour." He discussed books with Mrs. Pollock and Miss Miller, fashions with Miss Grady, politics with Mr. Pollock,--(agreeing with the latter on President Wilson),--art with Mr. Hatch and the erudite Miss Miller, the drama with every one.

Now, Courtney Thane knew almost nothing about books, and even less about pictures. He possessed, however, a remarkable facility when it came to discussing them. He belonged to that rather extensive class of people who thrive on ignorance. If you wanted to talk about Keats or Shelley, he managed to give you the impression that he was thoroughly familiar with both,--though lamenting a certain rustiness of memory at times. He could talk intelligently about Joseph Conrad, Arnold Bennet, Bernard Shaw, Galsworthy, Walpole, Mackenzie, Wells and others of the modern English school of novelists,--that is to say, he could differ or agree with you on almost anything they had written, notwithstanding the fact that he had never read a line by any one of them. He professed not to care for Thomas Hardy's "Jude the Obscure," though nothing could have been more obscure to him than the book itself or the author thereof, and agreed with the delightful Mrs. Pollock that "The Mayor of Casterbridge" was an infinitely better piece of work than "Tess of the D'Urbervilles." As for the American writers, he admitted a shameful ignorance about them.

"Of course, I read Scott when I was a boy,--I was compelled to do so, by the way,--but as for the others I am shockingly unfamiliar with them. Ever since I grew up I've preferred the English novelists and poets, so I fear I--"

"I thought Scott was an English writer," put in Charlie Webster quietly.

"What Scott are you referring to, Charlie?" he asked indulgently.

"Why, Sir Walter Scott,--he wrote 'Ivanhoe,' you know."

"Well, I happen to be speaking of William Scott, the American novelist,--no doubt unknown to most of you. He was one of the old-timers, and I fancy has dropped out of the running altogether."

"Never heard of him," said Mr. Pollock, scratching his ear

reflectively.

"Indigenous to New England, I fancy,--like the estimable codfish," drawled Courtney, and was rewarded by a wholesome Middle West laugh.

"What are those cabarets like?" inquired Mr. Hatch. He pronounced it as if he were saying cigarettes.

"Pretty rotten," said Thane.

"Are you fond of dancing, Mr. Thane?" inquired Mrs. Pollock. "I used to love to trip the light fantastic."

"I am very fond of dancing," said he, and then added with a smile: "Especially since the girls have taken to parking their corsets."

There was a shocked silence, broken by Miss Grady, who, as a dressmaker, was not quite so finicky about the word.

"What do you mean by parking?" she inquired.

"Same as you park an automobile," said he, enjoying the sensation he had created. "It's the fashion now, among the best families as well as the worst, for the girls when they go to dances to leave their corsets in the dressing rooms. Check 'em, same as you do your hat."

"Bless my soul," gasped Mr. Pollock. "Haven't they got any mothers?"

"Sure,--but the mothers don't know anything about it. You see, it's this way. We fellows won't dance with 'em if they've got corsets on,--so off they come."

"What's the world coming to?" cried the editor.

"You'd better ask where it's going to," said Charlie Webster.

"Do you go to the opera very often?" asked Miss Miller nervously.

He spoke rather loftily of the Metropolitan Opera House, and very lightly of the Metropolitan Museum,--and gave Charlie Webster a sharp look when that amiable gentleman asked him what he thought of the Metropolitan Tower.

But he was at home in the theatre. He told them just what Maude Adams and Ethel Barrymore were like, and Julia Marlowe, and Elsie Ferguson, and Chrystal Herne, and all the rest of them. He spoke familiarly of Mr. Faversham as "Favvy," of Mr. Collier as "Willie," of Mr. Sothern as "Ned," of Mr. Drew as "John," of Mr. Skinner as "Otis," of Mr. Frohman as "Dan."

And when he said good night and reluctantly wended his way to the room at the end of the hall, round the corner of which the fierce

October gale shrieked derisively, he left behind him a group enthralled.

"Isn't he a perfect dear?" cried Mrs. Pollock, clasping her hands.

"The most erudite man I have ever met," agreed Miss Miller ecstatically. "Don't you think so, Mr. Hatch?"

Mr. Hatch was startled. "Oh,--er--yes, indeed. Absolutely!" he stammered, and then looked inquiringly at his finger nails. He hoped he had made the proper response.

Charlie Webster ambled over to one of the windows and peered out into the whistling night.

"It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good," said he sententiously.

"What do you mean by that, Charlie?" inquired Flora Grady, at his elbow.

"Well, if it had been a pleasant night he'd have been up at Alix Crown's instead of here," said Charlie.

"I see," said Flora, after a moment. "You mean the ill wind favoured Alix, eh?"

Charlie's round face was unsmiling as he stared hard at the fire.

"I wonder--" he began, and then checked the words.

"Don't you worry about Alix," said Flora. "She's nobody's fool."

"I wasn't thinking of Alix just then," said Charlie.

II

The following morning, Courtney went, as was his custom, to the postoffice. He had arranged for a lock-box there. His letters were not brought up to the Tavern by old Jim House, the handy-man.

The day was bright and clear and cold; the gale had died in the early morning hours. Alix Crown's big automobile was standing in front of the post-office, the engine running. Catching sight of it as he left the Tavern porch, he hastened his steps. He was a good two hundred yards away and feared she would be off before he could come up with her. As he drew near, he saw the lanky chauffeur standing in front of the drug store, chatting with one of the villagers.

Alix was in the post-office. As he passed the car, he slackened his pace and glanced over his shoulder into the tonneau. The side curtains were down. A low growl greeted him. He hastened on.

She was at the registry window.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, extending his hand and searching her face as he did so for signs of a sleepless night.

"Good morning," she responded cheerily. There was nothing in her voice, her eyes or her manner to indicate an even remotely disturbed state of mind. Her gaze met his serenely; the colour did not rush to her cheeks as he had fondly expected, nor did her eyes waver under the eager, intense gleam in his. He suddenly felt cheated.

"Where are you off to this morning?" he inquired.

"To town for the day. I have some business to attend to and some shopping to do. Would you like to come along?"

He was in a sulky mood.

"You know I hate the very thought of going to town," he said. Then, as she raised her eyebrows slightly, he made haste to add: "I'd go from one end of the desert of Sahara to the other with you, but--" shaking his head so solemnly that she laughed outright,--"not to the city. Just ask me to go to the Sahara with you and see how--"

"Haven't you had enough of No-Man's Land?" she cried merrily.

"It depends on what you'd call No-Man's Land," said he, and her gaze faltered at last. There was no mistaking his meaning. "Sometimes it is Paradise, you know," he went on softly.

Twice before she had seen the same look in his eyes, and both times she had experienced a strange sensation, as of the weakness that comes with ecstasy. There had been something in his eyes that seemed to caress her from head to foot, something that filled her with the most disquieting self-consciousness. Strange to say, it was not the ardent look of the love-sick admirer,--and she had not escaped such tributes,--nor the inquiring look of the adventurous married man. It was not soulful nor was it offensive. She reluctantly confessed to herself that it was warm and penetrating and filled her with a strange, delicious alarm.

She quickly withdrew her gaze and turned to the little window where Mrs. Pollock was making out her receipt for a registered package. She felt that she was cowardly, and the thought made her furious.

"Will it go out today, Mrs. Pollock?" she asked.

"This afternoon," replied the postmaster's wife and assistant.

"Wasn't that a dreadful wind last night, Alix? I thought of you. You must have been frightened."

"I slept like a log through all of it," said Alix. "I love the wild night wind. It makes me feel so nice and comfy in bed. I was awfully tired last night. Thanks." Then turning to Courtney: "Sorry

you will not go with me. I'll bear you in mind if I ever take a trip to the Sahara. Good-bye."

"Will you be at home tonight?" he asked, holding the door open for her to pass through.

"Yes," she replied composedly.

"I mean,--to me?"

"If you care to come," she said.

He did not accompany her to the car. The big grey-brown dog with his paws on the back of the front seat, was eagerly watching her approach.

She wore a long mole-skin coat and a smart little red turban. She had never looked so alluring to the young man who waited in the open door until the car started away.

"Close the door, please," called out Mrs. Pollock. "This isn't July, you know."

"So she slept like a log, did she?" muttered Courtney as he turned away from his lockbox with a letter. "Well, that's more than I did."

He glanced hurriedly through the letter, crumpled it up in his hand, and went jauntily up the street until he came to Hatch's Photograph Gallery. Entering, he gave the proprietor a hearty "good morning," and then drew a chair up before the low "sheet-iron stove" which heated the reception-room. Hatch was "printing" behind a partition, and their conversation was carried on at long range over the top. Presently the visitor drew the crumpled letter from his pocket, tore it into tiny pieces and cast it into the fire.

"Well, so long, Hatch. I'm off for a stroll in your crisp October air."

CHAPTER XI

THANE VISITS TWO HOUSES

All day long Alix was troubled. She could not free her thoughts of that searing look or the spell it had cast over her during the brief instant of contact. She was haunted by it. At times she gave

herself up to a reckless, unmaidenly rejoicing in the thrill it had given her; at such times she flushed to the roots of her hair despite the chill of ecstasy that swept over her. But far more often she found herself resenting the liberty his eyes had taken,--a mental rather than a physical liberty. She was resolved that it should not happen again.

She had posted a note to David Strong that morning. Before the car had covered the first mile on its way to town, she was wishing she had not dropped it into the slot at the post-office. Only the fear of appearing ridiculous to Mrs. Pollock kept her from turning back to reclaim it. She could not explain this sudden, almost frantic impulse,--she did not attempt to account for it. Somehow she sensed that it had to do with the look in Thane's eyes,--but it was all so vague and intangible that even the suggestion did not take the form of thought.

In this curt little note she had said:

DEAR DAVID:

I hereby acknowledge receipt of your cheque No. 372 for two hundred and fifty dollars, but as I have tried to make you understand before, it is not only an unnecessary but a most unwelcome bit of paper. You are perfectly well aware that my grandfather's estate has been settled and, as I have informed you time and again, your obligation to him no longer exists. You may have owed something to him, but you owe nothing to me. If I were to follow my impulse I should tear up this cheque of yours. It would be useless to return it to you, for you would only send it back to me, as you did with the first two cheques that came last winter. I want you to understand that I do not accept this money as my own. If it is any satisfaction to you to know that I give it away,--no matter how,--you are welcome to all the consolation you may get out of it.

Yours truly,

ALIX CROWN.

P.S.--I have advised your mother to go to Philadelphia whenever you are ready for her to come. A.

P.S.S.--Under separate cover by registered post I am also returning to you the bracelet you sent me from Paris. I think I wrote you a long time ago how much I admired it. A.

Meanwhile, Thane was making the best of a rather empty morning. He put off finishing a letter to his mother, who had returned to New York and was so busy with dressmakers that twice she had employed the telegraph in promising to "write soon,"--a letter in which he already had written, among other rapturous passages: "She is positively ravishing, mater dear. I am simply mad about her, and I know you will be too." He was determined that the day should not

be a total loss; he would turn at least a portion of it to profit.

First of all, he visited Alaska Spigg at the log-hut village library. Miss Spigg was very proud of her geraniums. No one else in Windomville,--or in the world, for that matter, if one were to recall Mr. Pollock's article in the Sun,--no one else cultivated such geraniums as those to be seen in the pots that crowned the superinforced windowsills at the library.

There was no such thing as a florist's shop in Windomville. Roses or orchids or even carnations were unobtainable. A potted geranium plant, in full bloom,--one of Alaska Spigg's tall, sturdy, jealously guarded treasures was the best he could do in the way of a floral offering to his goddess. So he set about the supposedly hopeless task of inducing Alaska to part with one of her plants. Half an hour after entering the library he departed with a balloon shaped object in his arms. He was not too proud to be seen shuffling up the lane with his prize, a huge thing loosely done up in newspapers,--leaving behind him a completely dazzled Alaska who went about the place aimlessly folding and unfolding a brand new two-dollar bill.

"I don't know what come over me," explained Alaska later on to a couple of astonished ladies who had hurried in to see if the report was true that she had parted with one of her geraniums. "For the life of me, I don't know how I happened to do it. 'Specially the one I was proudest of, too. I've always said I'd never sell one of my plants,--not even if the President of the United States was to come in and offer me untold millions for it,--and here I--I--why, Martha, I almost GAVE it to him, honest I did. I just couldn't seem to help letting him have it. Of course, I don't mind its loss half so much, knowing that it is going to Alix. She loves flowers. She'll take the best of care of it. But how I ever came to--"

"Don't cry, Alaska," broke in one of her callers cheerfully. "You'll be getting it back before long."

"Never," lamented Alaska. "What makes you think I'll get it back?" she went on, suddenly peeping over the edge of her handkerchief.

"Why, as soon as Alix knows how miserable you are about parting with that geranium, she'll send it back to you,--and you'll be two dollars ahead. Don't be silly."

Repairing at once to the house on the knoll, Courtney took counsel with Mrs. Strong. The housekeeper could hardly believe her eyes when she saw the geranium.

"Well, all I've got to say is that you must have stolen it," she exclaimed. "There couldn't be any other way to get one of those plants away from Alaska Spigg."

"Be that as it may," said he airily, "what we've got to decide

now, Mrs. Strong, is just where to put it. I want to surprise Miss Crown when she returns from town."

"She'll be surprised all right when she finds out you got one of Alaska Spigg's pet geraniums. I remember Alaska saying not so long ago that she wouldn't sell one of those plants for a million dollars. Now let me see. It ought to go where it will get as much sun as possible. That would be in the dining-room. I guess we'd better--"

"I really think it would look better right here in this room, Mrs. Strong," said he, indicating one of the windows looking out over the terrace. There was little or no sunlight there, but he did not mind that. As a matter of fact, he wasn't at all concerned about the future welfare of the plant. It meant no more to him than the customary bunch of violets that one sends, "sight unseen," to the lady of the hour.

"Well, you're the boss. It's your plant," said Mrs. Strong briskly. "Alaska Spigg will go into hysterics when she hears where you've put it,--but that's of no consequence."

And so the plant was placed on a small table in the window of the long living-room.

"Link Pollock told us last night that you may go to Philadelphia to join your son, Mrs. Strong," said he, as he watched her arranging the window curtains.

Mrs. Strong flushed. "It did not occur to me to ask Mr. Pollock not to repeat what I said to him in confidence," she said, with dignity.

"I'm sorry I mentioned it. I am sure Pollock didn't understand it was--er--a secret or anything like that, Mrs. Strong."

"It isn't a secret. I have talked it over with Miss Alix, and I have practically decided to remain with her. You may tell that to Mr. Pollock if you like."

"She would miss you terribly," said he, allowing the sarcasm to pass over his head. "Your son and Miss Crown were boy and girl sweethearts, I hear,--oh, please don't be offended. Those things happen, you know,--and pass off like all of the children's diseases. Like the measles, or mumps or chicken pox. Every boy and girl has to go through that stage, you know. I remember being horribly in love with a girl in our block when I was fifteen,--and she with me. But, for the life of me, I can't remember her name now. I mean her married name," he explained, with his whimsical grin.

"I don't believe Alix and David ever were in love with each other," said she stiffly. "They were wonderful friends,--playmates and all that,--but,--" here she flushed again, "you see, my boy was only the blacksmith's son. People may have told you that, Mr. Thane."

"What has that to do with it?" he cried instantly. "Wasn't Miss Crown's father the son of a blacksmith?"

He caught the passing flicker of appreciation in her eyes as she lifted her head.

"True," she said quietly. "And a fine young man, they tell me,--those who knew him. His father was not like my David's father, however. He was a drunkard. He beat his wife, they say."

"Abraham Lincoln was a rail splitter. James A. Garfield drove a canal boat. Does anybody think the worse of them for that? Your son, Mrs. Strong,--I am told by all who know him,--will be a great surgeon, a great man. You must not forget that people will speak of HIS son as the son of Dr. David Strong, the famous surgeon."

Her face glowed with pleasure. Mother love and mother pride kindled in her dark eyes. He caught himself wondering if young David Strong was like this tall, grey-haired woman with the steady gaze and quiet smile.

"I am sure David will succeed," she said warmly. "He always was a determined boy. Mr. Windom was very fond of him. He took a great interest in him." A self-conscious, apologetic smile succeeded the proud one. "I suppose you would call Alix and David boy and girl sweethearts. As you say, boys and girls just simply can't help having such ailments. It's like an epidemic. Even the strongest catch it and,--get over it without calling in the doctor."

He grinned. "It is a most amiable disease. The only medicine necessary is soda water and ice cream, with a few pills in the shape of chocolate caramels or marshmallows, taken at all hours and in large doses."

Mrs. Strong's eyes softened as she looked out of the window. A faraway, wistful expression lurked in them.

"Those were wonderful days, Mr. Thane,--when those two children were growing up." She sighed. "David is four years older than Alix, but ever since she was a tiny child she seemed older than he was. I guess it was because he was so big and strong that he just couldn't bear to lord it over her like most boys do with girls. He was kind of like a big shepherd dog. Always watching over her and--dear me, I'll never forget the time they got lost in the woods up above here. That was when she was about seven. They were not found till next morning. We had everybody for miles around beating the woods for them all night long. Well, sir, that boy had taken off his coat and put it on her, and his stockings too, and he had even removed his shirt to make a sort of muffler to wrap around her throat, because she always had sore throats and croup when she was a child. And when the men found them, he was sitting up against a tree sound asleep, almost frozen stiff, with her in his lap and his cold little

arms around her. It was late in September and the nights were cold. Then there was the time when she fell off the side of the ferry boat and he jumped in after her,--with his best suit on, the little rascal,--and held her up till Josh Wilson stopped the ferry and old Mr. White, who was crossing with his team, managed to throw a buggy rein out to him and pull him in. The water out there in the middle of the river is ten feet deep, Mr. Thane, and David was just learning how to swim. And they BOTH had croup that night. My goodness, I thought that boy was going to die. But, my land, that seems ages ago. Here they are, a grown, man and woman, and probably don't even remember those happy days."

"That's the horrible penalty one pays for growing up, Mrs. Strong."

"I guess you're right. Of course, they write to each other every once in a while,--but nothing is like it used to be. Alix had a letter from Davy only a day or so ago. You'd think she might occasionally tell me some of the things he writes about,--but she never does. She never opens her mouth about them. And he never writes anything to me about what she writes to him. I suppose that's the way of the world. When they were little they used to come to me with everything."

"You see, I came here to keep house for Mr. Windom soon after old Maria Bliss died. My husband died when David was six years old. Alix was only four years old when I came here, Mr. Thane. This house was new,--just finished. I'll never forget the rage Mr. Windom got into when he found out that Alix and David were going up to the old farmhouse where her mother died and were using one of the upstairs rooms as a 'den.' They got in through a cellar window, it seems. They were each writing a novel, and that was where they worked and read what they had written to each other. That lasted only about six weeks or so before Mr. Windom found out about it. He was terrible. You see, without knowing it, they had picked out the room that was most sacred to him. It was his wife's own room,--where she died and where Alix's mother was born and where she also died,--and where our Alix was born."

"Of course, at that time nobody knew about Edward Crown. We all thought he was alive somewhere. The children never went there again. No, sirree! They both ought to have known better than to go at all. Alix was fifteen years old when that happened, and Davy was going to college in the winter time."

"Did your son live here in the house with you all those years?" inquired Courtney.

"We lived in the first cottage down the lane from here. Mr. Windom was a very thoughtful man. He did not want me to live here in the house with him because of what people might say. You see, I was a young woman then, and--well, people are not always kind, you know." She spoke simply and without the slightest embarrassment.

He looked hard at her half-averted face and was suddenly confronted

by the realization that this grey, motherly woman must have been young once, like Alix, and pretty. As it is with the young, he could not think of her except as old. He had always thought of his mother as old; it was impossible to think of her as having once been young and gay like the girls he knew. Yes, Mrs. Strong must have been young and pretty and desirable,--somebody's sweetheart, somebody's "girl." The thought astonished him.

II

Shortly afterward he took his departure. There was a frown of annoyance on his brow as he strode briskly up the lane in the direction of the crossroads, half a mile or more above the village. As usual, he thought aloud.

"There's no way of finding out just how things stand between them. The old lady doesn't know anything, that's a cinch. If she really knew she would have let it out to me. I'll never get a better chance to pump her than I had today. She doesn't know. You can see she hopes her son will get her. That's as plain as the nose on your face. But she doesn't know anything. Is that a good sign or a bad one? I wish I knew. Alix isn't the sort to forget. Maybe Strong has gotten over it and not she. It's darned aggravating, that's what it is. There must be some good reason why she's never married. I wonder if she's still keen about him. This talk of Charlie Webster's may be plain bunk. If she hates him,--why? That's the question. WHY does she hate him? There must be some reason beside that debt he owed to old Windom. Gad, I wish I could have seen that letter he wrote her when he sent the cheque. Well, anyhow, it's up to me to get busy. That's sure!"

His walk took him past the Windomville Cemetery and up the gravel turnpike leading to the city. Alix had traversed this road an hour or so earlier. Swinging around a bend in the highway, he came in view of the abandoned farmhouse half a mile ahead.

It was a familiar object by this time, for he had passed it many times, not only on his solitary walks but on several occasions with Alix. The desolate house, with its weed-grown yard, its dilapidated paling fence, its atmosphere of decay, had always possessed a certain fascination for him. He secretly confessed to a queer little sensation as of awe whenever he looked upon the empty, green-shuttered house. It suggested death. More than once he had paused in the road below the rickety gate to gaze intently at the closed windows, or to scrutinize the tangled mass of weeds and rose bushes that almost hid the porch and its approach from view. He was never without the strange feeling that the body of Edward Crown might still be lying at the foot of the hidden steps.

Now he approached the place with a new and deeper interest. Strangely enough, it had been shorn within the hour of much that was grim and terrifying. It was no longer a house to inspire dread and uneasiness. Two young and venturesome spirits had invaded its

silent precincts, there to dream in safety and seclusion, unhaunted by its spectres, undisturbed by its secret. In one of its darkened rooms they had set up a "workshop," a "playhouse." A glaze came over his eyes as he wondered what had transpired in that room during the surreptitious six weeks' tenancy. Had David Strong kissed her? Had she kissed David Strong? Were promises made and futures planned? His throat was tight with the swell of jealousy.

He stopped at the gate. After a moment's hesitation he lifted the rusty latch and jerked the gate open far enough to allow him to squeeze through. Then he paused to sweep the landscape with an inquiring eye. Far up the pike a load of fodder moved slowly. There were cattle in the pasture near at hand, but no human being to observe his actions. In a distant upland field men were moving among a multitude of corn-shocks, trailing the horses and wagons that belonged to Alix Crown. Crows cawed in the trees on the eastern edge of the strip of meadowland, and on high soared two or three big birds,--hawks or buzzards, he knew not which,--circling slowly in the arc of the steel blue sky.

Confident that he was unobserved, he made his way up the half-buried walk to the porch, and, deliberately mounting the steps, tried the door-knob. As he expected, the door was locked. After another searching look in all directions, he started off through the tangle of weeds and burdocks to circle the house. He passed through what once must have been the tennis-court of Alix the First,--now a weedy patch,--and came to the back door. Below him lay the deserted stables and outbuildings, facing the barnyard in which a few worn-out farm implements were to be seen, weather-beaten skeletons of a past generation.

There was no sign of human life. A lean and threadbare scarecrow flapped his ragged coat-sleeves in the wind that swept across the barren garden patch farther up the slope,--this was the nearest approach to human life that came within the range of vision. And as if to invite jovial companionship, this pathetic gentleman wore his ancient straw hat cocked rakishly over what would have been his left ear if he had had any ears at all.

While standing before the gate, Courtney had come to a sudden, amazing decision. He resolved to enter and explore the house if it were possible to do so. He remembered that Mrs. Strong, in pursuing the subject, had declared that Alix and David were not even permitted to return to the house for their literary products; moreover, she doubted very much whether the former had taken the trouble to recover them after she became sole possessor of the property. If they were still there, with other tangible proofs of an adolescent intimacy, he saw no reason why he should not lay eyes,--or even hands,--upon them. He saw no wrong in the undertaking. It was a justifiable adventure, viewed from the standpoint of a lover whose claim was in doubt.

The back door was locked and the window shutters securely nailed.

Entrance to the cellar was barred by heavy scantlings fastened across the sloping hatch. In the barnyard he found a stout single-tree. With this he succeeded in prying off the two scantlings. The staple holding the padlock was easily withdrawn from one of the rotten boards.

Descending the steps, he found himself in the small, musty cellar. The vault-like room was empty save for a couple of barrels standing in a corner and a small pile of firewood under the stairs that led to regions above. Selecting a faggot of kindling-wood from this pile, he fashioned a torch by whittling the end into a confusion of partially detached slivers. This he lighted with a match, and then mounted the stairs.

The door at the head opened at the lifting of an old-fashioned latch. A thick screen of cobwebs almost closed the upper half of the aperture. He burnt it away with the flaming torch, and passed on into the kitchen. He was grateful for the snapping fire of the faggot, for otherwise the silence of the grave would have fallen about him as he stood motionless for a moment peering about the empty room. No light penetrated from the outside. The air was dead. Spiders had clothed the corners and the ceiling with their silk, over which the dust of years lay thick and ugly. He felt, with a queer little shiver, that the eyes of a thousand spiders peered gloatingly down upon him from the murky fastnesses.

He hurried on. The rooms on the lower floor had been stripped of all signs of habitation. His footsteps resounded throughout the house. Boards creaked under his tread. Without actually realizing what he was doing, he began to tiptoe toward the stairway that led to the upper floor. He laughed at himself for this precaution, and yet could not rid himself of the feeling that some one was listening, that the stealth of the midnight burglar was necessary. The stairs groaned under his weight, the dust-covered banister cracked loudly when he laid his hand upon it. He had the strange notion that they were sounding the alarm to some guardian occupant of the premises,--to a slumbering ghost perhaps.

He came at last to the room where Alix and David had played at book-writing. In the centre stood a kitchen table, on either side of which was a rudely constructed bench,--evidently the handiwork of David Strong. Two strips of rag carpet served as a rug. At each end of the table was a candlestick containing a half-used tallow candle. There was a single ink pot, but there were two penholders beside it, and a couple of blue blotters. Nearby were two ancient but substantial rocking chairs,--singularly out of place,--no doubt discarded survivors of long-distant days of comfort, rescued from an attic storeroom by the young trespassers. A scrap basket, half-full of torn and crumpled sheets of paper, stood conveniently near the table.

He lighted both of the candles and extinguished the flickering faggot. The steady glow of the candlelight filled the room. On the

mantel above the blackened fireplace he saw a small, white framed mirror. A forgotten pair of gloves lay beside it, and two or three hairpins. He picked up the gloves, slapped them against his leg to rid them of accumulated dust, and then stuck them into his coat pocket. They were long and slim and soiled by wear.

A closet door, standing partly open, drew him across the room. Hanging from one of the hooks was a moth-eaten vicuna smoking jacket of blue. Beside this garment hung a girl's bright red blazer, with black collar; protecting, business-like paper cuffs were still attached. In the corner of the closet reposed a broom, a mop and an empty pail.

He smiled at the thought of young Alix sweeping and scrubbing the floor of this sequestered retreat.

Returning to the table, he pulled out the drawer, and there, side by side, lay two neat but far from voluminous manuscripts, each weighted down by the unused portion of the scratch pad from which the written sheets had been torn. One was in the bold, superior scrawl of a boy, the other ineffably feminine in its painstaking regard for legibility and tidiness.

III

These literary efforts had been cut off short in their infancy. David's vigorously written pages, marred by frequent scratchings and erasures, far outnumbered Alix's. He was in the midst of Chapter Three of a novel entitled "The Phantom Singer" when the calamitous interruption came. Alix's work had progressed to Chapter Five. Inspection revealed the further fact that she was thrifty. She had written on both sides of the sheets, while the prodigal David confined himself to the inexorable "one side of the sheet only." There were unmistakable indications of editorial arrogance on the part of Alix on every sheet of David's manuscript. Her small, precise hand was to be seen here, there and everywhere,--sometimes in the substitution of a single word, often in the rewriting of an entire sentence. But nowhere on her own pages was to be found so much as a scratch by the clumsy hand of her fellow novelist.

Her story bore the fetching title: "Lady Mordaunt's Lover."

Courtney read the first page of her script. A sudden wave of remorse, even guilt, swept through him. Back in his mind he pictured her bending studiously, earnestly to the task, her heart in every line she was penning, her dear little brow wrinkled in thought. He could almost visualize the dark, wavy hair, the soft white neck,--as if he were standing behind looking down upon her as she struggled with an obstinate muse,--and the quick, gentle rise and fall of her young breast. He could see her lift her head now and then to stare dreamily at the ceiling, searching there for inspiration. He could see the cramped, tense fingers that gripped the pen as she wrote these precious lines,--with David scratching away laboriously

at the opposite end of the table. A strange tenderness entered his soul. Something akin to reverence took possession of him. He had invaded sanctuary.

Slowly, almost tenderly, he replaced the manuscript in the drawer beside its bristling mate. Then he resolutely closed the drawer, blew out the candles, and strode swiftly from the room and down the creaking stairs, lighting the way with matches. Even as he convicted himself of wrong, he justified himself as right. The virtuous renunciation balanced, aye, overbalanced,--the account with cupidity. He was saying to himself as he made his way down to the cellar:

"It would be downright rotten to take that story of hers, even as a joke,--and I came mighty near to doing it. Thank the Lord, I didn't. Of course, it's piffle,--both of 'em,--but I just COULDN'T take hers away for no other reason than to get a good laugh out of it. Anyhow, my conscience is clear. I put it back where she left it,--and that's the end of it so far as I'm concerned. Damn these cobwebs! Good Lord, I wonder if any of these spiders are poisonous!"

Brushing the cobwebs from his face as he ran, he hurried across the cellar and bolted up the steps, out into the brilliant sunlight. He made frantic efforts to remove the disgusting webs from his garments, his eyes darting everywhere in search of the evil insects.

Presently he set to work replacing the staple and padlock, inserting the nails in the holes they had left in the rotting board. He did his best to fasten the scantlings down, making a sorry job of it, and then, as he prepared to leave the premises, he was suddenly seized by the uncanny feeling that some one was watching him. His gaze swept the fields, the barn lot, even the high grass that surrounded the house. There was no one in sight, and yet he could FEEL the eyes of an invisible watcher.

Up in the garden patch, the scarecrow flapped his empty sleeves. His hat was still tilted jauntily over his absent ear. It was ridiculous to suppose that that uncanny object could see,--yet somehow it seemed to Courtney that it WAS looking at him, looking at him with malicious, accusing eyes.

Not once, but half a dozen times, he turned in the road to glance over his shoulder at the house he had left behind. Always his gaze went to the scarecrow. He shivered slightly and cursed himself for a fool. The silly thing COULDN'T be looking at him! What nonsense! Still he breathed a sigh of relief when he turned the bend and was safely screened from view by the grove of oaks that crowned the hill above the village.

Several automobiles passed him as he trudged along the pike; an old man afoot driving a little herd of sheep gave him a cheery "good morning," but received no response.

"I wish I hadn't gone into that beastly house," he was repeating

to himself, a scowl in his eyes. "It gave me the 'Willies.' Jolly lot of satisfaction I got out of it,--I don't think. I daresay he kissed her a good many times up there in that,--But, Lord, what's the sense of worrying about something that happened ten years ago?"

At the dinner table that noon, Charlie Webster suddenly inquired:

"Well, what have YOU been up to this morning, Court?"

Courtney started guiltily and shot a quick, inquiring look at the speaker. Satisfied that there was no veiled significance in Charlie's question, he replied:

"Took a long ramble up the pike. The air is like wine today. I walked out as far as the old Windom house."

Charlie was interested. "Is that so? Did you see Amos Vick's daughter hanging around the place?"

"Amos Vick's--you mean Rosabel?" He swallowed hard. "No, I didn't see her. Was she over there?"

"Jim Bagley was in the office half an hour or so ago. As he was coming past the house in his Ford he saw her standing at the front gate, so he stopped and asked her what she was doing over on this side of the river. She'd been over here spending the night with Annie Jordan,--that's Phil Jordan's girl, you know, the township assessor,--and went out for a long walk this morning. She looked awful tired and sort of sickly, so Jim told her to hop in and he'd give her a lift back to Phil's house. She got in with him and he left her at Phil's."

"I saw her walking down to the ferry with Annie as I was coming over from the office a little while ago," said Doc Simpson.

"Sorry I didn't meet her," said Courtney. "She's jolly good fun,--and I certainly was in need of somebody to cheer me up this morning. For the first time since I came out here I was homesick for New York,--and mother. It must have been our talk last night about the theatres and all that."

CHAPTER XII

WORDS AND LETTEBS

Mary Blythe and her brother arrived on Tuesday for a two days' visit.

Alix motored to town and brought them out in the automobile. She was surprised and gratified when Courtney, revoking his own decree, volunteered to go up with her to meet the visitors at the railway station in the city. But when the day came, he was ill and unable to leave his room. The cold, steady rains of the past few days had brought on an attack of pleurisy, and the doctor ordered him to remain in bed. He grumbled a great deal over missing the little dinner Alix was giving on the first night of their stay, and sent more than one lamentation forth in the shape of notes carried up to the house on the knoll by Jim House, the venerable handy-man at Dowd's Tavern.

"I really don't recall him," said Addison Blythe, frowning thoughtfully. "He probably came to the sector after I left, Miss Crown. I've got a complete roster at home of all the fellows who served in the American Ambulance up to the time it was taken over. I'd like to meet him. I may have run across him any number of times. Names didn't mean much, you see, except in cases where we hung out together in one place for some time. I would remember his face, of course. Faces made impressions, and that's more than names did. Courtney Thane? Seems to me I have a vague recollection of that name. You say he was afterward flying with the British?"

"Yes. He was wounded and gassed at--at--let me think. What was the name of the place? Only a few weeks before the armistice."

"There was a great deal doing a few weeks before the armistice," said Blythe, smiling. "You'll have to be a little more definite than that. The air was full of British aeroplanes from London clear to Palestine. What is he doing here?"

"Recovering his health. He has had two attacks of pneumonia, you see,--and a touch of typhoid. His family originally lived in this country. The old Thane farm is almost directly across the river from Windomville. Courtney's father was born there, but went east to live during the first Cleveland administration. He had some kind of a political appointment in Washington, and married a Congressman's daughter from Georgia, I think--anyhow, it was one of the Southern states. He is really quite fascinating, Mary. You would lose your heart to him, I am sure."

"And, pray, have you offered any reward for yours?" inquired Mary Blythe, smiling as she studied her friend's face rather narrowly.

Alix met her challenging gaze steadily. A sharper observer than Mary Blythe might have detected the faintest shadow of a cloud in the dark, honest eyes.

"When I lose it, dear, I shall say 'good riddance' and live happily ever after without one," she replied airily.

The next morning she started off with her guests for a drive down the river, to visit the old fort and the remains of the Indian

village. Stopping at the grain elevator, she beckoned to Charlie Webster. The fat little manager came bustling out, beaming with pleasure.

"How is Mr. Thane today, Charlie?" she inquired, after introducing him to the Blythes.

Charlie pursed his lips and looked wise. "Well, all I can say is, he's doing as well as could be expected. Temperature normal, pulse fluctuating, appetite good, respiration improved by a good many cusswords, mustard plaster itching like all get out,--but otherwise he's at the point of death. I was in to see him after breakfast. He was sitting up in bed and getting ready to tell Doc Smith what he thinks of him for ordering him to stay in the house till he says he can go out. He is terribly upset because he can't get up to Alix's to see you, Mr. Blythe. I never saw a feller so cut up about a thing as he is."

"He must not think of coming out in this kind of weather," cried Alix firmly. "It would be--"

"Oh, he's not thinking of coming out," interrupted Charlie quietly.

"I am sorry not to have met him," said Blythe. "We probably have a lot of mutual friends."

A queer little light flashed into Charlie Webster's eyes and lingered for an instant.

"He's terribly anxious to meet you. It wouldn't surprise me at all if he got up today sometime and in spite of Doc Smith hustled over to call on you. I'll tell you what we might do, Alix. If Mr. Blythe isn't going to be too busy, I might take him up to see Court,--that is, when you get back from your drive. I know he'll appreciate it, and be tickled almost to death."

"Fine!" cried Blythe. "If you're sure he will not mind, Mr. Webster."

"Why should he mind? He says he's crazy to meet you, and he's able to see people--"

"But I've always understood that talking was very painful to any one suffering from pleurisy," protested Alix.

"Doesn't seem to hurt Court very much," declared Charlie. "He nearly talked an arm off of me and Furman Hatch this morning,--and it certainly seemed to be a real pleasure for him to cuss. I really think he'll get well quicker if you drop in for a chat with him, Mr. Blythe."

"It would be very nice," said Alix warmly, "if you could run in for a few minutes--"

"Sure I will," cried the young man. "This afternoon, Mr. Webster,--about half-past two?"

"Any time suits me," said the obliging Mr. Webster. As if struck by something irresistibly funny, he suddenly put his hand to his mouth and got very red in the face. After an illy-suppressed snort or two, he coughed violently, and then stammered: "Excuse me. I was just thinking about--er--about something funny. I'm always doing some fool thing like that. This was about Ed Jones's dog,--wouldn't be the least bit funny to anybody but me, so I won't tell you about it. Two-thirty it is, then? I'll meet you up at Alix's. It's only a step."

"Will you tell Mr. Thane that you are bringing Mr. Blythe to see him this afternoon, Charlie?" said Alix. "You said he was threatening to disobey the doctor's--"

"You leave it to me, Alix," broke in Charlie reassuringly. "Trust me to see that he don't escape."

A little before two-thirty, tall Mr. Blythe, one time Captain in the Field Artillery, and short Mr. Webster wended their way through the once busy stableyard in the rear of Dowd's Tavern. Charlie gave his companion a brief history of the Tavern and indicated certain venerable and venerated objects of interest,--such as the ancient log watering-trough (hewn in 1832); the rain-barrels, ash-hoppers and fodder cribs (dating back to Civil War days), the huge kettle suspended from a thick iron bar the ends of which were supported by rusty standards, where apple-butter was made at one season of the year, lye at another, and where lard was rendered at butchering-time. He took him into the wagon-shed and showed him the rickety high-wheeled, top-heavy carriage used by the first of the Dowds back in the forties, now ready to fall to pieces at the slightest ungentle shake; the once gaudy sleigh with its great curved "runners"; and over in a dark corner two long barrelled rifles with rusty locks and rotten stocks, that once upon a time cracked the doom of deer and wolf and fox, of catamount and squirrel and coon, of wild turkeys and geese and ducks--to say nothing of an occasional horsethief.

"They say old man Dowd could shoot the eye out of a squirrel three hundreds yards away with one of these rifles," announced Charlie; "and it was no trick at all for him to nip a wild turkey's head off at five hundred yards. I'll bet you didn't run up against any such shooting as that over in France."

Blythe shook his head. "No such rifle shooting, I grant you. But what would you say to a German cannon twelve miles away landing ten shells in succession on a battery half as big as this stable without even being able to see the thing they were shooting at?"

"I give up," said Charlie gloomily. "Old man Dowd was SOME liar, but, my gosh, he couldn't hold a--well, my respect for the American Army is greater than it ever was, I'll say that, Captain. Dan Dowd

was the rankest kind of an amateur."

"Do you mean as a shot,--or as a liar?" inquired Blythe, grinning.

"Both," said Charlie.

He had a very definite purpose in leading his guest through the stable-yard. By doing so he avoided the customary approach to the Tavern, in full view from Courtney's windows. They circled the building and arrived at the long, low porch from the north. Here they encountered Furman Hatch. Charlie appeared greatly surprised to find the photographer there.

"What are you doing here at this time o' day, Tintype?" he demanded. "Takin' a vacation?"

"I come over for some prints I left in my room last night," explained Mr. Hatch.

"We're going up to call on Court," said Charlie. "Won't you join us?"

Hatch looked at his watch, frowned dubiously, and then said he could spare a few minutes,--and that was just what it was understood in advance that he was to say!

"He goes by the name of Tintype," explained Mr. Webster, after the two men had shaken hands. "Not because he looks like one, but because the village idiot's name is Furman, and we have to have some way of tellin' them apart."

A few minutes later, Charlie knocked resoundingly on Courtney's door.

"Who is it?"

"It's me,--Charlie Webster. Got a nice surprise for you."

"Come in."

And in strode Charlie, followed by the tall stranger and the lank Mr. Hatch.

Courtney, full dressed,--except that he wore instead of his coat a thick blue bath gown,--was sitting at a table in front of the small wood-fire stove, playing solitaire. A saucer at one corner of the table served as an ash tray. It was half full of cigarette stubs.

"Well, what the--" he began, and then, catching sight of the stranger, scrambled up from his chair, his mouth still open.

"I thought you'd be surprised," said Charlie triumphantly. "This

is Mr. Blythe, Mr. Thane,--shake hands with each other, comrades. When I told him you were so keen to see him and talk over old times, he said slap-bang he'd come with me when I offered to bring him up."

"I hope we're not intruding, Mr. Thane," said Blythe, advancing with hand extended. "Mr. Webster assured me you were quite well enough to receive--"

"I am glad you came," cried Courtney, recovering from his surprise. "Awfully good of you. These beastly lungs of mine, you know. The least little flare-up scares me stiff. Still, I had almost screwed up my nerve to going out this afternoon--"

"It doesn't pay to take any risks," warned Blythe, as they shook hands.

The two men looked each other closely, steadily in the eye. Courtney was the first to speak at the end of this mutual scrutiny.

"I wasn't quite sure whether I met you over there, Captain Blythe," he said, "but now I know that I didn't. I've been puzzling my brain for days trying to recall the name, or at least your face. I may be wrong, however. I haven't much of a memory. I hope you will forgive me if we did meet and I have forgotten it. I--"

"I have no recollection of ever having seen you, Mr. Thane," said Blythe. "It isn't surprising, however. It--it was a pretty big war, you know."

Charlie Webster was slightly dashed. If anything, Courtney Thane was more at ease, more convincing than Addison Blythe. He felt rather foolish. Something, it seemed, had fallen very flat. He evaded Mr. Hatch's eye.

"Sit down, Captain Blythe," said Courtney affably. "Hope you don't mind this bath gown. Charlie, make yourself at home on the bed,--you too, Hatch. We're as shy of chairs here as we were at the front, you see."

Blythe remained for half an hour and then went away with his two companions. Courtney shook hands with him and said good-bye at the hall door; then he strode over to the bureau to look at himself in the glass. He saw reflected therein a very well satisfied face, with brightly confident eyes and the suggestion of a triumphant smile.

Hatch accompanied the moody Mr. Webster to the warehouse office.

"Strikes me, Charlie," said he, thoughtfully, "that of the two our friend Courtney seems a long sight more genuine than this feller Blythe. I guess you're off your base, old boy. Why, darn it, he had Blythe up in the air half the time. If I was a betting man,

I'd put up a hundred or two that Blythe never even saw the places they were talking about."

"Do you think Blythe is a fake?" cried Charlie in some heat.

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that," said Hatch diplomatically, "but you'll have to admit that Court asked him a lot of questions he didn't seem able to answer."

Charlie stared hard at the floor for a few seconds. Then: "Well, if I was to ask you what my mother's maiden name was, Tintype, you'd have to say you didn't know, wouldn't you?"

"Sure," said Hatch. "But I wouldn't go so far as to say I wasn't certain whether she had a maiden name or not, would I?"

"There's no use arguing with you, Hatch," said Charlie irritably, and turned to his desk by the window, there to frown fiercely over his scales book.

II

Alix and Miss Blythe were sitting in front of the fireplace when young Blythe entered the living-room on his return from Dowd's Tavern. The former looked up at him brightly, eagerly as he planted himself between them with his back to the cheerful blaze.

"Did you see him?" she inquired. He was struck by the deep, straining look in her dark eyes,--as if she were searching for something far back in his brain.

"Yes," he replied, as he took his pipe and tobacco pouch from his pocket. "He was up and around the room and was as pleased as Punch to see me." He began stuffing the bowl of the pipe. "He is a most attractive chap, Alix. I don't know when I've met a more agreeable fellow."

"Then you had not met before,--over there?"

"No. We missed each other by days on two or three occasions. He left for the Vosges just before I got to Pont-a-Mousson, and was transferred to another section when we all went up to Bar le Duc at the time of the Verdun drive. He joined the Ambulance several months before I did, and was shifted about a good deal. Had some trouble with a French officer at Pont-a-Mousson and asked to be transferred." Here he smiled feelingly. "He's got a mustard plaster on his back now, he says, that would cover an army mule. I know how that feels, by Jinks! I wore one for three weeks over there because I didn't have the nerve to rip it off."

He was still aware of the unanswered question in her eyes. Changing his position slightly, he busied himself with the lighting of his pipe.

"Was he expecting you?" inquired Alix.

"Not at all. It seems that your roly-poly friend forgot to notify him. I say, Alix, what a wonderful lot of pre-historic junk there is in that old stable-yard. Webster took me around there and showed me the stuff. Tell me something about the place."

Late in the afternoon Blythe,--after submitting to an interview at the hands of A. Lincoln Pollock,--sat alone before the fire, his long legs stretched out, a magazine lying idly in his lap, his pipe dead but gripped firmly in the hand that had remained stationary for a long, long time halfway to his lips. He was staring abstractedly into the neglected fire.

His sister came in. He was not aware of her entrance until she appeared directly in front of him.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, blinking.

"What is on your mind, Addy?"

He glanced over his shoulder.

"Where is Alix?"

"Writing letters. There were two or three she has to get off before we start for town." She sat down on the arm of his chair. "You may as well tell me what you really think of him, Addison. Isn't he good enough for her?"

He lowered his voice. The frown of perplexity deepened in his eyes.

"I can't make him out, Mary," he said, lowering his voice.

"What do you mean?" she asked quickly.

"Well, I may be doing him the rottenest injustice, but--somehow--he doesn't ring quite true to me."

"For goodness sake, Addy,--" she began, and then: "In what way? Hurry up! Tell me before she comes down. Isn't he a--a gentleman?"

"Oh, yes,--I suppose he is. He's a most engaging chap; he certainly seems well-bred, and he's darned good-looking. That isn't what I mean." He hesitated a moment and then blurted out: "Does Alix know POSITIVELY that he was in the American Ambulance? I mean, has she anybody else's word for it except his?"

Mary Blythe stared at her brother, her lips parted. Then her eyes narrowed suddenly.

"Don't--don't you think he's straight, Addy?" she half-whispered.

"I confess I'm puzzled. I never dreamed of doubting him when I went there. But I've been doing a lot of thinking since I saw him, and,--by George, Mary, I'm up a tree. Good Lord, if he should be--well, if he should be putting something over on Alix, he ought to be shot, that's all. Do you think she's in love with him?"

"I don't know. She's interested in him, I'm sure, but two or three times I have caught the queerest little look in her eyes when she is speaking of him,--almost as if she were afraid of something. I can't describe it. It's just--well, the only thing I can think of is that it's kind of pleading, if you know what I mean."

"Groping, I guess is the word you're after."

"Exactly. But go on,--tell me."

"It won't do to say anything about this to Alix, Mary," said he firmly. "At least not at present. Not until I've satisfied myself. I'm going to write to three or four fellows who were in Section Two for months,--before I was there,--and see if they know anything about him. I'd write to Mr. Hereford himself, but he's in Europe. He could give me the right dope in a minute. Piatt Andrew's in France, I understand. The records will show, of course, but it will take time to get at them. We must not breathe a word of all this to Alix, Mary. Understand? I've got to make sure first. It would be unpardonable if I were to make a break about him and he turned out to be all right."

"You must find out as quickly as possible, Addison. We would never forgive ourselves if we allowed Alix to--"

"Don't you worry! It won't take long to get a line on him. I'd telegraph if I were sure of the addresses. I ought to hear in three or four days, a week at the outside. Of course, he talks very convincingly. That's what floors me. But, on the other hand, he's too darned convincing. First of all, he called me Captain Blythe all the time. That isn't done by fellows in the know. I'm just plain Mister these days. He was rather hazy about the places I know all about, and tremendously clear about places I've never even heard of,--the places around Pont-a-Mousson, I mean. He actually looked suspicious of me when I said I didn't know where they were. And he mentioned a lot of men that I am dead sure never were up at Pont-a-Mousson,--either before or after I was there. Names I had never heard before in my life. And, confound it, the way he lifted his eyebrows made me feel for a minute or two that I hadn't been there myself. He says that since his injury and his sicknesses his memory isn't the best, but when I spoke of some of the fellows who were there with me, he remembered them perfectly. Didn't know them well, because he wasn't with the bunch very long, it seems. When I remarked that he must see a good bit of the chaps who live in New York City, he told me he had been sick ever since he came home from England and hadn't seen one of the crowd. He said he knew Pottle,

and Fay, and Tyler, Sudbery and several others,--so I'm going to write to all of them tomorrow."

"It would be terrible, Addy, if she were to--"

"Mind you, old girl, I'm not saying this fellow isn't square," he interrupted. "He may be all he says he is. He's got me guessing, that's all."

"She says he has the croix de guerre and a D. S. medal."

He looked at her pityingly. "I've got a couple of Iron Crosses, old dear, but that doesn't mean I had 'em pinned on me by a Boche general. I've also got a German helmet, but I got it the same way I got the Crosses,--off of a German whose eyes were closed. Anyhow, I'd like to see his medals. Has Alix seen them?"

"His mother has them in New York," she replied. She stared into the fire for a moment or two and then turned to him, a look of deep concern in her eyes. "I think Alix is in love with him, Addy. She isn't herself at all. She is distraught. Twice this afternoon she has asked me if I didn't want to walk down into the village,--to the postoffice or the library. What she really wanted to do was to walk past the place where he lives. Oh, I know the symptoms. I've had them myself,--when I was younger than I am now. We don't do the things at thirty-two that we did at twenty-four. She is the dearest, finest girl I've ever known, Addy. We must not let anything happen to her."

He shook his head slowly. "If she is really in love with him, there's nothing we can do. The saying that 'there's no fool like an old fool' isn't in it with 'there's no fool like a woman in love.' Look at Isabel Harrington. Wasn't she supposed to be as sensible as they make 'em? And didn't everybody she knew tell her what kind of a man he was? Did it do any good?"

"She knew he gambled,--and drank--and he WAS a fascinating chap, Addy. You'll admit that."

"You bet I admit it. It was certainly proved when those other women turned up with marriage certificates, and old Mrs. Mason jumped into the scrimmage and had him arrested for swindling her out of thirty-five thousand dollars, and the New York police came along with a warrant for--"

"Yes, yes," she interrupted impatiently. "But Alix is quite different. She is NOT a fool, and Isabel was,--and still is, I maintain. You have seen this friend of Alix's. Is he attractive?"

"Well," he mused aloud, "unless I am mistaken, he is the sort of fellow that women fall for without much of an effort. The sort that can fool women but can't fool men, Mary, if that means anything to you. Now that I think of it, I believe Webster and that friend of

his are--Well, I'm sure they don't like him. He--"

"Sh! She is coming!"

Alix's quick, light tread was heard in the hall. She came from her "office" in the wing where the kitchen was situated.

There was a heightened colour in her cheeks and her lovely eyes were shining.

"Well, that job is done," she cried, tossing two or three letters on the table. "Don't let me forget them, Mary. I'll post them in the city. We leave at six o'clock, Addison. I telephoned to town and asked George Richards to meet us at the Raleigh at a quarter before seven. I am dreadfully disappointed, Mary, that Mr. Thane cannot go, but you will like George. Mr. Thane NEVER goes to town. He was going to break his rule tonight, and now he CAN'T go. Isn't that always the way?"

"Mary's awfully partial to Georges," said Addison, "so don't you worry about her. I know I shall have a better time if Thane isn't in the party. To be perfectly frank with you, I'm jolly well fed up with Mary,--as we say in London. And if Thane was along I'd HAVE to talk to her for three solid--Why, 'pon my soul, Alix, you're blushing!"

"Don't be silly!"

"Skip along, Addy, and see how quickly you can dress," interposed his sister briskly. "You've got forty-six minutes."

"I can dress and undress three times in forty-six minutes, and still have time to read the evening paper and do a few odd chores about the place. I say, Alix, red is awfully becoming to you." With that parting shot, he disappeared.

III

One of the envelopes on the table was addressed to David Strong. It was a reply to a special delivery letter received in the afternoon post. He had been very prompt in responding to Alix's curt note, and she was being equally prompt with her answer. There were stamps sufficient on hers to insure "special delivery" to him.

He had written:

DEAR ALIX:

I have not received the bracelet yet. Registered mail moves slowly. If I did not know you so well, I might even hope that you had changed your mind at the last minute and did not send it. But I know it will come along in a day or so. I shall not ask you to explain why you are returning my gift. You have a good reason, no doubt.

We have not been very friendly of late. I admit that I have been stubborn about paying back the money your grandfather lent to me, and I suppose I have not been very gentlemanly or tactful in trying to make you understand. I still maintain that it is a very silly thing for us to quarrel about, but I am not going to hector you about it now. I trust you will forgive me if I add to your annoyance by saying that I'd like to be where I could shake a little sense into that stubborn head of yours.

You are returning my gift. As I told you when I sent it to you, it was given me by a French lady whose son I had taken care of and for whose ultimate recovery I was perhaps responsible. She appreciated the fact that I could not and would not accept pay for my services. This much I have told you before. Now, I shall tell you something more. When she pressed it upon me she said that I was to give it to my sweetheart back in America. I gave it to you. I daresay I am greatly to blame for never having told you before that you were my sweetheart, Alix.

Very sincerely yours,

DAVID.

To this Alix replied:

DEAR DAVID:

By this time you will have received the bracelet. It is not beyond the bounds of probability that you may yet be in a position to carry out the terms imposed by the lady in France. All the more reason for my returning it to you. You are now free to give it to any one to whom you may have confided the astonishing secret you so successfully withheld from me. You seem to have forgotten that I gave you a receipt in full for the amount you are supposed to have owed my grandfather's estate. I did this with the consent of my lawyer. He said it was perfectly legal and that it was in my power to cancel the so-called obligation,--especially as we have no documentary evidence that you ever had promised to reimburse my grandfather. On the contrary, as I have told you over and over again, I have in my possession a statement written by Grandfather Windom which absolutely settles the matter. He states in so many words that in making his will he failed to mention his "beloved young friend, David Strong" as a beneficiary, in view of the fact that "I have made him a substantial gift during the closing years of my life in the shape of such education as he may require, and for which I trust him to repay me, not in money, but in the simplest and truest form of compensation: gratitude." In spite of this, you continue to offend me,--I might even say insult me,--by choosing to consider his gift as an obligation which can only be met by paying MONEY to me. All that you owed my grandfather was gratitude and respect. As for myself, I relieve you of the former but I do think I am entitled to the latter.

Yours sincerely,

ALIX CROWN

The same post that carried her letter east was to take one from Courtney Thane to his mother.

DEAREST MATER:

I am going to ask Alix Crown to marry me. I have hesitated to do so for obvious reasons, perfectly clear to you. Now, I have decided. She understands my financial situation. She knows that I am almost entirely dependent on you for support at present. If it had not been for the war and my confounded ill-health, I should, of course, have been quite independent by this time. I have explained my present unbearable situation to her in a general sort of way, and I know that she is in complete sympathy with me. Your resolve to not increase my allowance is, I suppose, irrevocable. I shall soon be in a position, I hope, to dispense with what you are already so gracious as to allow me. I have not deemed it wise to tell her at this time of my unfortunate and, as you say, foolish mismanagement of my affairs before and after father's death. When all is said and done, he didn't leave me very much. It went before I quite knew what was happening, and I submit that it was bad judgment due to my youth rather than to recklessness, as old Mumford claims. I'll make him eat his words some day. Thanks for your cheque. You are a darling. You're the best mother a fellow ever had. I quite understand your position, so don't lose a moment's sleep thinking that I may be resenting your decision. I shall manage very nicely on what you give me. It is ample for my present needs. I shall probably find it rather humiliating when it comes time for a wedding journey, but, bless your dear old heart, I'll manage somehow.

I am quite well and very happy. Hope you are the same. By the way, have you made that visit to Washington?

Your loving son,

COURTNEY.

P.S.--I am still looking for the little parcel I asked you to send me. Have you forgotten to attend to it?

C.

As Alix and her friends went out to the automobile, the big police dog trotted beside Addison Blythe, looking up into his face with pleased and friendly eyes. He allowed the man to stroke his head and rumple the thick fur on his back.

"He likes you, Addison," said Alix, a serious little frown in her eyes. "I can't understand his not liking Courtney Thane. His hair fairly bristles and he growls like a bear every time he sees him.

Isn't it odd?"

Blythe looked up quickly. It was on the tip of his tongue to say something tactless. What he did say was this:

"Can you blame the poor dog for being jealous?"

CHAPTER XIII

THE OLD INDIAN TRAIL

Courtney delayed. A certain aloofness on Alix's part caused him to hesitate. Something in her manner following upon the visit of the Blythes invited speculation. She was as pleasant as ever, yet he sensed a subtle change that warned him of defeat if he attempted to storm the citadel. His confidence was slightly shaken,--but not his resolve.

"She's been different ever since those infernal Blythes were here," he reflected aloud, scowling as he watched her pass in the car several days after the departure of her guests.

She went to the city nearly every day now, and seldom returned before dark. Somehow he felt that his grip was slipping. He was standing in front of the Tavern. She had waved her hand to him, and had smiled gaily, but it was not the first time that week she had failed to stop and repeat her usual invitation for him to accompany her, even though she knew he would politely decline. He resented this oversight. How could she know that he hadn't changed his mind about going to the city? As a matter of fact, he had changed it. He would have gone like a shot. Indeed, he had dressed with that very object in view,--and she had gone by with a casual wave of her hand. His annoyance was increased by the remark of Mr. Nichols, who was standing at the top of the steps at the time.

"Thought you said you was going up to town, Courtney," said the old man, with a detestable grin on his wrinkled visage.

"I didn't say anything of the kind," snapped Courtney, and strode off angrily.

His stroll,--and his reflections,--took him up the old Indian trail along the bank of the river. He wanted solitude. He wanted to be where he could talk without fear of being overheard. There was much that he had to say to himself.

The rarely used path through the willows and underbrush ran along the steep bank, sometimes within a few feet of water. Once before he had walked a couple of hundred yards over this ancient, hard-packed trail of Tecumseh's people, but had been turned back by the sight of a small snake wriggling off into the long grass ahead of him. That was in the warm days of early September. There was no likelihood of serpents being abroad on this chill October morning.

Leaving the road at the cut above the ferry landing, he turned into the trail. A half hour's walk brought him to the gradually rising, rock-covered slope that led to the base of Quill's Window. On all sides were great, flat slabs of stone, some of them almost buried in the earth, others sticking their jagged points up above the brush and weeds. Back in ages dim these drab, moss-covered rocks had been sliced from the side of the towering mound by the forces that shaped the earth, to be hurled hither and thither with the calm disdain of the mighty. No human agency had blasted them from their insecure hold on the shoulders of the cliff. Uncounted centuries ago they had come bounding, crashing down from the heights, shaken loose by the convulsions of Mother Earth, tearing their way through the feeble barrier of trees to a henceforth place of security.

The trail wound in and out among these boulders, dividing at a point several hundred feet south of the steep ascent to the top of the great black mound. The main-travelled path turned in from the river at this point, to skirt the hill at its rear. A more tortuous way, traversed presumably by the fishers and hunters of the tribes, or perhaps by war parties in swift pursuit or retreat, held directly to the bank of the stream and passed along the front of the cliff.

Courtney took the latter branch. Presently he was picking his way carefully along the base of the cliff, scrambling over and between the rocks that formed a narrow ledge between the river and the sheer face of Quill's Window. He was now some fifty or sixty feet above the cold, grey water. Below him grew a line of stunted, ragged underbrush, springing from the earth-filled fissures among the boulders. Across the river stretched far away the farms and fields of the far-famed grain-belt.

He sat down upon a rock and gazed out over these fertile lands, now crowded with shocks of corn or rusty with the dead glories of summer. There were great square fields of stubble, fenced-in patches of pasture-land, small oases of woodland, houses and barns and silos as far as the eye could reach,--and always the huge red barns dwarfed the houses in which the farmers dwelt. Cattle and sheep and horses, wagons and men, all made small and insignificant in the sweep of this great and solemn panorama.

The home of Amos Vick was visible, standing half-a-mile back from the river. He looked hard and long at the house in which he had spent the first three weeks of his stay in the country. So young Cale had gone off to join the Navy, eh? Good! And Rosabel,--what of her? What was she doing over at the old Windom house that day?

Could it have been she who was watching him? Looking badly, too, they said. Such a strong, pretty, wind-tanned young thing she was! How long ago was it? Not two months....He lit a cigarette and resumed his way, the shadow of a fond smile lingering in his eyes.

Rounding the curve, he came to that side of the stone hill which faced up the river. He had passed many small, shallow niches along the base of the eminence, miniature caves from which oozed what might well have been described as sweat. There were, besides, deep upright slashes in the side of the rock, higher than his head, suggesting to the imagination the vain effort of some unhappy giant to burst through the walls of his rocky prison,--some monster of a man who now lay dead in the heart of the hill. The turn took him farther away from the river.

He was looking now into the tops of several tall sycamores that rose from the low ground at the foot of the hill. Extending far to the north along the river was a fringe of these much be-sung trees. The space between the straight face of the cliff and the edge of the ledge on which he stood was not more than seven or eight feet. It was possible, he perceived, for one to continue along and down this natural path to the bottom of the hill, coming out among the trees in the low ground. The descent, however, was a great deal more precipitous than the ascent from the other direction.

Now that he was immediately below the cave known as Quill's Window, he was surprised to find that the cliff was not absolutely perpendicular. There was quite a pronounced slant; the top of the wall was, at a guess, ten feet farther back than the foot. His gaze first sought the strange opening three-fourths of the way to the top,--a matter of eighty or ninety feet above the spot on which he stood. There it was,--a deep, black gash in the solid rock, rendered narrow by fore-shortening and a slightly protruding brow. He could think of nothing more analogous than an open mouth with a thick upper lip and the nether lip drawn in.

Then he saw what surprised him even more,--something that none of the chroniclers had mentioned: a series of hand-cut niches up the face of the cliff, leading directly to the mouth of the cave. He had been given to understand that there was no other means of reaching Quill's Window save from the top of the rock. These niches or "hand-holds" were about two feet apart. He examined the lower ones. They were deeply chiselled, affording a substantial foothold as well as a grip for a strong, resolute climber. Most of them were packed with dirty, wind blown leaves from the trees nearby,--so tightly packed by the furious rains that beat against the rock that he had difficulty in removing the substance. Higher up they appeared to be quite clean and free from obstruction.

He scraped the leaves out of five or six of the slits, one after the other, as he climbed a short distance up the wall. Further progress was checked, not so much by lack of desire to go to the top, but by an involuntary glance over his shoulder. He was not

more than ten feet above the trail, but the trail was shockingly narrow and uneven. So down he came, quite thrilled by his discovery, to lean against the rock and laugh scornfully over the silly tales about Quill's Window and its eerie impregnability. Anybody could climb up there! All that one needed was a stout heart and a good pair of arms. Closer inspection convinced him that these niches were of comparatively recent origin,--certainly they were not of Quill's time. David Windom? Had that adventurous lad hewn this ladder to the cave long before the beautiful Alix the First came to complete the romance of his dreams?

No matter who cut them, they were still there to prove that Quill's Window was accessible. According to tradition, no one had put foot inside the cave since David Windom, in his youth, had ventured to explore its grisly interior. Courtney promised himself that one day he would enter that unhallowed hole in the wall!

Retracing his steps over the trail, he soon found himself in the village. He was more cheerful now. He had talked himself into a better frame of mind....She was shy. She had reached the turning point,--the inevitable point where women tremble with a strange mixture of alarm and rapture, and are as timid as the questioning deer. What a fool he was not to have thought of that!

There was a small package in his lockbox at the postoffice--and two or three letters. The package was from New York, addressed in his mother's hand.

He stopped at the general delivery window for a chat with Mrs. Pollock.

"I had forgotten all about my birthday," he said, "but here's mother reminding me of it as usual. She never forgets,--and, hang it all, she won't let ME forget." He fingered the unopened package lovingly.

"Goodness me, Mr. Thane,--is this your birthday?" she cried excitedly. "We must have a celebration. We can't allow--"

"Alas, it is too late. Your super-efficient postal service has brought this to me just forty-eight hours behind time. Day before yesterday was the day, now that I think of it."

Mrs. Pollock mentally resolved to indite a short poem to him, notwithstanding. She could feel it coming, even as she stood there talking to him. The first line was already written, so to speak. It went:

"The flight of Time has brought once more--"

He continued, oblivious to the workings of the Muse: "Twenty-nine! By Jove, I begin to feel that I'm getting on in life." He ripped open one of the envelopes.

Maude Baggs Pollock looked intently at the ceiling of the outer office, and thought of line number two:

"The busy Reaper to his door,"

She hastily snatched a pencil from her hair and began jotting down these precious lines. Fumbling for a bit of paper her fingers encountered an envelope addressed to Alaska Spigg. The Muse worked swiftly. Before she had dashed off the first two lines, the second pair were crowding down upon them, to wit:

"But while he whets his fatal scythe, Gaze ye upon his victim lithe."

At this juncture George Rice's son came in for a half dozen postal cards, and while she was making change for a dime the Muse forsook her. Bent on preserving the lines already shaped, she stuffed Alaska's letter into the pocket of her apron, intending to copy them at the first leisure moment. Unfortunately for Alaska, there was a rush of business at the window, including an acrimonious dispute with Mrs. Ryan over the non-arrival of a letter she was expecting from her son, and a lengthy conversation with Miss Flora Grady who dropped in to say that her chilblains always began to bother her in October. In the meantime, Courtney departed.

Two days later, Alaska Spigg received her letter, considerably crumpled and smelling of licorice root,--(a favourite remedy of Mrs. Pollock's)--but rendered precious by the presence of a mysterious "quatrain" done in violet hues by some poetic wielder of an indelible pencil. Guilt denied Maude Baggs Pollock the right to claim authorship of these imperishable lines, and to this day they remain unidentified in the archives of the Windomville Public Library, displayed upon request by Alaska Spigg, their proud and unselfish donor.

Courtney read two of his letters. The third he consigned, unopened, to the fireplace at Dowd's Tavern. The little package, minus the wrapping paper, was locked away in his trunk.

Charlie Webster, emerging from his office at the dinner hour,--twelve noon,--espied Miss Angie Miller hurrying toward the Tavern. He hailed her,--not ceremoniously or even gallantly,--but in the manner of Windomville.

"Hey!" he called, and Angie promptly responded, not with the dignity for which she was famous but with an entirely human spontaneity:

"Hey yourself!"

She waited till he caught up with her.

"Have you had an answer to that letter, Angie?" he inquired, glancing

at a small bunch of letters she held in her hand.

"No, I haven't." she replied, somewhat guardedly. "I can't understand why he hasn't answered, Charlie,--unless he's away or something."

"Must be that," said he, frowning slightly. "You wrote nearly two weeks ago, didn't you?"

"Two weeks ago yesterday."

"Sure you had the right address?"

"Absolutely. Thirty-three Cedar Street. He's had an office there for ever so long. I ought to know where my uncle's office is, oughtn't I?"

"I thought maybe you might have got the wrong tree," explained Charlie.

"It's Cedar," said Miss Angie flatly.

"Cedar and pine are a good deal alike, except in--" began Charlie, doubtfully,

"Goodness!" cried Miss Angie, stopping short. "It IS Pine! How perfectly stupid of me! How utterly reprehensible!"

Charlie stared at her a moment in sheer disdain.

"Well, by gosh, if that ain't like a woman," he exclaimed disgustedly. "I'd hate to send you for a half dozen oranges if there were any lemons in the market."

"He is such a well-known lawyer," began Angie humbly, "that you would think the mail carrier would--"

"What did you say his name was?"

"Joseph Smith. He is my mother's brother."

"East or West?"

"East or west what?"

"Pine Street. Same as North Fourth Street and South Fourth Street up in the city. It runs both ways, Angie,--you poor simp."

"I shall write to him again this evening," said Angie stiffly. "And I'll thank you, Charlie Webster, to remember that I am a lady and not a--"

"I apologize, Angie," cried Charlie.

"You'd better!"

They walked along in silence for a few rods. Then Charlie spoke.

"You say your uncle was mixed up in a lawsuit of some kind concerning the Thane family?"

"I remember it distinctly. It was five or six years ago, before my mother died. He wrote her a letter about it when he found out that the Thanes originally came from this neighbourhood. I don't remember what it was all about, but I think it was some kind of a rumpus over money."

"Well, you write tonight, Angie," ordered Mr. Webster; "and remember it ain't Cedar, or Oak, or Mahogany. It's Pine,--the stuff you make boxes of."

Much to Courtney's dismay, Alix remained in town over night. He went up to the house that evening, only to receive this disconcerting bit of information. Halfway home, he stopped short in the road, confronted by a most astonishing doubt. Had she really stayed in town? Could it be possible that she was at home and did not care to see him? Was it an excuse? He compressed his lips. With lightning rapidity certain bits of circumstantial evidence raced through his mind. In the first place, there was Sergeant, the police dog. He wished he could remember whether he had seen the animal in the car with her that morning. It was her custom to take the dog with her when she went up for the day. One thing was certain: Sergeant was now at home. Did that mean she had returned from the city?

And then there was another extraordinary thing,--something to which he had not given a thought till now. The dog was on the terrace when he strode up the walk. Not only was he there, but he interposed his lean, bristling body between him and the porch-steps, growling ominously and showing his teeth. He did not bark. He merely stood there, daring him to approach. Courtney remembered saying to himself:

"There's one thing sure, you and I can't live in the same house, you filthy brute. You'd better learn how to say your prayers, my amiable friend."

It was not so much the presence of the dog or his inimical attitude that troubled him now as the fact that Mrs. Strong opened the front door without having been summoned by the bell. What did that signify? But one thing: either she or some one else had been waiting and watching for his arrival,--waiting behind the window curtains of a darkened room!

"Well,--I'm damned!" he swore to himself, as the blood rushed furiously to his head. For an instant he saw red. "Good Lord, what have I done to deserve such a slap in the face as this? What can be--But, what the devil's the matter with me? Of course, she's in town! I must be going batty. Certainly she's in town. She--but, even

so, why should she have gone off like this without saying a word to me about it? She didn't mention it last night. Not a word. And she must have known then she was planning to spend the night,--why, by gad, I wonder if she calls that being fair with me? Letting me trail up here tonight, expecting--Any way you want to look at it, it's rotten,--just plain rotten!"

CHAPTER XIV

SUSPICION

Early the next morning she called him up from the city. She explained everything. The little daughter of her best friend had fallen downstairs, injuring herself badly,--perhaps fatally. She felt it her duty to remain with the distracted mother,--she hoped he would understand. And she was in such a hurry to reach the city after the child's father had called her on the telephone that she really did not have the time to stop and explain. He would understand that, too, wouldn't he? And she thought perhaps she would stay over another night. She couldn't leave Marjorie,--at least, not until something definite was known.

He was vastly relieved. All his worry for nothing! He wished now that he had remained in his room instead of going out a second time last night to tramp about the dark, lonely village, driven forth by an ugly fit of temper.

"But Mrs. Strong didn't say anything about the accident," he said over the wire. "She simply said you were in town for the night."

"I can't understand that," replied Alix. "She knew why I came up to town, and I telephoned her during the afternoon that I would stay overnight."

"She might have told me," he complained. "It would have relieved my mind enormously. I--I was horribly unhappy. Never closed my eyes. I thought you,--that is, I wondered if I had done anything to offend you. My Lord, you'll never know how happy I am this minute. My heart is singing--And to think it was like a lump of lead all last night. Do try to come out this evening."

She did not answer at once, but he could plainly hear her breathing. Then she said softly:

"If--if the child is better. I can't leave Marjorie until--until--"

"I understand," he cried heartily. "What a selfish beast I am. Don't give me another thought. Your place is there. Because you are an angel!"

Later on he sauntered over to the postoffice. A number of men and women were congregated in front of the drug store, among them Charlie Webster and A. Lincoln Pollock. The latter had his "pad" in hand and was writing industriously.

"What's the excitement?" Courtney inquired, coming up to Charlie.

"Somebody poisoned Henry Brickler's collie last night," replied Charlie. There was a dark scowl on his chubby face.

"You don't mean that corking dog up at the white house on the--"

"Yep. That's the one," replied Charlie harshly. "Anybody that would poison a dog ought to be tarred and feathered."

"Who did it?"

"You don't suppose a man mean enough to give an unsuspectin' dog a dose of poison would be kind enough to pin his card on the gatepost, do you? I should say not!"

"But why on earth should any one want to poison that big beautiful dog?" cried Courtney indignantly. "Had he bitten anybody?"

"Not as anybody knows of. Henry says he never harmed a living soul. That dog--"

"By George!" exclaimed Courtney suddenly. "This reminds me of something. I passed a couple of men last night down at the corner where you turn up to Miss Crown's. They were leaning against the fence on the opposite side of the road, and I had the queerest sort of feeling about them. I felt that they were watching me. I remember turning my head to look back at them. They were still standing there. It was too dark to see what they looked like--"

"Wait a second," broke in Charlie. "Here's Bill Foss, the constable. Tell it to him, Court."

The town constable, vastly excited, came up the street, accompanied by two or three stern-visaged citizens.

"Well, by thunder!" growled the officer, wiping his forehead. "Somebody's been making a wholesale job of it. Dick Hurdle's 'Jackie' and Bert Little's 'Prince' are dead as doornails. That makes three. Now, who the hell,--"

"Just a second,--just a second," cried A. Lincoln Pollock, elbowing his way into the thick of the new group. "Let me get the facts. You first, Dick. Where did you find your dog's remains? Now, take

it calm, Dick. Don't cuss like that. I can't print a word of it, you know,--not a word. Remember there are ladies present, Dick. You've got to--"

Mr. Hurdle said he didn't give a cuss if all the women in town were present, he was going to say what he thought of any blankety-blank,--and so on at great length, despite the fact that the ladies crowded even a little closer, evidently reluctant to miss a word of his just and unbridled blasphemy.

The occasion demanded the sonorous efficiency of Mr. Richard Hurdle. In all Windomville there was no one so well qualified to do justice to the situation as he. (Later on, Charlie Webster was heard to remark that "as long as these dogs had to be killed, it's a great relief that Dick's was one of 'em, because he's got the best pair of lungs in town. He can expand his chest nearly seven inches, and when he fills all that extra space up with words nobody ever even heard of before, people clear over in Illinois have to rush out and shoo their children into the house and keep 'em there till it blows over.")

Doctor Smith came rattling up in his Ford, hopped out, and started to enter the drug store. Catching sight of the druggist in the crowd, he stopped to bawl out:

"Who's been buying prussic acid of you, Sam Foster? What do you mean by selling--"

"I ain't sold a grain of prussic acid in ten years," roared Mr. Foster. "Or any other kind of poison. Don't you accuse ME of--"

"Anything new, Doc? Anything new?" cried the editor of the Sun, rushing up to the doctor.

"They got that dog of Alix Crown's. I tried to save him,--but he was as good as dead when I got there. Of all the damnable outrages--"

"Miss Crown's dog?" cried Courtney, aghast, "Good God! Why,--why, it will break her heart! She LOVED that dog! Men! We've got to find the scoundrel. We've got to FIX him. He ought to be strung up. Has any one called Miss Crown up, Doctor? She is in the city. She--"

"Mrs. Strong called her up. The automobile started for town fifteen or twenty minutes ago to bring her home."

"Keep your shirt on, Court," warned Charlie Webster. "You'll bust a blood vessel. Cool off! There's no use talkin' about GETTING him. Whoever it was that planted these dog-buttons around town was slick enough to cover up his tracks. We'll never find out who did it. It's happened before, and the result is always the same. Dead dogs tell no tales."

"But those two fellows I saw down at the corner last night--"

"Would you be able to identify them?"

"No,--hang it all! It was too dark. It was about half-past nine. Why, earlier in the evening I was at Miss Crown's. I saw the dog. He was on the terrace. He growled at me,--he always growled at me. He didn't like me. Mrs. Strong came to the door and called him into the house. I am sure he was all right then. When is he supposed to have got the poison, Doctor?"

"This morning. She let him out of the house about seven o'clock. Paid no attention to him till he came crawling around to the kitchen door some time afterward. He just laid down and kicked a few times,--that's what makes me think it was prussic acid. It knocks 'em quick."

"Come on, Charlie," cried Courtney, clutching the other's arm. "We must go up to the house. There may be some trace,--something that will give us a clue."

He was at the house when the car returned without Alix. She had sent the chauffeur back with instructions to bury the dog. She could not bear looking at him. She wanted it to be all over with before she came home.

"I don't blame her," said Charlie soberly. "Shows how much she thought of Sergeant when she's willing to pay five hundred dollars reward for the capture of the man or men who poisoned him."

"Where did you hear that?" demanded Courtney, surprised.

"Ed Stevens says she told him to authorize Bill Foss to have reward notices struck off over at the Sun office, offering five hundred cash. She always said that dog was the best friend she had on earth."

"But five hundred dollars! Why, good Lord, you can buy a dozen police dogs for that amount of--"

"You couldn't have bought Sergeant for ten times five hundred," interrupted Charlie. "You see, as a matter of fact, he didn't actually belong to Alix."

"You must be crazy. She has had him since he was a puppy three months old."

"Sure, But, all the same, he didn't belong to her. He belonged to David Strong. Davy got him in France in the spring of 1918 and sent him clear over here for his mother to take care of for him."

Courtney was silent for a moment. "It's strange Miss Crown never told me this," he said, biting his lip.

"Well," said Charlie quaintly, "far as that goes, I don't suppose it ever occurred to her to tell Sergeant he belonged to somebody else, but even if she had I don't reckon it would have made a darn' bit of difference to him. He would have gone on loving her, just the same,--and workin' twenty-four hours a day for her, Sundays and holidays included. A dog don't care who he belongs to, Court, but he's mighty darned particular about who belongs to him."

"I can't understand why he never seemed to like me," mused Courtney.

"Well, maybe," began Charlie soberly, "--maybe, after all, he DID sort of know that he was Davy Strong's dog."

II

For three days Windomville talked of nothing but the "dog murders." The Sun came out on Thursday with a long and graphic account of the mysterious affairs of Monday night, including the views and theories of well-known citizens. It also took occasion to "lambast" Constable Foss with great severity. The Constable, being a Republican, (and not a subscriber to the Sun), was described as about the most incompetent official Windomville had ever known, and that it would have been quite possible for the miscreant or miscreants to have poisoned every dog in town, in broad daylight, accompanied by a brass band, without Bill ever "getting onto it."

It goes without saying that everybody in town was stimulated to prodigious activity by the reward offered by Miss Crown. Notices were stuck up in the postoffice and on all the telephone poles. A great many embarrassing incidents resulted, and three fist-fights of considerable violence occurred,--for the gentlemen accused of the crimes took drastic and specific means of establishing complete and satisfactory alibis.

Courtney Thane chafed under the prolonged absence of Alix Crown. Valuable time was being wasted. He had assisted at the burial of Sergeant, and had shed tears with Mrs. Strong while Ed Stevens, the chauffeur, was filling in the grave up back of the orchard; and he had done further homage to the dead by planting a small American flag at the head of the mound and,--as an afterthought,--the flag of Belgium at the foot.

He felt that he had done very well by a dog that would have torn him to pieces if encouraged by the merest whisper of the words "sic 'im!"

Alix returned late on Friday afternoon. He had a box of roses, ordered from the city for him by Miss Flora Grady, awaiting her, and with them a tender little note of sympathy.

She sat for a long time with Mrs. Strong. Her dark eyes softened and filled with tears as David's mother gently stroked her hair and sought by words to convince her that David would understand.

"It wasn't your fault, Alix darling," she protested. "David won't mind,--not in the least. Sergeant didn't really mean anything to him. He was yours more than he was David's. Don't you worry about David's feelings, dear. He--"

"You don't understand, Aunt Nancy,--you don't understand at all," Alix repeated over and over again in her distress.

"You're just worrying yourself sick over it," said the older woman. "Why, you look all tuckered out, child,--I was shocked when you first came in. Now, don't be foolish, dear. I tell you it will be all right with David. I wrote him all about it, and--what's that you are saying?"

"You don't suppose he will think I--think I did it, Aunt Nancy?" Alix whispered bleakly.

"Think you--for the land's sake, Alix, what on earth are you saying? Are you stark, staring crazy? You come right upstairs and get into bed this minute. My land, I--I believe you're going to be sick. You've got the queerest look in your eyes. Come on, now, deary, and--"

"I am sick,--just sick with unhappiness, Aunt Nancy," sobbed the girl. "You don't know,--you don't understand. Oh, he couldn't believe I would do such a thing as THAT! He couldn't think me so cruel, and wicked and--and spiteful."

"Now, listen to me," said Mrs. Strong sternly. "What is the meaning of all this? What has happened between you and David that makes you talk like this? Tell me,--tell me this minute, Alix Crown."

"Hasn't he told you--written you about ANYTHING?" cried the girl.

"I don't know what you are driving at, Alix, but whatever it is I KNOW David hasn't got anything against you that would make you say such things as you've just been saying." She hesitated a moment and then laid her hand on Alix's head. "I've been wondering a whole lot of late, Alix. Have you and David had a--a misunderstanding?"

"We--we don't like each other as--as we used to, Aunt Nancy," said the girl, lifting her head almost defiantly to look David's mother full in the eyes.

"Is it David's fault?" asked Mrs. Strong after a moment.

"I--I wish you wouldn't ask me anything more about it. At least, not now."

"Is it David's fault?" demanded the other once more, insistently.

"I will say this much; it isn't my fault," replied Alix stiffly.

Mrs. Strong smiled,--a tender, loving smile.

"I think I could straighten everything out if David were only here," she said. "I would take you both across my knee and give you a good sound spanking. It used to work beautifully when you were children,--and I think it would work now. I--I wonder if it would help matters any if I were to spank--No, I'm sure it wouldn't. To do any good at all David would have to be here to see me spanking you and to beg me to let you off and give it to him just twice as hard."

"Oh, Aunt Nancy," cried Alix eagerly, "if you only WOULD! How I wish I were a little girl again! And David a little boy!"

Then she fled from the room. Nancy Strong put her hand over her eyes and sighed.

"I wish David were here," she said to herself. "If he were only here today."

During dinner that evening Alix was strangely repressed. It was plain to Mrs. Strong that she was inwardly agitated. After they left the table she became visibly nervous. She was "fidgety," to speak the thought of her perplexed companion. Time and again she started and appeared to be listening intently, and always there was a queer little expression in her eyes as of expectancy. Once or twice Mrs. Strong surprised a flash of anxiety,--aye, even fear,--in them.

"You haven't read your letters yet, Alix," she said at last, seeking for some means to divert the girl's thoughts. "There is quite a pile of them there on the table."

"I don't feel like reading letters tonight," said Alix. "They can wait till tomorrow." She arose, however, and hurriedly ran through the pile. "I wrote to David before dinner, Aunt Nancy," she said suddenly. "A long letter about Sergeant's death. I wanted him to know how miserably I feel about it."

"Bless your heart, he'll know that without your telling him, child. I am glad you wrote to him, however."

Alix came to a letter addressed in an unfamiliar hand,--a bold, masculine scrawl. The postmark was Chicago. She tore it open. It began with "Dear Alix." She quickly turned to the last page. It was signed "Addison Blythe." A "thank you" letter, of course.

Her back was to Mrs. Strong as she stood beside the table, bending slightly forward to get the full light from the library lamp. She read the letter through to the end; then she walked over to the fireplace and threw it into the flames. Her face had lost every vestige of colour:

DEAR ALIX: [it began] You will no doubt throw this letter into the fire the instant you have finished reading it, and you will hate me for having written it. Nevertheless, I am doing so because I think it is my duty. I offer no apology. I only ask you to believe that my intentions are good. It is best to come straight to the point. I have talked it all over with Mary and she approves of this letter. What I am about to say still requires official confirmation. I do not speak with authority, you must understand. I am merely giving you certain bits of information I have obtained from men who were in France in 1915 and 1916. It rests with you to believe or disbelieve. In any case, if you are wise, you will at least take the trouble to investigate. I am at your service. If I can help you in any way, please call upon me. If you desire it, I will provide you with the names of at least three men who were in Ambulance, all of whom have answered my letters of inquiry. One of these men met Courtney Thane in Paris in November, 1915. He was living at the Hotel Chatham with his mother. She had a husband up at the front, fighting with the French. This husband was a count or something of the sort and a good many years her junior. My informant writes me that young Thane, who drank a great deal and talked quite freely of family affairs, told him that his mother had married this young Frenchman a few months before the war broke out and went to Paris to live with him. He went so far as to say that the Frenchman married her for her money and he hoped the Germans would make a widow of her again before it was too late. According to this chap, Thane had also been in Paris since the beginning of the war. He spent money like a drunken sailor and touched nothing but the high spots. The second or third time he met him, Thane said he would like to get into the Ambulance. His mother, however, was bitterly opposed to his joining up. The last time he saw him, he had on an Ambulance uniform and was as drunk as a lord in one of the cafes. My friend had it straight from fellows out at Neuilly that Thane hadn't worn the uniform a week before it was taken away from him and he was kicked out of the service in disgrace.

One of the other chaps has written me, saying that he was at the base hospital when Thane was stripped of his uniform. He was not a witness to this, but he heard other fellows and the nurses talking about it. Not only was his uniform taken away, but he was ordered to get out of Paris at once. They heard afterward that he went to Madrid with his mother. He was never at Pont-a-Mousson. It is obvious that he was not in the Vosges sector, in view of the fact that he lasted less than a week in the Ambulance, and did a vast amount of carousing in a uniform that I revere.

It is up to you, Alix. The records of the American Ambulance are available. You can obtain all the information you desire, and I beg of you to get into communication with Mr. Hereford or Mr. Andrew or some other official at once. I append below the addresses of several persons to whom you may write. They were high in authority. They will give you facts.

I was convinced that Thane was not on the level when I met him that day. His stories did not jibe. I said nothing to you at the time, because I could not be sure of my ground. I think I am reasonably sure now.

I may add that I have written to Col. Andrew and others on my own hook. If you care to see their replies, when I get them, I shall send them to you. All you have to do is to say the word. In any case, I ask you to believe that my devotion and Mary's deep and honest love are the excuse for this letter, which you may show to Mr. Thane if you see fit. I have no right to question his statement that he served in the Royal Air Force. I know nothing to the contrary. I speak only of the Ambulance. I am, dear Alix,

Yours devotedly,

ADDISON BLYTHE.

CHAPTER XV

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

Mrs. Strong, observing her pallor, arose quickly and went to Alix's side, "What is it, dear?" she cried. "What was in that letter? You are as white as a ghost." Receiving for answer a pitiful little smile that was not so much a smile as a grimace of pain, she placed her hand on the girl's shoulder. "Why did you destroy it?"

"I--I don't know," murmured Alix through set, rigid lips.

"Yes, you DO know," said the other firmly.

Alix looked dumbly into her old friend's eyes for a moment, and then her honest heart spoke: "I destroyed it, Aunt Nancy, because I was afraid to read it again. It was from Addison Blythe. He has been making inquiries concerning Courtney Thane. In that letter he said things which, if true, make Courtney out to be a most--a most unworthy person."

She turned to look into the fire, her eyes narrowing. The black, flaky remnants of the letter were still fluttering on the hearth. As she watched, the draft caught them and sent them swirling up the chimney.

A high wind was blowing outside. It whistled mournfully around the corners of the house. Somewhere on the floor above a door, buffeted

by the wind from an open window, beat a slow and muffled measure against its frame.

David's mother saw the colour slowly return to her companion's face. She waited. Something akin to joy possessed her. She was afraid to speak for fear that her voice would betray her. At last she said:

"We know nothing about Mr. Thane except what he has told us, Alix."

The girl looked searchingly into her eyes.

"You do not like him, Aunt Nancy. I have felt it from the beginning. Is it because you are David's mother?"

Mrs. Strong started. The direct question had struck home. She was confused.

"Why,--Alix,--I--what a silly thing to ask. What has David to do with it?"

Alix was still looking at her, broodingly. "Why don't you like him, Aunt Nancy?"

"Have I ever said I didn't like him?"

"No. But I know. I know that Charlie Webster does not like him. I knew that Addison did not like him."

Mrs. Strong could not resist the impulse to add: "And Sergeant did not like him."

"And you think THAT convicts him?" said the girl, half ironically.

"I have a good deal of faith in dogs," muttered Mrs. Strong, flushing.

Alix's gaze went to the huge vase of roses on the table. Then she turned quickly to look once more into her companion's eyes.

"You believe that Courtney poisoned him, don't you?"

"I have no more reason for believing it than you have, Alix," returned Mrs. Strong calmly.

"Why,--why do you say that?" cried the girl, startled.

"Because you would not have asked the question if you hadn't been--well, wondering a little yourself, Alix."

"Oh,--I don't want to think it," cried Alix miserably. "I don't want to think of it!"

"No more do I want to think it. Listen to me, Alix. I confess that

I do not like this man. I have no way of explaining my feeling toward him. He has always been polite and agreeable to me. He has never done a thing that I can call to mind that would set me against him. Maybe it's because he is not of my world, because he comes from a big city, because deep in his heart he probably looks down on us Hoosiers. I will go farther, Alix, and say that I do not trust him. That is a nasty thing to say. It is none of my business, but I--I wish you did not like him so well, Alix."

"It would appear that my friends are taking more than an ordinary interest in my welfare," said Alix slowly, and with some bitterness. "Is it possible that you all believe me incapable of taking care of myself?"

"Smarter women than you, Alix Crown, have been fooled by men," said the other sententiously. "Oh, I don't mean the way you think, my child,--so don't glare at me like that. I know you can take care of yourself THAT way,--but how about falling in love? And getting married? And finding out afterward that roses don't grow on cactus plants? That's how women are fooled,--and you're no different from the rest of us."

"I think,--I am quite sure that he is in love with me, Aunt Nancy," said Alix, somewhat irrelevantly. There was no sign of gladness, however, nor of triumph, in her dark, brooding eyes.

"That's easy to understand. The point is, Alix,--are you in love with him?"

Alix did not answer at once. The little frown in her eyes deepened.

"I don't think so, Aunt Nancy," she said at last. "I don't believe it is love. That is what troubles me so. It is something I cannot understand. I don't know what has come over me. I will be honest with you,--and with myself. I do not really trust him. I don't believe he is all that he claims to be. And yet,--and yet, Aunt Nancy, I,--I--"

"Don't try to tell me," broke in the older woman gently. "My only sister thought she was in love with Terry Moore, a fellow who had been in the penitentiary once for stealing, and was a drunkard, a gambler, and a bad man with women, and all that. She was crazy about him. She ran off with him and got married. She never was in love with him, Alix. She hated him after a few weeks. He just cast some kind of a spell over her--not a mental spell, you may be sure. It was something physical. He was slick and smart and good looking, and he just made up his mind to get her. A man can be awful nice when he has once set his heart on getting a girl,--and that's what fools 'em, great and small. All the mistakes are not made by ignorant, scatter-brained girls, my dear. My father used to say that the more sense a woman has, the more likely she is to do something foolish. Now, Alix dear, I know just how it is with you. Courtney Thane has cast a spell over you. I believe in spells, same as the

old New Englander used to believe in witchcraft. You don't love him, you don't actually believe in him. You--you are sort of like a bird that is being charmed by a snake. It knows it ought to fly away and yet it can't, because it's so interested in what the snake is going to do next. Thane is attractive. He is, far as I know, a gentleman. At any rate, he would pass for one, and that's about all you can expect in these days. The thought has entered both our minds that he put Sergeant out of the way. Well, my dear, I don't believe either of us would ever dream of connecting him with it if there wasn't something back in our minds that has been asking questions of us ever since he came here. You say you were afraid to read Mr. Blythe's letter again. Does that mean you are afraid everything he says is true?"

"Oh, I can't believe it,--I must not allow myself to even THINK it," cried the girl. "Why, if what Addison says is true, Courtney Thane is not fit to--There must be some mistake, Aunt Nancy. There were two men of the same name. _I_ WILL NOT BELIEVE IT!"

The two tall women stood tense and rigid, side by side, their backs to the fire, gazing straight before them down the lamp-lit room.

"Has Addison Blythe any reason for lying to you, Alix?" asked the elder quietly.

"Of course not," Alix answered impatiently. "There is some mistake, that's all."

"Do you mind telling me what he says?"

"Mr. Thane is coming to see me tonight," said the girl, uneasily. "He may come at any moment now. What time is it?"

"Ten minutes of eight. He never comes before half-past." She waited a moment, and then went on deliberately: "I always had an idea it was because he wanted to be sure Sergeant was in the house and not out in the yard."

Alix closed her eyes for a second or two, as if by doing so it were possible to shut out the same thought that had floated through Mrs. Strong's mind.

"But he need not be afraid of Sergeant now," she said, with a little tremor in her voice. "He will come earlier tonight." The unintentional sarcasm did not escape Mrs. Strong. "Wait till tomorrow, Aunt Nancy. Then I may tell you."

"You are trembling, dear. I wish you would let me make your excuses to him when he comes. Don't see him tonight. Let me tell him--"

Alix turned squarely and faced her. There was a harassed, haunted expression in her eyes,--and yet there was defiance.

"I stayed away five days," she said huskily. "For five days I kept away from him. Then I--I gave up. I couldn't stand it any longer. I had to come home. Now, you have the truth. I just simply HAD to see him, Aunt Nancy,--I just HAD to."

"Then,--then it IS a spell," cried the other, dismay in her voice. "You are not yourself, Alix. This is not you who say these things."

"Oh, yes, it is!" cried the girl recklessly. "I wanted to come home. I wanted to see him. I don't love him, but I wanted to be with him. I don't trust him, but here I am. Now you have it all! I want to see him!"

Mrs. Strong was looking past her. She stared hard at the window in the far end of the room, her eyes narrowed, her chin thrust slightly forward. Then suddenly she clutched the girl's arm, her eyes now widespread with alarm.

"Look!" she whispered shrilly, pointing.

The flush faded from Alix's face; the reckless, defiant light left her eyes, and in its place came fear.

II

Plainly outlined in the window was the face of a masked man. A narrow black mask, through which a pair of eyes gleamed brightly.

The exposed lower portion of the face, save for the heavily bearded upper lip, was ghastly white. Brief as this glimpse was, they were able to see that he wore a cap, pulled well down over his forehead.

For a few seconds the two women stood as if petrified, their eyes wide and staring, their hearts cold, their tongues paralyzed. They were gazing straight into his shining eyes. Suddenly he turned his head for a quick, startled glance over his shoulder. The next instant he was gone, vanishing in the blackness that hung behind him like the magician's curtain in a theatre. They heard rapid footsteps on the veranda, the crash of a chair overturned, then a loud shout, and again the sound of flying footsteps across the brick-paved terrace. Another shout, and still another, farther away.

"Quick!" screamed Alix, the first to recover her voice. "The telephone! Call the drug store. Bill Foss is there."

She ran swiftly out into the hall.

"Come back!" cried Mrs. Strong. "What are you doing? Don't open that door! He's got a pistol, Alix!"

Even as she spoke, the report of a pistol shot came to their ears. As Alix stopped short, her hand outstretched to clutch the door

knob, a second report came.

"Oh, my God!" she cried. "He has killed Courtney! He has shot Courtney!"

By this time, her companion had reached her side. She dragged her back from the door.

"Killed Courtney? What's the matter with you? Why do you say he has killed--"

"Don't you see--can't you understand? It was Courtney who surprised him. That's why he ran. He shot,--oh, let go of me! Let go of me, I say!"

"I'll do nothing of the sort," cried Mrs. Strong. "Do you want to get shot? Come away from this door!"

A door slammed against the wall at the back of the house. Some one came running through the dining-room. First the cook, then the little waitress, dashed into the hall.

"Wha-what is it? What's the matter?" shouted the former. "What was that shootin'--"

"Where is Stevens?" demanded Mrs. Strong, as she fairly pushed Alix into the living-room. "Call him! Isn't he out there in--"

"He went out,--half hour ago,--out," stuttered the waitress. "Who's been--what's happened to Miss Alix?"

"Nothing! Go and yell for Ed! Thieves! On the porch. Don't stand there, Hilda. Go out back and scream!"

"Oh, my God! Ed's killed! He's been shot! My husband's been shot!" It was the cook who sent this lamentation to the very roof of the house.

Mrs. Strong whispered fiercely in Alix's ear: "That's it! Ed is the one who surprised him. Courtney nothing! Now, you stay here! I'll telephone. Don't you dare go outside, Alix Crown. A stray bullet--"

Far away sounded the third shot, muffled by distance and the shriek of the wind....

Mrs. Strong was off somewhere trying to telephone. Shrill voices, out back, were screaming. Alix stood alone in the middle of the long room, staring at the window in which the sinister face had appeared. She had not moved in what seemed to be an age. A strange, incredible thing was creeping through her mind,--a thought that was not a part of her, something that seemed to shape itself outside of her brain and force its way in to crowd out the fear and anxiety that had gripped her but a few short moments before.

What would it mean to her if Courtney Thane were dead out there in the night?

It was not the question but the answer that fixed itself in her mind. She was unconscious of the one, but vividly aware of the other. His death would mean--emancipation! For one brief instant she actually LONGED for the word that he was dead! The reaction was swift, overwhelming.

"God!" she gasped, shutting her eyes and clenching her hands in an ecstasy of revulsion. "What a beast,--what a horrible beast I am! What a coward!"

Her knees trembled; an icy perspiration seemed to start out all over her body. She had wished him dead! She had grasped at THAT as the solution! Her heart had leaped joyously! It was as if some great weight suddenly had been lifted from it. Now she was numb with horror. What devilish power had taken possession of her in that brief, soul-destroying instant? She shuddered. She was afraid to open her eyes. She reached out with her hand for the support of the table. She had longed for some one to come and tell her that he was dead!

Some one was pounding on the outer door. She had a dim, vague impression that this pounding had been going on for some time. A sort of paralysis benumbed her sensibilities. Her eyes were now wide open, staring. Had her wish come true? Was some, one come to tell her that her horrible wish had come true? Suddenly the fetters fell away. She rushed frantically to the door and turned the knob. The driving wind flung it open with a force that almost swept her off her feet.

Thane stood on the threshold, hatless, panting. The light from the hall, falling upon his face, revealed a long red stain that ran from temple to chin. As she drew back, alarmed, he staggered into the hall, limping painfully, and pushed the door shut behind him.

"Oh!" she gasped.

He shot a swift, searching glance down the hall and into the living-room. Then he held out his arms to her. She was gazing spell-bound into his eager, shining eyes. He waited. She came to him as if drawn by some overpowering magnet. His arms closed about her....She was crushed against his body, she seemed a part of him. His arms were like smothering coils that pressed the life out of her; his hungry lips were fastened upon hers, hot and lustful.

Presently she began to struggle. Shame,--a vast, sickening shame,--possessed her. She was conscious of the wild, increasing lust that mastered him. She tried to tear herself from contact with his body, as from something base, unclean, revolting. His kisses held her. She was powerless to resist the passion that swept over

her. Once more she surrendered,--and then came the shame, the overwhelming shame. She was debased, defiled! She put her hand to his face and pushed frantically to release herself from those consuming, unholy lips.

Suddenly he freed her, and sprang back, panting but triumphant. She heard him whisper, hoarsely, rapturously:

"God!"

Some one was coming. He had caught the sound of footsteps,--somewhere. Alix sank breathless, rigid, almost fainting, upon the hall-seat.

"Darling!" he whispered passionately. She half arose, caught once more by the irresistible spell that had first swept her into his embrace. He shook his head. Then she heard him speak. He was looking past her.

"I'm all right, Mrs. Strong. Don't mind me. Telephone for help."

"I have telephoned," cried Mrs. Strong, coming toward them quickly.

"Help is coming. Good heavens! You are bleeding! Were you hit?"

III

The question aroused Alix. She was aware of something wet and sticky on the palm of her hand. She looked. It was covered with blood. Then she remembered putting her hand against his cheek. As if fascinated she stared for a second or two before her wits returned. Mrs. Strong must not see that bloody hand. She would know! Guiltily she clenched her fingers again and thrust her hand behind her back. She shuddered at the feel of the moist, sticky substance, and turned suddenly sick. Her one thought was to get to her room where she could wash away the tell-tale evidence. Again she heard him speaking, and hung on his words.

"Nothing but a scratch. I fell while chasing him. He got the start of me. My overcoat bothered me. I got it off, but not in time. It's out there somewhere. My rotten old leg is the worst. I twisted it when I jumped over the fence. That's when I fell. Tripped over some bushes or something. I was gaining on him. Up in the woods, you see. He was making for the road above. Oh, if this leg of mine was any good, I would have--" He broke off short to grip his knee with both hands, his face twitching with pain. The sentences came jerkily, breathlessly.

"Send for Dr. Smith!" Alix cried out suddenly. "Be quick! He has been shot,--I know he has been shot. Go--"

"It's a scratch, I tell you, Alix," he protested. "He didn't get me. He fired at me, but it was dark. I'm all right. There is no time to lose. If they get after him at once they'll catch him. I can show them which way he went. Where the devil are they? We ought

to have every man in town out there in the woods. Did you tell 'em to bring guns? He's armed. He--"

"You ARE hurt," cried Alix. "You MUST have the doctor. Oh, for heaven's sake, DO SOMETHING!" The last was directed impatiently to Mrs. Strong.

"I'll give him a basin of water,--and some court plaster," said the older woman, who had looked closely at the scratch on the young man's cheek. "It doesn't amount to anything,--if that's all, Mr. Thane?"

"That's all,--except my knee, and that will be all right in a few minutes. Let me sit down here a minute. Not in there,--I'm covered with dirt and burrs and,--I might get some of this filthy blood on,--that's all right, Mrs. Strong, thank you. I'll be able to go out with the gang as soon as they come. Gad! It's going to be great sport. Man-hunting!"

Alix was leaning against the end of the hall-seat, watching him as if fascinated. He bent an ardent, significant look upon her, and her eyes widened slightly under the contact.

"I'll get some water ready for you in the kitchen, and a--" began Mrs. Strong, but Alix, suddenly alive, intercepted her with a cry.

"No! I will go, Aunt Nancy,--I insist!" And before Mrs. Strong could offer a word of protest, she flashed past her and was running up the stairs.

A look of chagrin leaped into Courtney's eyes. He had counted on another minute or two alone with her. Under his breath he muttered an oath.

Alix's bedroom door opened and closed. Mrs. Strong was still looking in astonishment up the staircase.

"I--she's pretty badly upset, Mr. Thane," she said at last. "That face in the window,--and everything."

"Good Lord,--you don't mean to say you saw him?"

"Yes,--looking in that window over there. Only for a second. You must have scared him away."

"Then, by George, you can identify him!"

"He had a mask on. Didn't you see his face?"

"No. It was dark. Masked, you say. That's bad. It will be hard to swear--Still, I saw his figure. Short, heavy fellow. Wore a cap."

She continued to look anxiously up the stairs.

"Wait here," she said shortly. "I must go up to her. Go to the kitchen if you like, and wash the blood off. I'll be back in a jiffy."

He waited till she was out of sight, and then limped into the living-room,--but with a swiftness incredible in one with a twisted knee. Going direct to the fireplace, he took something out of his coat pocket and, after a glance at door and window, quickly consigned it to the flames. A small black object it was, that crumpled softly in his palm and was consumed in a flash by the flames. A moment later he entered the kitchen, bringing consternation to the two excited domestics, both of whom sent up cries of alarm at the sight of his bloody face.

Meanwhile Mrs. Strong had surprised Alix in her bathroom, frantically washing her hands. She looked up and saw the housekeeper standing in the door behind her. The bowl was half full of reddish water. The expression of disgust in her eyes remained for a moment and then gave way to confusion. Neither spoke for some time.

"What are you doing?" asked Mrs. Strong.

"Oh, Aunt Nancy!" came in a choked voice from the girl's lips.

"Is that blood?"

"Yes," replied Alix, looking away.

"I--I understand. Oh, Alix,--Alix!"

"I don't know what made me do it,--I couldn't help myself. I--Oh, it was terrible! I don't love him,--I don't love him! As long as I live,--as long as I live, I shall never forget it. I shall never know anything like it again. I could feel my soul being dragged out of my body,--Oh, Aunt Nancy! What am I to do? What is to become of me?"

"There's only one thing for you to do now," said the other, slowly, levelly. "Stay in this room. Lock the door. Don't see him again. Keep away from him. He's--he's bad, Alix!"

"But he is not a coward!" cried the girl eagerly. "He followed that man, he chased him, he was shot at,--that is not what a coward would do. Addison Blythe is mistaken. Those men are mistaken. He--"

"I hear people downstairs,--and out in the yard. You must obey me, Alix. You must not see him again tonight. God in heaven, what kind of a spell has he cast upon you? The spell of the devil! Child, child,--don't you understand? That's what it is. The spell that makes women helpless! Stay here! I will send Hilda up to you."

"Why do you blame him for everything?" cried the girl hotly. "Doesn't a woman ever cast this spell you speak of? What defence has a man

against--"

"Do you call yourself an evil woman? Nonsense! Don't talk like that. I am not blaming him. He can't help himself. He loves you. That's not his fault. But you do not love him. You are afraid of him. You would run from him if you could. He must go away. You must send him away. Tell him of Blythe's letter. Face him with it. Tomorrow,--not tonight. You are not yourself tonight. Trust me, dearest Alix. Do as I tell you. Promise."

"I will not come down," said Alix slowly, and Mrs. Strong went out. She heard the key turn in the door.

CHAPTER XVI

ROSABEL

All night long bands of men scoured the woods and fields, with lanterns and dogs and guns. Courtney Thane, thrilled by that one glorious, overpowering moment of contact, sallied forth with the first of the searchers. He showed them where the masked man vaulted over the porch rail, and the course he took in crossing the terrace, below which Courtney's coat was found where he had cast it aside at the beginning of the chase. The first shot was fired as the man climbed over the fence separating the old-fashioned garden from the wooded district to the west, the second following almost immediately. Thane was over the fence and picking himself up from the ground after tripping when the last shot was fired. He ran forty or fifty yards farther on and then his knee gave out. Realizing that pursuit was useless under the circumstances, he hurried back to the house to give the alarm.

It appears that he first saw the man as he was nearing the top of the steps leading to the terrace. The fellow's figure, in a crouching position, was distinctly outlined against the lighted window.

"Kind of a funny time for a robber to be monkeyin' around a house," said Charlie Webster, after Courtney had concluded his brief story. "Eight o'clock is no time to figure on breaking into a house."

"He probably figured that the occupants would be at dinner," said Courtney. "Or maybe he was getting the lay of the land while there were lights to guide him. That is most likely the case. Lord, how I wish I had had a gun!"

"Maybe it's lucky you didn't," said Charlie. "Guns are pretty

treacherous things to monkey with, Court. You might have shot yourself."

"Oh, I guess I know how to handle a gun, Charlie," retorted Thane, after a perceptible pause.

"Anyhow," remarked Constable Foss, "we now know why that dog of Alix's was killed. This robber had things purty well sized up. He knowed he had to fix that dog first of all,--and that goes to show another thing. He is purty well posted around these parts. He knowed all about that dog. He ain't no tramp or common stranger. The chances are he ain't even a perfessional burglar. Maybe some dago,--or, by gosh, somebody we all know."

A chosen group waited at the roadside above the Windom place for automobiles which were to be used in the attempt to head off the invader. This was Courtney's idea. He suggested a wide cordon of machines and men as the only means of cutting off the fellow's escape.

"You're not likely to get anywhere, Foss, by keeping up a stern chase," he argued. "He has got too big a lead. Our only chance is to rush a lot of men out ahead of him in cars, and then work back through the woods."

A boy came up with Courtney's fedora hat, which he had picked up in the brush near the fence.

"There's a bullet hole through it, Mr. Thane," he cried in great excitement. "Lookee here!"

Sure enough there was a hole in the crown of the hat.

"Whew!" whistled Courtney, staring at the hat blankly. "I never dreamed--Why, good Lord, a couple of inches lower and he'd have got me. I remember my hat blowing off as I got up, but I thought it was the wind. Where did you find it, kid?"

"Back there by the fence."

"We must have that hat for evidence," said the constable. "Shows the calibre of the bullet, and all that. Bring it down to the office in the morning, Mr. Thane. Better put it on now. You'll ketch cold out here bareheaded."

By this time the lane and grounds were alive with excited people,--men, women and children. Several automobiles approached, sounding their horns. Men were shouting directions, dogs were barking, small children were squalling lustily. Shadowy, indistinct figures scuttled through the darkness, here and there coming into bold relief as they passed before the lamps of automobiles or entered the radius of light shed by an occasional lantern. Half the town was already on the scene, and the belated remainder was either on the way or

grimly guarding cash drawers in empty, deserted stores.

Courtney reluctantly announced that he did not feel up to accompanying the searchers, his leg was bothering him so. No, he didn't need a doctor. The confounded thing simply gave out on him whenever he got the least bit reckless, but it seldom if ever amounted to anything. Only made him realize that he couldn't "get gay" with it. He'd be all right in a day or two. Hobble a little, that's all,--like a lame dog. More scared than hurt, you know, etc., etc.

He picked his way through the ever-increasing crowd of agitated people, avoiding rampant automobiles and inquisitive citizens with equal skill, and approached Alix's gate. His blood was rioting. The memory of that triumphant moment when her warm body lay in his arms,--when her lips were his,--when his eager hand pressed the firm, round breast,--ah, the memory of it all set fire to his blood. She had come to him, she had clung to him, she had kissed him! He had won! She was his! He must see her again tonight, hold her once more in his arms, drink of the rapture that came through her lips, caress the throbbing heart she had surrendered to him. Anticipation sent the blood rushing to his head. He grew strangely dizzy. He narrowly escaped being struck by a car.

"The darned fools!" he muttered, as he leaped aside into the shallow ditch.

A figure separated itself from a group near the gate and approached him. There were no lights near and the lane was dark. He could not see the face of the woman who halted directly in front of him, barring the path.

"It is I, Courtney,--Rosabel," came in low, tremulous tones.

He stood stockstill, peering intently.

"Rosabel!" he repeated vacantly.

"I--I saw you. The auto lamp shone on your face."

Her teeth were chattering. Her voice was little more than a whisper.

"You--you poor child!" he cried. "What are you doing here? How do you happen to be--"

"I came over to spend the night with Annie Jordan. I--I do that quite often, Courtney. Aren't--aren't you ever coming to see me again?"

"I was planning to come over tomorrow, Rosie,--tomorrow sure. I've been meaning to run over to your house--"

"I--I thought you had forgotten all about us," she broke in, pathetically. "You wouldn't do that, would you? Didn't you get my

letters? I wrote four or five times and you never answered. You--you haven't forgotten, have you?"

"Bless your heart, no! I should say not. I've been so busy. Working like a dog on my book. The one we talked about, Rosie. The story of my experiences over in France, you know."

"Oh, Courtney, are you really, truly writing it?" she cried eagerly.

"Sure," he replied. "It's a tough job, believe me. I've been so busy I haven't even had time to write letters. Mother complains that I never write to her. Dear old mater,--I ought to be kicked for neglecting her. Stacks of unanswered letters. Really, it's appalling. But I've just got to finish this work. The publisher wants it before Christmas."

"You promised to read it to me as you wrote it, Courtney," she murmured wistfully. "Don't you remember?"

"Just as soon as I've got it in little better shape, Rosie. You see, it's an awful mess now. I'm trying so hard to concentrate. It would be different if I were an experienced writer. But I'm a terrible duffer, you know. The least little thing throws me off. I--"

"I wouldn't interfere for the world, Courtney. I will wait. I don't want to bother you. Please don't think about reading it to me now. But,--oh, Courtney, I have wanted to see you so much. You WILL come over, won't you. Or would you rather have me come--"

"I'll be over, Rosie,--tomorrow," he said hastily. "Or the day after, sure. I'm all done up. I can hardly stand on this leg. Did they tell you? I chased the robber up through the woods. Had a bad fall. Bunged up this rotten old knee again."

"You poor boy," she cried. "Yes, I heard them talking about how brave you were. And he shot at you, too. I saw the plaster on your face when the light shone on it a while ago. I was frightened. I forgot to ask you how bad it is. I forgot everything but--but just speaking to you. Is it dangerous? Is it a bad wound?"

"I don't know. The doctor is waiting for me up at Miss Crown's. They sent me back, the other fellows did. I wanted to go with the gang,--but I was weak and--Oh, I'll be all right. Don't you worry, little girl. Dr. Smith may slap me into bed,--"

"You must not be foolish, Courtney. Do what the doctor says. You must get well--oh, you MUST get well!"

She had come quite close to him and was peering at his face. Even in the darkness he could see her big, dark eyes. Her teeth no longer chattered, but there was a perilous quaver in her low, tense voice. She put out a hand to touch him. He drew back.

"I'll be as fit as a fiddle in no time at all," he said hurriedly.

"See you tomorrow, Rosie,--or as soon as the blamed old doctor turns me loose. I've got to be on my way now. He's waiting for me up there. May have to put a stitch in my mug,--and yank my leg like the devil, but--"

She still blocked his path.

"Courtney, I'm--I'm terribly unhappy. I want to see you,--very soon."

"I hear you have been ill, Rosie. Some one was telling me you were looking thin and--and all that sort of thing. I hope you're feeling better."

She waited a moment. When she spoke it was with difficulty.

"I'm awfully worried, Courtney," she cried, her voice little more than a whisper. He was silent, so after a little while she went on: "I wish I could die,--I wish I could die!"

"Come, come!" he said reassuringly. "You must not talk like that, Rosie. Cheer up! You're too young to talk about dying. Think what I've been through,--and I'm still alive! I'll run over tomorrow,--or next day,--and try to cheer you up a bit, little girl. So long. I've got to see the doctor. I'm--I'm suffering like the dickens."

"I mustn't keep you, Courtney," she murmured, stepping aside to let him pass. "Good night! You--you WILL come, won't you? Sure?"

"Sure!" he replied, and limped painfully away.

A little later Annie Jordan found her standing beside the road, where he had left her. She was looking up at the brightly lighted house at the top of the lane.

"Goodness!" cried Annie. "I thought you were lost, Rosie. Where on earth have you been?"

"Maybe I AM lost," replied the girl, and Annie, failing to see anything cryptic in the words, laughed gaily at the quaintness of them.

"Come on," she said, thrusting her arm through Rosabel's, "let's go back home. There's nothing doing here. And that wind cuts through one like a knife. Gee, it's fierce, isn't it?"

"I don't want to go in yet," protested Rosabel, hanging back.

"Let's wait awhile. Let's wait till Dr. Smith comes out. He's up there with--with Alix Crown. Maybe he can tell us how--"

"Doc Smith isn't up there. He's gone up the road in his car with

Dick Hurdle and--why, Rosie, you're shivering like a leaf. Have you got a chill? Come on home. We'll have Dr. Smith in as soon as he gets back to--"

"I don't want the doctor," cried Rosabel fiercely. "I won't have one, I tell you. I won't have one!"

CHAPTER XVII

SHADOWS

Greatly to Courtney's chagrin, his triumphal progress was summarily checked when he presented himself at the door. He could hardly believe his ears. Miss Crown was in her room and would not be able to see any one that night. She was very nervous and "upset," explained the maid, and had given orders to admit no one. Of course, Hilda went on to say, if Mr. Thane wanted to come in and rest himself, or if there was anything she or the cook could do for him,--but Courtney brusquely interrupted her to say that he was sure Miss Crown did not mean to exclude him, and directed Hilda to take word up to her that he was downstairs.

"It won't do any good," said Hilda, who was direct to say the least. "She's gone to bed. My orders is not to disturb her."

"Are they her orders or Mrs. Strong's orders?" demanded Courtney, driven to exasperation.

"All I can say, sir, is they're MY orders, sir," replied Hilda, quite succinctly.

"All right," said he curtly. Then, as an afterthought: "Please say that I stopped in to see if I could be of any further service to Miss Crown, will you, Hilda?"

He was very much crestfallen as he made his way down the steps to the lane. This wasn't at all what he had expected.

There were a number of people near the gate. Instead of going directly down the walk, he turned to the right at the bottom of the terrace and cut diagonally across the lawn. Coming to one of the big oaks he sat down for a moment on the rustic seat that encircled its base. Sheltered from the wind he managed to strike a match and light a cigarette. Assured that no one was near, he leaned over and felt with his hand under the bench. His fingers closed upon an object wedged between the seat and one of the slanting supports.

Quickly withdrawing it, he dropped it into his overcoat pocket, and, after a moment, resumed his progress, making for the carriage gate in the left lower corner of the grounds.

He had a sharp eye out for Rosabel Vick. He heard Annie Jordan's high-pitched voice in the road ahead of him and slackened his pace. In due time he limped up the steps of Dowd's Tavern.

Several women were in the "lounge," chattering like magpies in front of the fire. There were no men about. He went in and for ten minutes listened to the singing of his praises. Then, requesting a pitcher of hot water, he hobbled upstairs, politely declining not only the Misses Dowd's offer to bathe and bandage his heroic knee, but Miss Grady's bottle of witchhazel, Miss Miller's tube of Baume Analgesique and old Mrs. Nichols' infallible remedy for every ailment under the sun,--a flaxseed poultice.

The first thing he did on entering his room was to open his trunk and deposit therein the shiny object he had recovered from its hiding-place under the tree-seat. Before hanging his hat on the clothes-tree in the corner of the room, he thoughtfully examined the bullet hole in the crown.

"Thirty-eight calibre, all right," he reflected. Poking his forefinger through the hole, he enlarged it to some extent. "More like a forty-four now," he said in a satisfied tone.

Margaret Slattery brought up the hot water and some fresh firewood for his stove, in which the fire burned low.

"Would you be liking a drink of whiskey, Mr. Thane?" she inquired, with a stealthy look over her shoulder. "You're all done up,--and half-frozen, I guess."

"Whiskey?" he exclaimed. "There ain't no sitch animal," he lamented dolefully.

"Miss Jennie's got some cooking brandy stuck away in the cellar," whispered Margaret. "We use it at Christmas time,--for the plum pudding, you know. I guess it's the same thing as whiskey, ain't it?"

"Well, hardly. Still, I think I could do with a nip of it, Maggie."

"I'll see what I can do," said Margaret, and departed.

She did not return, for the very good reason that Miss Jennie apprehended her in the act of pouring something from a dark brown bottle into a brand new fruit jar.

"What are you doing there, Maggie?" demanded Miss Dowd from the foot of the cellar stairs.

Miss Slattery's back was toward her at the time. She was startled into hunching it slightly, as if expecting the lash of a whip,--an attitude of rigidity maintained during the brief period in which her heart suspended action altogether.

"I'm--I'm getting some vinegar for Mr. Thane to gargle with, Miss Jennie," she mumbled. "He's--he's got a sore throat."

"Let me smell that stuff, Maggie," said Miss Jennie sternly. One sniff was sufficient. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Margaret Slattery, leading a young man into temptation like this. You may be starting him on the road to perdition. It is just such things as this that--"

"Oh, gosh!" exclaimed Margaret, recovering herself. "Don't you go thinking he's as good as all that. From what he was telling me at breakfast the other day, he used to make the round trip to purgatory every night or so,--only he said it was paradise. Keep your old brandy. He wouldn't like it anyway. Not him! He says he's swallered enough champagne to float the whole American Navy."

"The very idea!" exclaimed Miss Jennie. "Go to your room, Maggie. It's bad enough for you to be stealing but when you make it worse by lying, I--"

"I'm quitting you in the morning," said Margaret, her Irish up.

"It won't be the first time," said Miss Jennie, imperturbably.

Courtney sat for a long time before the booming little stove. He forgot Margaret Slattery and her mission.

"I guess it took her off her feet," he reflected aloud. "That's the way with some of them. They get panicky. Go all to pieces when they find out what it really means to let go of themselves. God! She's wonderful!" He leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes; a smile settled on his lips. For a long time he sat there, fondling the memory of that blissful moment. A slight frown made its appearance after a while. He opened his eyes. His thoughts had veered. "What rotten luck! If it could only have been Alix instead of that--" He arose abruptly and began pacing the floor. After a long time he sighed resignedly. "I mustn't forget to telephone her tomorrow." Then he began to undress for bed.

He looked at his knee. There was a deep, irregular scar on the outside of the leg, while on the inside a knuckle-like protuberance of considerable size provided ample evidence of a badly shattered joint, long since healed. Along the thigh there was another wicked looking scar, with several smaller streaks and blemishes of a less pronounced character. He placed some hot compresses on the joint, gave it a vigorous massage, and, before getting into bed, worked it up and down for several minutes.

"Clumsy ass!" he muttered. "Next time you'll watch your step. Don't go jumping over fences in the dark. Gad, for a couple of minutes I thought I'd put it on the blink for keeps."

The next morning, up in the woods above Alix's house, the crude black mask was found, and some distance farther on an old grey cap, from which the lining and sweatband had been ripped. The search for the man, however, was fruitless. Constable Foss visited the camp of a gang of Italian railroad labourers near Hawkins and was reported to be bringing several indignant "dagoes" over to Windomville to see if Courtney or the two ladies could identify them. He was very careful to choose men with thick black moustaches.

Bright and early, Courtney repaired to the house on the hill. His progress was slow. Aside from the effort it cost him to walk, he was delayed all along the route by anxious, perturbed citizens who either complimented him on his bravery or advised him to "look out for that cut" on his cheek, or he'd have "a tough time if blood-poisoning set in."

Mrs. Strong admitted him.

"Well, when will she be able to see me?" he demanded on being informed that Alix was in no condition to see any one.

"I can't say," said Mrs. Strong shortly.

"Have you had the doctor in to see her?"

"No."

"Well, that's rather strange, isn't it?"

"Not at all, Mr. Thane. She isn't ill. She has had a shock,--same as I have had,--and she'll get over it in good time."

"You seem to have survived the shock remarkably well, Mrs. Strong," he said with unmistakable irony.

"How is the scratch on your face?" she asked, ignoring the remark.

"Amounts to nothing," he replied, almost gruffly. "I'll write a little note to Alix, if you'll be so good as to take it up to her."

"Very well. I'll see that she gets it. Will you write it here?"

"If you don't mind. I'll wait in case she wants to send down an answer."

"I'll get you some paper and pen and ink," said she.

"Some paper, that's all. I have a fountain pen."

He dashed off a few lines, folded the sheet of note paper and handed it to Mrs. Strong. He had written nothing he was unwilling for her to read. In fact, he expected her to read it as soon as she was safely out of his sight.

"She thinks she may feel up to seeing you tomorrow--or next day," reported the housekeeper on her return from Alix's room.

His rankling brain seized upon the words--" tomorrow--next day." He had used them himself only the night before. "Tomorrow,--or next day!" He frowned. Hang it all, was she putting him off? He experienced a slight chill.

"I will run in again in the morning," he said, managing to produce a sympathetic smile. "And I'll telephone this evening to see how she is."

All the way down the walk to the gate, he kept repeating the words "tomorrow,--or next day." In some inexplicable way they had fastened themselves upon him. At the gate he turned and looked up at Alix's bedroom windows. The lace curtains hung straight and immovable. It pleased him to think that she was peering out at him from behind one of those screens of lace, soft-eyed and longingly. Moved by a sudden impulse, he waved his hand and smiled.

His guess was right. She WAS looking down through the narrow slit between the curtains. Her eyes were dark and brooding and slightly contracted by the perplexity that filled them. She started back in confusion, her hand going swiftly to her breast. Was it possible that he could see through the curtains? A warm flush mantled her face. She felt it steal down over her body. Incontinently she fled from the window and hopped back into the warm bed she had left on hearing the front door close.

"How silly!" she cried irritably. She sat bolt upright and looked at her reflection in the mirror of her dressing-table across the room. Her night-dress had slipped down from one shapely shoulder; her dark, glossy hair hung in two long braids down her back; her warm, red lips were parted in a shy, embarrassed smile.

"I wonder--But of course he couldn't. Unless,--" and here the smile faded away,--"unless he possesses some strange power to see through walls and--Sometimes I feel that he has that power. If he could not see me, why did he wave his hand at me?"

There came a knock at her door. She was seized by a sudden panic. For a moment she was unable to speak.

"Alix! Are you awake?"

It was Mrs. Strong's voice. A vast wave of relief swept through her.

"Goodness!" she gasped, and then: "Come in, Aunt Nancy?"

"Courtney Thane has just been here," said the housekeeper as she approached the bed.

"Has he?" inquired Alix innocently.

"He left a note for you."

"Read it to me," said the girl.

"Dearest: I am grieved beyond words to hear that you are so awfully done up. I am not surprised. It was enough to bowl anybody over. I did not sleep a wink last night, thinking about it. I have been living in a daze ever since. I cannot begin to tell you how disappointed I am in not being able to see you this morning. Perhaps by tonight you will feel like letting me come. Ever yours, Courtney."

"Well?" said Mrs. Strong, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

A fine line appeared between Alix's eyes. She was deep in thought.

"Have they caught the man?" she asked, after a moment.

"Not that I know of. What's more, they'll never catch him. Bill Foss sent word up he was bringing several Italians here to see if we could identify one of them as the man."

"How can we be expected to identify a man whose face was covered by a mask?"

"Well, Bill is doing his best," replied Mrs. Strong patiently.

"We've got to say that much for him. Charlie Webster was here early this morning to say that the police up in town have been notified, and they're sending a detective out. But he won't be any better than Bill Foss, so it's a waste of time. What we ought to have is a Pinkerton man from Chicago."

Despite the calm, deliberate manner in which she spoke, there was an odd, eager light in Mrs. Strong's eyes.

"I wish you would go down to the warehouse, Aunt Nancy, and ask Charlie to take the car and go up to the city. Tell him to call up the Pinkerton offices in Chicago and ask them to send the best man they have. No one must know about it, however. Impress that very firmly upon Charlie. Not even the police--or Bill Foss. Have him arrange to meet the man in town and give him directions and all the information possible. Please do it at once,--and tell Ed to have the car ready."

"That's the way I like to hear you talk," cried Mrs. Strong.

Half an hour later, Charlie Webster was on his way to the city. He

had an additional commission to perform. Mrs. Strong was sending a telegram to her son David.

II

The next day a well-dressed, breezy-looking young man walked into Charlie's office and exclaimed:

"Hello, Uncle Charlie!"

"Good Lord!" gasped Charlie Webster. "It can't be--why, by gosh, if it ain't Harry! Holy smoke!" He jumped up and grasped the stranger's hand. Pumping it vigorously, he cried: "I'd know that Conkling nose if I saw it in Ethiopia. God bless my soul, you're--you're a MAN! It beats all how you kids grow up. How's your mother? And what in thunder are you doing here?"

"I guess I've changed a lot, Uncle Charlie," said the young man, "but you ain't? You look just the same as you did fifteen years ago."

"How old are you? My gosh, I can't believe my eyes."

"I was twenty-four last birthday. You--"

"If ever a feller grew up to look like his father, you have, Harry. You're the living image of George Conkling,--and you don't look any more like your mother than you look like me."

"Well, you and Mother look a lot alike, Uncle Charlie. She's thinner than you are but--"

"Well, I should hope so," exploded Charlie. "Take a chair, Harry,--and tell us all about yourself. Wait a minute. Sam, shake hands with my nephew, Harry Conkling,--Mr. Slutterback, Mr. Conkling. Harry lives up in Laporte. His mother--"

"Guess again, Uncle Charlie. No more Laporte for me. I've been living in Chicago ever since I got married. Working for--"

"Married? You married? A kid like you? Well, I'll--be--darned!"

"Sure. And I'm not Harry, Uncle Charlie. I'm Wilbur. Harry's two years older than I am. He's married and got a kid three years old. Lives in Gary."

"You don't mean to say you're little Wilbur? Little freckle-faced Wilbur with the pipe-stem legs?"

Mr. Webster's nephew took a chair near the stove, unbuttoned his overcoat, and held his hands to the fire. He was a tall, rather awkward young man, with large ears, a turned-up nose and a prominent "Adam's Apple."

"I'm working for one of the biggest oil companies in the world. We've got six hundred thousand acres of the finest oil-producing territory in the United States, and we control most of the big concessions in Honduras, Ecuador, Peru, Colombia and--thirty million dollar concern, that's all it is. Oh, you needn't look worried. I'm not going to try to sell you any stock, Uncle Charlie. That is, not unless you've got fifty thousand to invest. I'll tell you what I'm here for. My company wants to interest Miss Crown in--"

"Hold on a minute, Wilbur," interrupted Charlie firmly. "You might just as well hop on a train and go back to Chicago. If you're expecting me to help you unload a lot of bum oil stock on Miss Alix Crown you're barking up the wrong tree,--I don't give a cuss if you are my own sister's son. Miss Crown is my--"

The young man held up his hand, and favoured his uncle with a tolerant smile.

"I'm not asking your help, old chap. I've got a letter to her from Mr. Addison Blythe, one of our biggest stockholders. All I'm asking you to do is to put me up at your house for a day or two while I lay the whole matter before Miss Crown."

"I haven't got any house," said Charlie, rather helplessly. "Wait a second! Let me think. How long do you expect to be here, Wilbur?"

"I wouldn't be here more than half an hour if I could get Miss Crown to say she'd take--"

"Well, she's sick and can't see anybody for a couple of days,--'specially book agents or oil promoters. I was just thinking I might fix something up for you over at the Tavern where I'm staying. It won't cost you a cent, my boy. I'd be a darned cheap sort of an uncle if I couldn't entertain my nephew when he comes to our town,--out of a clear sky, you might say. I'll be mighty glad to have you, Wilbur, but you've got to understand I won't have Miss Crown bothered while she's sick."

"Permit me to remind you, Uncle Charlie, that I am a gentleman. I don't go butting in where I'm not wanted. My instructions from the General Manager are very explicit. I am to see Miss Crown when convenient, and give her all the dope on our gigantic enterprise,--that's all."

"By the way,--er,--is that your automobile out there?"

"It's one I hired in the city."

"You--er--didn't happen to bring your wife with you, did you? Because it would be darned awkward if you did. She'd have to sleep with Angie Miller or Flora--"

"She's not with me, Uncle Charlie,--so don't worry. Of course, if it isn't convenient for you to have me for a day or two, I can motor in and out from the city. Money's no object, you know. I've got a roll of expense money here that would choke a hippopotamus."

"Come on over to the Tavern, Wilbur. We'll see Miss Molly Dowd and fix things up. Sam, if anybody asks for me, just say I'll be back in fifteen minutes."

And that is how "Mortie" Gilfillan, one of the ablest operatives in the Pinkerton service, made his entry into the village of Windomville. Inasmuch as he comes to act in a strictly confidential capacity, we will leave him to his own devices, content with the simple statement that he remained two full days at Dowd's Tavern as the guest of his "Uncle Charlie"; that he succeeded in obtaining an interview with the rich Miss Crown, that he "talked" oil to everybody with whom he came in contact, including Courtney Thane; that he declined to consider the appeals of at least a score of citizens to be "let in on the ground floor" owing to the company's irrevocable decision to sell only in blocks of ten thousand shares at five dollars per share; that he said good-bye to Mr. Webster at the end of his second day and departed--not for Chicago but, very cleverly disguised, to accept a job as an ordinary labourer with Jim Bagley, manager of the Crown farms.

CHAPTER XVIII

MR. GILFILLAN IS PUZZLED

Three days passed. The village had recovered from its excitement. The Weekly Sun appeared with a long and harrowing account of the "vile attempt to rifle the home of our esteemed and patriotic citizeness," and sang the praises of Courtney Thane, whose "well-known valour, acquired by heroic services during the Great War," prevented what might have been "a most lamentable tragedy."

Those three days were singularly unprofitable to the "hero." He was unable to see Alix crown. He made daily visits to her home but always with the same result. Miss Crown was in no condition to see any one.

"But she saw this fellow Conkling," he expostulated on the third day. "He sold her a lot of phony oil stock. If she could see him, I--"

"He came all the way from Chicago to see her,--with a letter from

Mr. Blythe," explained Mrs. Strong. "She had to see him. I guess you can wait, can't you, Mr. Thane?"

"Certainly. That isn't the point. If I had seen her in time I should have warned her against buying that stock. She's been let in for a whale of a loss, that's all I can say,--and it's too late to do anything about it. Good Lord, if ever a woman needed a man around the house, she does. She--"

"I will tell her what you say," said Mrs. Strong calmly.

"Don't you do anything of the kind," he exclaimed hastily. "I was speaking to you as a friend, Mrs. Strong. She means a great deal to both of us. You understand how it stands with Alix and me, don't you? I--I would cheerfully lay down my life for her. More than that, I cannot say or do."

"She will be up by tomorrow," said Mrs. Strong, impressed in spite of herself by this simple, direct appeal. (All that day she caught herself wondering if he had cast his spell over her!)

"Please give her my love,--and say that I am thinking about her every second of the day," said he gravely, and went away.

Alix had received another letter from Addison Blythe. Enclosed with it was a communication from an official formerly connected with the American Ambulance. It was brief and to the point:

Courtney Thane volunteered for service in the American Ambulance in Paris in November, 1915. He was accepted and ordered to appear at the hospital at Neuilly-sur-Seine for instructions. His conduct was such that he was dismissed from the service before the expiration of a week, his uniform taken away from him, and a request made to the French Military authorities to see that he was ordered to leave the country at once. Our records show that he left hurriedly for Spain. He was a bad influence to our boys in Paris, and there was but one course left open to us. We have no account of his subsequent movements. With his dismissal from the service, he ceased to be an object of concern to us.

Alix did not destroy this letter. She locked it away in a drawer of her desk. She had made up her mind to confront Thane with this official communication. It was an ordeal she dreaded. Her true reason for refusing to see him was clear to her if to no one else: she hated the thought of hurting him! Moreover, she was strangely oppressed by the fear that she would falter at the crucial moment and that her half-guarded defences would go down before the assault. She knew his strength far better than she knew his weakness. She had had an illuminating example of his power. Was she any stronger now than on that never-to-be-forgotten night?...She put off the evil hour.

And on the same third day of renunciation, she had a letter from

David Strong. She wept a little over it, and driven finally by a restlessness such as she had never known before, feverishly dressed herself, and set forth late in the afternoon for a long walk in the open air. She took to the leaf-strewn woodland roads, and there was a definite goal in mind.

II

Courtney remembered Rosabel Vick.

"I guess I'd better call her up," he said to himself. "I ought to have done it several days ago. Beastly rotten of me to have neglected it. She's probably been sitting over there waiting ever since--Gad, she may; have some good news. Maybe she is mistaken."

He went over to the telephone exchange and called up the Vick house. Rosabel answered.

"That you, Rosie?...Well, I couldn't. I've been laid up, completely out of commission ever since I saw you....What?...I--I didn't get that, Rosie. Speak louder,--closer to the telephone."

Very distinctly now came the words, almost in a wail:

"Oh, Courtney, why--why do you lie to me?"

"Lie to you? My dear girl, do you know what you are--"

A low moan, and a harsh, choking sob smote his ear, and then the click of the receiver on the hook.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" he muttered angrily. "That's the last time I'll call you up, take it from me."

And it was the last time he ever called her up.

Then he, too, ravaged by uneasy thoughts, struck off into the country lanes, the better to commune with himself. In due course, he came to the gate leading up to the top of Quill's Window. Here he lagged. His gaze went across the strip of pasture-land to the deserted house above the main-travelled road. He started. His gaze grew more intense. A lone figure traversed the highway. It turned in at the gate, and, as he watched, strode swiftly up the path to the front door....He saw her bend over, evidently to insert a key in the lock. Then the door opened and closed behind her.

III

Every word of David's letter was impressed on Alix's brain. Over and over again she repeated to herself certain passages as she strode rapidly through the winding lanes. She spoke them tenderly, wonderingly, and her eyes were shining.

DEAREST ALIX:

I have always loved you. I want you to know it. There has never been an hour in all these years that I have not thought of you, that your dear face has not been before me. In France, here, everywhere,--always I am looking into your eyes, always I am hearing your voice, always I am feeling the gentle touch of your hand. Now you know. I could not have told you before. I am the blacksmith's son. God knows I am not ashamed of that. But I cannot forget, nor can you, that a blacksmith's son lies buried at the top of that grim old hill, and that he was not good enough for the daughter of a Windom. I hear that you have given your heart to some one else. You will marry him. But to the end of your days,--and I hope they may be many,--I want you to know that there is one man who will love you with all his heart and all his soul to the end of HIS days. I hope you will be happy. It is my greatest, my only wish. Once upon a time, we stole away, you and I, to write romances of love and adventure. Even then, you were my heroine. I was putting you into my poor story, but you were putting your dreams into yours, and I was not your dream hero. Then we would read to each, other what we had written. Do you remember how guardedly we read and how stealthy we were so as not to arouse suspicion or attract attention to our lair? I shall never forget those happy hours. Every line I wrote and read to you, Alix dear, was of you and FOR you. You were my heroine. My hero, feeble creature, told you how much I loved you, and you never suspected.

I am telling you all this now, when my hope is dead, so that you may know that my love for you began when you were little more than a baby, and has endured to this day and will endure forever. I pray God you may always be happy. And now, in closing, I can only add the trite sentence,--which I recall reading in more than one novel and which I was imitative enough to put into my own unfinished masterpiece: If ever you are in trouble and despair and need me, I will come to you from the ends of the earth. I mean it, Alix. With all the best wishes in the world, I am and will remain

Yours devotedly,

DAVID.

P.S.--I have just looked up from this letter to catch sight of myself in a mirror across the office. I have to smile. That beastly but honourable glass reveals the true secret of my failure to captivate you. How could any self-respecting heroine fall in love with a chap with a nose like mine, and a mouth that was intended for old Goliath himself, and cheek bones that were handed down by Tecumseh, and eyes that squint a little--but I daresay that's because they are somewhat blurred at this particular instant. I am reminded of the "Yank" who had his nose shot off at Chateau Thierry. He said that now that the Germans didn't have anything visible to train their artillery on, the war would soon be over. He had lost his nose but not his sense of the ridiculous. I have managed to

retain both.

Up in that bare, dust-laden room, with the two candles burning at her elbows, sat Alix. There were tears in her eyes, a wistful little smile on her lips. She was reading again the clumsy lines David had written in those long-ago days of adolescence. Now they meant something to her. They were stilted, commonplace expressions; she would have laughed at them had they been written by any one else, and she still would have been vastly amused, even now, were it not for the revelations contained in his letter. And the postscript,--how like him to have added that whimsical twist! He wanted her to smile, even though his heart was hurt.

Ten years! Ten years ago they had sat opposite each other at this dusty table, their heads bent to the task, their brows furrowed, their hands reaching out to the same bottle of ink, their souls athrill with romance. And she was writing of a handsome, incredibly valiant hero, whilst he--he was writing of her! Time and again his hand, in seeking the ink, had touched the hand of his heroine,--she remembered once jabbing her pen into his less nimble finger as she went impatiently to the fount of romance, and he had exclaimed with a grimace: "Gee, you must have struck a snag, Alix!" She recalled the words as of yesterday, almost as of this very moment, and her arrogant rejoinder, "Well, why can't you keep your hand out of the way?"

She was always hurting him, and he was always patient. She was always sorry, and he was always forgiving. She was superior in her weakness, he was gentle in his strength.

And his heroine? She read through the mist that filled her eyes and saw herself. The lofty heroine wooed by the poor and humble musician who crept up from unutterable depths to worship unseen at her feet! "The Phantom Singer!" The lover she could not see because her starry eyes were fixed upon the peak! And yet he stood beneath her casement window and sang her to sleep, lulled her into sweet dreams,--and went his lonely way in the chill of the morning hours, only to return again at nightfall.

She looked up from the sheet she held. She stared, not into space, but at the face of David Strong, sitting opposite,--the phantom singer. It was as plain to her as if he were actually there. She looked into his deep grey eyes, honest and true and smiling.

What was it he said in his letter? About his nose and mouth and eyes? They were before her now. That keen, boyish face with its coat of tan,--its broad, whimsical mouth and the white, even teeth that once on a dare had cracked a walnut for her; its rugged jaw and the long, straight nose; its wide forehead and the straight eyebrows; and the thick hair as black as the raven's wing, rumped by fingers that strove desperately to encourage a recalcitrant brain; and those big, bony hands, so large that her little brown paws were lost in them; and the broad shoulders hunched over the

table, supported by widespread elbows that encroached upon her allotted space so often that she had to remind him: "I do wish you'd watch what you're doing," and he would get up and meekly recover the scattered sheets of paper from the floor. Ugly? David ugly? Why, he was BEAUTIFUL!

Suddenly her head dropped upon her arms, now resting on David's manuscript; she sobbed.

"Oh, Davy,--Davy, I wish you were here! I wish you were here now!"

The creaking of the stairs startled her. She half arose and stared at the open door, expecting to see--the ghost! Goose-flesh crept out all over her. The ghost that people said came to--

The very corporeal presence of Courtney Thane appeared in the doorway.

For many seconds she was stupefied. She could see his lips moving, she knew he was speaking, she could see his smile as he approached, and yet only an unintelligible mumble came to her ears.

"--and so I cut across the field and ventured in where angels do not fear to tread," were the first words that possessed any degree of coherency for her.

She hastily thrust the precious manuscript into the drawer. He stopped several feet away and looked about the room curiously, his gaze coming back to her after a moment. The light of the candles was full on her face.

"Well, of all the queer places," he said. "What in the world brings you here? I thought no one ever entered this house, Alix."

"I have not been inside this house in ten years," she said, struggling for control of herself. "I came today to--to look for some papers that were left here. I was on the point of leaving when you came up." She picked up her gloves from the table.

"It's cold here. Do you think it was wise for you to sit here in this chilly--Gad, it's like an ice-house or a tomb. Better let me give you my coat." He started to remove his overcoat. There was an anxious, solicitous expression in his eyes.

"No,--no, thank you. I am quite warm,--and I shall be as warm as toast after I've walked a little way. I must be going now, Mr. Thane." She took a few steps toward the door.

"Are you going away without blowing the candles out?" he inquired.

She halted. She felt herself trapped. She did not want to be alone in the dark with him.

"If you will go ahead while there is light, I will follow--" The solution came suddenly. "How stupid! There is nothing to prevent us carrying the candles downstairs with us, is there? Will you take one, please?"

She returned to the table and took up one of the candlesticks.

"I've been terribly worried about you, Alix," he said, without moving. "How wonderful it is to see you again,--to see what is really you and not the girl I've seen in dreams for the past few endless nights. You in the flesh, you with your beautiful eyes, you whose lips--oh, God, I--I have been nearly mad, Alix. A thousand times I have felt you in my arms,--you've never been out of them in my thoughts. I--"

"Please--please!" she cried, shrinking back and putting her hands to her temples.

Still he did not move. There was a gentleness in his voice, a softness that disarmed her. It was not the voice of a conqueror, rather it was that of a suppliant.

"I am not worthy to touch the hem of your garment," he went on, an expression of pain leaping swiftly to his eyes. "I am most unworthy. My life has not been perfect. I have done many things that I am ashamed of, things I would give my soul to recall. But my love for you, Alix Crown, is perfect. All the good that God ever put into me is in this feeling I have for you. You are the very soul of me. If you tell me to go away, I will go. That is how I love you. You DO believe I love you with all my heart and soul, don't you, Alix? You DO believe that I would die for you?"

Now she was looking into his eyes across the candle flames. David's features had vanished. She saw nothing save the white, drawn face of the man whose voice, sweet with passion, fell upon her ears like the murmur of far-off music. She felt the warm thrill of blood rushing back into her icy veins, surging up to her throat, to her trembling lips, to her eyes.

"I--I don't know what to think--I don't know what to believe," she heard herself saying.

He came a step or two nearer. Her eyes never left his. She tried to look away.

"I want you to be mine forever, Alix. I want you to be my wife. I want you to be with me to the end of my life. I cannot live without you. Do not send me away now. It is too late."

Her knees gave way. She sank slowly to the bench,--and still she looked into his gleaming eyes.

He came to her. She was in his arms. His face was close to hers,

his breath was on her cheek....

"No! No!" she almost shrieked, and wrenched herself free. "Not now! Not here! Give me time--give me time to think!"

She had sprung to her feet and was glaring at him with the eyes of an animal at bay. He fell back in astonishment.

"You--you had no right to follow me here," she was crying. "You had no right! This place is sacred. It is sanctuary." Her voice broke. "My mother was born in this room. She died in this room. And I was born here. Go! Please go!"

He controlled himself. He held back those words that were on his tongue, ready to be flung out at her: "Yes, and in this room you behaved like hell with David Strong!" But he checked them in time. He lowered his head.

"Forgive me, Alix," he said abjectly. "I--I did not know. I was wrong to follow you here. I could not help myself. I was mad to see you. Nothing could have stopped me." He looked up, struck by a sudden thought. "You call this sanctuary. It is a sacred place to you. Will you make it sacred to me? Promise here and now, in this sanctuary of yours, to be my wife, and all my life it shall be the most sacred spot on earth."

She turned her head quickly to look at David Strong. A startled, incredulous expression leaped into her eyes. He was not there. By what magic had he vanished? She had felt his presence. He was sitting there a moment ago, his tousled head bent down over the pad of paper,--she was sure of it! Then she realized. A wave of relief surged over her. He was not there to hear this man making love to her in the room where he had poured out his soul to her. She experienced a curious thrill of exultation. David could never take back those unspoken words of love. She had them safely stored away in that blessed drawer!

A flush of shame leaped to her cheeks. She could not banish the notion that he,--honest, devoted David,--had seen her in this man's arms, clinging to him, giving back his passionate kisses with all the horrid rapture of a--She stiffened. Her head went up. She faced the man who had robbed David.

"I cannot marry you," she said quietly. The spell was gone. She was herself again. "I do not love you."

He stared, speechless, uncomprehending.

"You--you do not love me?" he gasped.

"I do not love you," she repeated deliberately.

"But, good God, you--you couldn't have kissed me as you--"

"Please!"

"--as you did just now," he went on, honestly bewildered. "You put your arms around my neck,--you kissed me--"

"Stop! Yes, I know I did,--I know I did. But it was not love,--it was not love! I don't know what it was. You have some dreadful, appalling power to--Oh, you need not look at me like that! I don't care THAT for your scorn. Call me a fool, if you like,--call me ANYTHING you like. It is all one to me now. What's done, is done. But it can never happen again. I will not even say that I am ashamed, for in saying so I would be confessing that I was responsible for my actions. I was not responsible. That is all, Mr. Thane. No doubt you are sincere in asking me to be your wife. No doubt your love for me is sincere. I should like to think so--always. It would help me to forget my own weakness. I am going. I want you to leave this house before I go, Mr. Thane."

She spoke calmly, evenly, with the utmost self-possession.

"I can't let you go like this, Alix! I can't take this as final. You--you MUST care for me. How can I think otherwise? In God's name, what has happened to turn you against me? You owe me more of an explanation than--"

"You are right," she interrupted. "I do owe you an explanation. This is not the time or the place to give it. If you will come to see me tomorrow, I will tell you everything. It is only fair that you should know. But not now."

"Has some one been lying about me?" he demanded, his eyes narrowing.

She waited an instant before replying.

"No, Mr. Thane," she said; "no one has been lying about you."

He took up his hat from the table.

"I will come tomorrow," he said. At the door he paused to say:
"But I am not going to give you up, Alix. You mean too much to me. I think I understand. You are frightened. I--I should not have come here."

"Yes, I WAS frightened," she cried out shrilly. "I was frightened,--but I am not afraid now."

She had moved to Thane's side of the table, and there she stood until she heard his footsteps on the little porch outside.

She was in an exalted frame of mind as she hurried from the house. The short October day had turned to night. For a moment she paused, peering ahead. A queer little thrill of alarm ran through her. She

had never been afraid of the dark before. But now she shivered. A great uneasiness assailed her. She listened intently. Far up the hard gravel road she heard the sound of footsteps, gradually diminishing. He was far ahead of her and walking rapidly.

At the gate she stopped again. Then she struck out resolutely for home,--the Phantom Singer was beside her. She was not afraid.

A farm-hand, leaning on the fence at the lower corner of the yard, scratched his head in perplexity.

"Well, here's a new angle to the case," he mused sourly. "I'm up a tree for sure. Why the devil should Miss Crown be meeting him out there in this old deserted house. My word, it begins to look a trifle spicy. It also begins to look like a case that ought to be dropped before it gets too hot. I guess it's up to me to see my dear old Uncle Charlie What's-His-Name."

Whereupon Mr. Gilfillan set off in the wake of the girl who had employed him to catch the masked invader.

CHAPTER XIX

BRINGING UP THE PAST

Charlie Webster wore a troubled expression when he appeared for dinner that same evening. He was late. If such a thing were believable, his kindly blue eyes glittered malevolently as they rested upon the face of Courtney Thane, who had taken his place at table a few minutes earlier. The fat little man was strangely preoccupied. He was even gruff in his response to Mr. Pollock's bland inquiry as to the state of his health.

"How's your liver, Charlie?" inquired the genial editor. This amiable question was habitual with Mr. Pollock. He varied it a little when the object of his polite concern happened to be of the opposite sex; then he gallantly substituted the word "appetite." It was never necessary to reply to Mr. Pollock's question. In fact, he always seemed a little surprised when any one did reply, quite as if he had missed a portion of the conversation and was trying in a bewildered sort of way to get the hang of it again.

"Same as it was yesterday," said Charlie. "I don't want any soup, Maggie. Yes, I know it's bean soup, but I don't want it, just the same."

"Going on a hunger strike, Charlie?" inquired Doc Simpson.

"Sh! He's reducing," scolded Flora Grady.

"What's on your mind, Charlie?" asked Courtney.

Charlie swallowed hard. He made a determined effort and succeeded in recovering some of his old-time sprightliness.

"Nothing, now that I've got my hat off."

"Have you heard the latest news, Charlie?" inquired Mrs. Pollock, a thrill of excitement in her voice.

He started, and looked up quickly. "There's been so blamed much news lately," he muttered, "I can't keep track of it."

"Well, this is the greatest piece of news we've had in ages," said the poetess. "Wedding bells are to ring in our midst. Somebody you know very well is going to be married."

Mr. Webster's heart went to his boots. He stared open-mouthed at the speaker.

"Oh, my Lord!" he almost groaned. "Don't tell me she has promised to marry--" He broke off to glare venomously at Thane.

"Don't blame me for it, Charlie," exclaimed the latter. "I am as innocent as an unborn babe. Charge it to woman's wiles." He laughed boisterously, unnaturally.

Mr. Pollock spoke. "The next issue of the Sun will contain the formal announcement of the engagement of the most popular and beloved young lady in Windomville. No doubt it will be old news by that time,--next Thursday,--but publication in the press gives it the importance of officialty."

"We may congratulate ourselves, however, that we are not to lose her," said Mrs. Pollock. "She is to remain in--"

"Whe-when is it to take place?" groaned Charlie, moisture starting out on his brow.

"That," began Mr. Pollock, "is a matter which cannot be definitely announced at present, owing to certain family--er--ah--conditions. In addition to this, I may say that there is also the children to consider, as well as the township trustee and, to an extent, the taxpayer. The--"

"All I've got to say," grated Charlie, "is that the police ought to be consulted, first of all."

"The police!" exclaimed Angie Miller.

"The--the what?" gasped Furman Hatch, lifting his head suddenly. He was very red in the face. "I'd like to know what the devil the police have to do with it?"

Charlie took a look at Angie Miller's face, and then the truth dawned upon him. He sank back in his chair so suddenly that the legs gave forth an ominous crack.

"Don't do that!" cried Margaret Slattery sharply. "You know them chairs are not made of iron. And I don't want you flopping all over me when I'm passing the stew--"

"Yes, sir!" boomed Charlie, who had collected his wits by this time, and was pointing his finger accusingly at Mr. Hatch. "The police have simply got to be called. It's going to take half the force, including Bill Foss, to keep me from drinking the heart's blood of my hated rival. Ladies and gents, that infernal, low-down villain over there has come between me and--But nobody shall say that Charles Darwin Webster is a poor loser! Say what you please about him, but do not say he is a short sport. It breaks my heart to do it, but I'm coming around there to shake hands with you, old Tintype. I'm going to congratulate you, but I'm never going to get through hating you."

He arose and bolted around the table. Mr. Hatch got to his feet and the long and the short man clasped hands.

"Put her there, old boy! I've already made up my mind what my wedding present is going to be. The day before the wedding I'm coming in and order a dozen photographs of myself,--pay for 'em in advance. And I'm going to give every darned one of 'em to the bride, so's she can stick 'em up all over the house just to make you feel at home, you blamed old bachelor. And as for you, Miss Angelina Miller, the very topmost height of my ambition will be reached in less than two minutes after the ceremony. Because, then and there, I'm going to kiss you. Bless you, my children. As old Rip Van Winkle used to say, 'may you live long and brospere.'"

Having delivered himself of this felicitous speech, the somewhat relieved Mr. Webster wiped his brow.

"What did he say?" quaked old Mrs. Nichols, putting her hand to her ear.

"Says he hoped they'd be happy," bawled old Mr. Nichols, close to her ear.

"Pass the bread, Doc," said Mr. Hatch, getting pinker and pinker.

"When's it to take place, Angle?" inquired Charlie, resuming his seat. He cast a sharp look at Courtney. The young man shifted his gaze immediately.

"As I explained to Mr. Pollock, everything depends on my aunt," said Angie composedly. "She is very old,--eighty-three, in fact."

"You don't mean to say your aunt objects to your marrying old Tintype," exclaimed Charlie.

"Not at all," replied Angie, somewhat tartly.

"You see, it's this way," volunteered Mr. Pollock. "Miss Angie is the sole support of a venerable and venerated aunt who lives in Frankfort. That is a thing to be considered. Her duty to her father's sister--"

Courtney interrupted, chuckling. "It's too much to ask of any woman. I suppose it must take nearly all you earn, Miss Miller, to support your aged relative, so naturally you do not feel like taking on Mr. Hatch immediately."

There was a moment's silence around the table.

"I see by the Chicago Tribune," said Mr. Pollock, after a hurried gulp of coffee, "that there's likely to be a strike of the street-car men up there."

"You don't say so," said Doc Simpson, looking so concerned that one might have been led to suspect that he was dismayed over the prospect of getting to his office the next day.

"What's the world coming to?" sighed Maude Baggs Pollock nervously. "Strikes, strikes everywhere. Murder, bloodshed, robbery, revolution--"

"Next thing we know," put in Charlie Webster, without looking up from his plate, "God will strike, and when He does there'll be hell to pay, begging your pardon, ladies, for using a word that sounds worse than it tastes."

"I use it every day of my life," said Miss Flora Grady. "It's a grand word, Charlie," she added, a little defiantly.

"Times have changed," remarked Mr. Pollock blandly. "It wasn't so very long ago that women said 'pshaw' when they wanted to let off steam. Then they got to saying 'shucks,' and from that they progressed to 'darn,' and now they say 'damn' without a quiver. Only yesterday I heard my wife say something that sounded suspiciously like 'dammit to hell' when she upset a bottle of ink on her desk. She hasn't stubbed her toe against a rocking-chair lately, thank goodness."

Doc Simpson stopped Courtney as he was starting upstairs after dinner. The dentist was unsmiling.

"Say, Court, I'm running a little close this week. Been so much excitement a lot of patients have forgotten all about their teeth."

Can you let me have that ten you borrowed last week?"

"Sure," said Courtney, in his most affable manner. "I'll hand it to you tomorrow. I'll give it to you now if you'll wait till I run upstairs and get it out of my trunk. That's my bank, you know."

"Tomorrow'll do all right," said Doc, a trifle abashed.

"Can I see you a second, Mr. Thane?" called Miss Grady, when he was halfway up the stairs.

He stopped and smiled down at her. "I hope you'll forgive me if I don't come down, Miss Flora. My knee is still on the blink. It hurts worse to go downstairs, than it does up."

"I'll come up," said Miss Grady promptly. "You remember those roses I ordered for you last week? Well, I had to pay cash for them, including parcel post. You owe me seven dollars and thirteen cents."

"I'm glad you spoke of it. I hadn't forgotten it, of course, but--I simply neglected to square it up with you. Have you change for a twenty, Miss Flora?"

"Not with me."

"I'll hand it to you tomorrow. Seven-thirteen, you say? Shall we make it seven-fifteen?" He favoured her with his most engaging smile, and Miss Grady, who thought she had steeled her heart against his blandishments, suffered a momentary relapse and said, "No hurry. I just thought I'd remind you."

He failed completely, however, to affect the susceptibilities of Miss Mary Dowd, who presently rapped at his door, and rapped again when he called out "Come in." He opened the door.

"Pardon me, Mr. Thane, for coming up to speak to you about your bill. Will it be convenient for you to let me have the money this evening?"

She did not soften the dun by offering the usual excuse about "expenses being a little heavier this month than we expected," or that she "hated to ask him for the amount."

"Is it three or four weeks, Miss Molly?" he inquired, taking out an envelope and a pencil.

"Four weeks today."

"Sixty dollars." He jotted it down. "I cannot let this opportunity pass to tell you how thoroughly satisfied I have been with everything here, Miss Molly. The table is really extraordinarily good. I don't see how you can do it for fifteen dollars a week, including room." He replaced the envelope in his pocket, and smiled politely, his

hand going to the door knob.

"We couldn't do it, Mr. Thane, unless we stuck pretty closely to our rule,—that is, of asking our patrons to pay promptly at the end of every week."

"It's really the only way," he agreed.

"So if you will be kind enough to let me have the amount now, I will be very much obliged to you."

He stepped to the head of the stairs, ostensibly to be nearer a light, and took out his purse. While counting out the bills, he cast frequent glances down into the lower hall. The buzz of conversation came up from the "lounge."

"I think you will find the proper amount here, Miss Molly," he said, after restoring the purse to his pocket.

She took the bank-notes and counted them.

"Quite correct, Mr. Thane. Thank you. By the way, I have been meaning to ask how much longer you contemplate remaining with us. Pastor Mavity has been inquiring for room and board for his sister, who is coming on from Indianapolis to spend several months in Windomville. If by any chance you are thinking of vacating your room within the next few days, I would be obliged if you would let me know as soon as possible in order that I may give Mr. Mavity an answer."

"I think I shall be leaving shortly, Miss Dowd. I can let you know in a day or two," said he stiffly. "I am afraid your winters are too severe for me. Good night,—and thank you for being so patient, Miss Dowd."

Meanwhile, Miss Angie Miller had taken Charlie Webster off to a corner of the "lounge" remote from the fireplace. She was visibly excited.

"I had a letter in this afternoon's mail from my uncle, Charlie," she announced in subdued tones. "My goodness, you'll simply pass away when you read it."

"Where is it?" demanded Charlie eagerly.

"I haven't even shown it to Furman," said she, looking over her shoulder. "I've been wondering whether I ought to let him read it first."

"Not at all," said he promptly. "It's none of his business. This is between you and me, Angie. Let's have a look at it."

"I don't think you'd better read it here," she whispered nervously.

"It--it is very private and confidential."

"That's all right," said Charlie. "I'll sneak upstairs with it, Angie."

"Well, act as if you are looking out of the window," she said, and when his back was turned she produced the letter from its hiding place inside her blouse.

II

Charlie retired to his room a few minutes later. There he perused the following letter, written on the stationery of Beck, Blossom, Fredericks & Smith, Attorneys-at-law, New York City:

MY DEAR NIECE:

Pardon my delay in replying to your letter of recent date. I have been very busy in court and have not been in a position to devote even a little of my time to your inquiry. Your second letter reached me yesterday, and I now make amends for my previous delinquency by answering it with a promptness most uncommon in lawyers.

The firm of which I am a member appeared in 1912 for the plaintiff in the case of Ritter vs. Thane. Our client was a young woman residing in Brooklyn. The defendant was Courtney Thane, the son of Howard Thane, and no doubt the young man to whom you refer. In any case, he was the grandson of Silas Thane, who lived in your part of the State of Indiana. We were demanding one hundred thousand dollars for our client. Miss Ritter was a trained nurse. Young Thane had been severely injured in an automobile accident. If YOUR Courtney Thane is the same as MINE, he will be walking with a slight limp. His left leg was badly crushed in the accident to which I refer. For several months he was unable to walk. Upon his removal from St. Luke's Hospital to his father's home in Park Avenue, a fortnight after the accident, our client was employed as a nurse on the case. This was early in the spring of 1912. In June the Thane family went to the Berkshires, where they had rented a house for the summer. Our client accompanied them. Prior to their departure, Thane, senior, had settled out of court with the occupants of the automobile with which his son's car had collided in upper Broadway. His son was alone in his car when the accident occurred, but there were a number of witnesses ready to testify that he was driving at a high rate of speed, regardless of traffic or crossings. If my memory serves me correctly, his father paid something like twenty-five thousand dollars to the three persons injured. That, however, is neither here nor there, except to illustrate the young man's disregard for the law.

Miss Ritter had been on the case a very short time before he began to make ardent love to her. She was an extremely pretty girl, two years his senior, and, I am convinced, a most worthy and exemplary young woman. She became infatuated with the young man. He asked

her to marry him. (Permit me to digress for a moment in order to state that while Courtney Thane was in his freshman year at college his father was obliged to pay out quite a large sum of money to a chorus-girl with whom, it appears, he had become involved.) To make a long story short, our client, trusting implicitly to his honour and submitting to the ardour of their joint passion, anticipated the marriage ceremony with serious results to herself. When she discovered that he had no intention of marrying her, she attempted suicide. Her mother, on learning the truth, went to Thane's parents and pleaded for the righting of the wrong. Howard Thane had, by this time, lost all patience with his son. He refused to have anything to do with the matter. The young man's mother ordered Miss Ritter's mother out of the apartment and threatened to have her arrested for blackmail. Shortly after this episode, we were consulted by Mrs. Ritter, much against the wishes of her daughter, who shrank from the notoriety and the disgrace of a lawsuit. The elder Thane was adamant in his decision that his son should marry the girl, who, he was fair enough to admit, was a young woman of very superior character and who, he was convinced, had been basely deceived. The mother, on the other hand, was relentlessly opposed to the sacrifice of her son. We took the matter to court. On the morning of the first day of the trial, before the opening of court, the defendant's counsel came to us with a proposition. They offered to settle out of court for twenty-five thousand dollars. In the end, we accepted fifty thousand, and the case was dismissed. Afterwards counsel for the other side informed us that the elder Thane turned his son out of his home and refused to have anything more to do with him. I understand the young man went to Europe, where he subsisted on an allowance provided by his mother. Thane, senior, died shortly after this. Our client, I am pained to say, died with her babe in childbirth.

You may be interested to know, my dear niece, that Mrs. Thane married soon after her husband's death. Her second husband was a young French nobleman, many years her junior. He was killed in the war, I think at Verdun. I understand she is now living in this city. Her present name escapes me, but I know that her widowhood has been made endurable by a legacy which happens to be one in name only. In other words, he left her the title of Countess.

If I can be of any further service to you, my dear niece, pray do not hesitate to call upon me. Believe me to be...etc., etc.

Within ten minutes after the perusal of this very convincing indictment, Charlie Webster was on his way to Alix's home. He was quite out of breath when he presented himself at the front door, and his first words to Alix were:

"While I'm getting my breath, Alix, you might prepare yourself for a shock."

CHAPTER XX

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF ROSABEL VICK

Early the next morning, the telephone in township assessor Jordan's house rang. Annie Jordan was "setting" the breakfast table. She waited for the call to be repeated; she was not sure whether the bell had rung thrice or four times. Their call was "Party J, ring four." Four sharp rings came promptly. She looked at the kitchen clock. It lacked five minutes of seven.

"Gee," she grumbled, "I didn't know anybody had to get up as early as I do." Taking down the receiver she uttered a sweet "hello," because, as she said, "You never know who's at the other end, and it's just as likely to be HIM as not."

"Is that you, Annie? This is Mrs. Vick. May I speak to Rosabel?"

"Why, Rosabel isn't here, Mrs. Vick."

"What?"

"Rosabel isn't here."

There was a short silence. Then: "Are you joking with me, Annie? If she isn't up yet, please tell her to--"

"Honest to goodness, Mrs. Vick, she's not here. I haven't seen her since day before yesterday."

"She said she was going over to spend the night with you. She left home about four yesterday. Oh, my goodness, I--I--is there any one else she might have,--I'm sure she said you, though, Annie. Can you think of any one else? She took her nightdress--and things."

"She always comes here, Mrs. Vick," said Annie, and felt a little chill creeping over her. "Still she may have gone to Mrs. Urlin's. She and Hattie are good friends. Shall I call up and ask? I'll ring you up in a couple of minutes."

That was the beginning. Within the hour the whole of Windomville was talking about the strange disappearance of the pretty daughter of Amos Vick, across the river. Old Jim House, the handy-man at Dowd's Tavern, inserted his shaggy head through the dining-room door and informed the editor of the Sun in a far from ceremonious manner that he had an "item" for the paper.

"I'll be out as soon as I've finished breakfast," said Mr. Pollock.

"Well, you can't say I didn't tell ye," said Jim, and withdrew his head. "No wonder there ain't ever anything worth readin' in that pickerune paper of his, Maggie," he growled to Margaret Slattery. "If ever I DO subscribe for a paper, it's goin' to be one that's got some git up and go about it. Some Injinapolis er Cincinnati paper, b'gosh. There's Link Pollock settin' in there eatin' pancakes while a girl is bein' missed from one end of the township to the other. Bill Foss has--"

"What girl?" demanded Margaret.

"That girl of Amos Vick's. They ain't seen hide er hair of her sence yesterday afternoon. Amos is over to the drug store, nearly crazy with suspicion. I got it all figgered out. One of two things has happened. She's either run off to get married er else she's been waylaid and--er--execrated by some tramp. Like as not the very feller that peeped in at Alix Crown's winder the other night. 'Twouldn't surprise me a particle if she was found some'eres er other with her head beat in or somethin'! And Link Pollock jest sits in there stuffin' pan--"

Margaret Slattery having disappeared abruptly into the dining-room, Jim grunted and edged over to the kitchen range, where Miss Jennie Dowd was busily engaged.

"I ain't got nothin' personal ag'in Link Pollock, Jennie," he said, sniffing the browning batter with pleasurable longing, "but if you was to ask me I'd say his wife is twice the man he is, and a little over. The minute that woman is a widder I'm goin' to subscribe for the paper, 'cause I know she'll--What say, Jennie?"

"Bring me another scuttle of coal,--and, for goodness' sake, don't smoke that pipe in my kitchen."

"What's the matter with this here pipe?" demanded Mr. House in some surprise.

"Never mind. I'm busy."

"Yes,--cookin' pancakes for that--all right, ALL RIGHT, I'll get your coal fer ye. I ought to be out helpin' Amos Vick to investigate fer his daughter, that's where I ought to be. First thing you know, he'll be offerin' twenty-five er fifty dollars fer her and--say, it seems to me you ought to be more interested in that pore lost girl than makin' pancakes fer Link Pollock." He prepared to sit down. "There's a lot of people in this here town payin' him two dollars a year fer to git the news, and all he does is to--All right, I wasn't goin' to set down anyways. I was jest movin' this cheer out o' the way a little, so's Maggie--Yes, and with coal as high as it is now and a lot of pore people starvin' and freezin' to death, it exaggerates me considerable to see you wastin'--Well, is he still eatin', Maggie?"

"He's beat it upstairs to change his carpet slippers," announced Margaret Slattery excitedly. "You needn't make any more, Miss Jennie. They're all beatin' it,--all except Mr. Thane, and he says he don't want any more. He says he ain't feelin' well and thinks he'll go up to his room and lay down for a while."

"Well, seein's you don't need that coal, Jennie, I guess I'll mosey along and see if I c'n be any help to Amos. This jest goes to show what an ijit I'd ha' been to let my pipe go out."

Courtney Thane hung over the little stove in his room, shivering as with a chill. About ten o'clock some one knocked at his door. He started up from the chair, his gaze fixed on the door. With an effort he pulled himself together and inquired who was there.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Mr. Thane?" asked Miss Molly Dowd, outside.

"Nothing, thank you." After a moment's indecision, he crossed over and opened the door. "It's awfully good of you, Miss Molly. There's nothing really the matter with me. I was awake most of the night with a pain in my back,--something like lumbago, I suppose. I was afraid at first it was my old pleurisy coming back for another visit, but it seems to be lower down. I feel much better, thank you. The fresh air will do me good. I think I'll go out and see if I can be of any assistance to poor Vick. Have they had any news of Rosabel?"

"I think not. They have telephoned to the city to ask the police to watch out for her, especially at the trains. She's been terribly depressed, they say, since her brother went to the Navy training school up near Chicago. Amos thinks she may have taken it into her head to go up there somewhere to be near him."

"It is possible. She was devoted to her brother. I hope nothing worse has happened to her. She is a sweet, lovable girl, and they worshipped her."

Later on, as he was standing in front of the postoffice, smoking a cigarette, Vick came up in Alix Crown's automobile.

The former had been to the city to consult with the police. He inquired anxiously if any word had been received from the men who had volunteered to search in the woods and along the river bank for the girl. Receiving a reply in the negative from several of the hangers-on, he turned to give an order to the chauffeur. As he did so, his gaze fell upon Courtney, who was on the outer edge of the little group surrounding the car.

After a moment of indecision, the young man pushed his way forward, an expression of deep concern in his eyes.

"Morning, Courtney," greeted the older man, extending his hand.
"I'm glad to see you. I suppose you've heard about Rosabel?"

Thane shook hands with Rosabel's father.

"I wouldn't be worried if I were you, Mr. Vick. She'll turn up all right. I feel sure of it. If there is anything in the world I can do, I wish you would say so, Mr. Vick. Anything, sir. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you and Mrs. Vick and Rosabel. I adore that child. Why, I get positively sick all over when I let myself think that--but, it's impossible! I feel it in my bones she'll come home sometime today."

Vick pressed the young man's hand.

"I wish I could be sure of that,--God, I wish I could be sure," he said, with a little catch in his gruff voice. "I don't see what got into her to run away like this. She ain't been very chipper since Cale went away, you know. Sort of sick and down in the mouth. Her mother's heard her crying a good bit lately up in her room. I promised her only a couple of days ago to take her up to Chicago for a spell, so's she could see Cale every once in a while. So it can't be she's gone off on her own hook to see him, knowin' that either me or her mother was planning to go up with her next week. Thank you, Courtney, for offering to help us. If there's anything, I'll let you know. We've been telegraphin' and telephonin' everywhere to see if we can get track of her, and we've been to all her friends' homes to ask if they've seen her. I wish, if you feel like it, you'd go over and see Mrs. Vick. Maybe you can cheer her up, encourage her or something. She's terribly worried. I--I think it would break her heart if anything happened to--to--" His lips twisted as with pain. He bent over and picked a burr from his trousers' leg.

"Buck up, old fellow," said Courtney, a ringing note of confidence in his voice. He laid his hand on Vick's arm. "Tell me all about it. When did she leave the house, and where did she say she was going?"

"Yesterday afternoon. She said she was going to spend the night at the Jordans'. She kissed her mother good-bye,--just as she always does,--and we ain't seen or heard anything of her since. Nobody in Windomville saw her. Bill Foss is afraid she may have been waylaid by hoboos down along the river road. If--if THAT happened there'll be something worse than lynchin' if I ever lay hands on--"

Thane broke in with an oath.

"By God, I'll do the job for you if I get hold of him first, Vick. I could set fire to a devil like that and see him burned alive without moving a muscle."

"I can't let myself believe she's met with any such horrible fate as that, Courtney. I simply can't bear to think of my pretty little

Rosie in the hands of--"

"Don't think about it, Vick. I believe she will turn up safe and sound and--By the way, has it occurred to you that she may have eloped? Was she in love with anybody? Was she interested in any young fellow that you didn't approve of?"

"She never spoke of being in love with anybody. She never even gave us an inklin' of such a thing. She would have told her mother. Why, good heavens, Courtney, she wasn't much more'n a little girl! She was eighteen her last birthday, and we never thought of her as anything but a child just out of short dresses. Did she ever speak to you about being gone on any of these young fellows that come to see her? She liked you tremendous, Courtney,--and I didn't know but what maybe she might have mentioned something to you about it when you were off on those long walks together. Some of the times when you used to take a lunch basket and go off--"

"Not a word," broke in Courtney. "Why, she was just like a kid, laughing and singing and begging me to tell her stories about the war, and life in New York, and all that sort of thing. She used to read to me, bless her heart,--read by the hour while I smoked,--or went to sleep. If she was in love with anybody she certainly never took me into her confidence."

"I--I guess there's nothing in that theory," said Amos Vick, shaking his head. "She didn't run away with anybody. That's out of the question. I'm working on the theory that she sort of went out of her head or something and wandered away. You read about cases like that in the papers. I forget what they call the disease, but there's--"

"Aphasia," supplied Courtney absently. His gaze was fixed on a graceful, familiar figure down the street.

Alix Crown had just dismounted from her horse in front of the library. She stood, straight and slim, on the sidewalk awaiting the approach of Editor Pollock, who was hurrying up from Assessor Jordan's house where he had been "interviewing" Annie.

A warm glow shot through Courtney's veins. He had held that adorable, boyish figure tight in his arms! Nothing could rob him of that rapturous thought,--nothing could deprive him of those victorious moments. Amos Vick's voice recalled him.

"I'll have to be on the move, Courtney. Here comes Bill Foss. He's been telephonin' to Litchtown, down the river. I do wish you'd go over and see Lucinda. She'll be mighty grateful to you."

"Don't fail to call on me, Mr. Vick, if there's anything I can do," called out Courtney after the moving machine.

He did not take his eyes from Alix until she disappeared through

the library door. The horse, a very fine animal, was wet with sweat. He could see, even at that distance, the "lather" on her flanks.

"Any news?" he inquired of Pollock, as that worthy came up panting.

"Nope. Alix Crown is just back from Jim Bagley's. Some one said a hired man of his had seen a woman walking across the pasture yesterday just before dark--out near the old Windom place,--but it couldn't have been Rosie Vick because she had no way to get across the river except by the ferry, and she didn't come that way, Joe Burk swears. Alix saw this hired man and he says it was almost dark and he couldn't be sure whether it was a man or a woman."

A greyish pallor spread over Courtney's face. He turned away abruptly and hurried down the street. He remembered the "skiff" that belonged to young Cale, salvaged some years before on the abatement of a February flood. On more than one occasion he had taken Rosabel out on the river in this clumsy old boat, twice at least to the base of Quill's Window where she had refused to land because of the dread she had for the gruesome place.

Cale kept his boat down among the willows, chained to a pole he had driven deep in the bed of the river. It was one of his treasures. He had fished from it up and down the stream; he had gone forth in it at daybreak for wild ducks and geese.

Yes, Thane remembered the "skiff." Strange that no one else had thought of it. Strange that even Amos Vick was satisfied she could not have crossed the river except by the ferry. He wondered whether it was tied up in its accustomed place over yonder, or was it now on this side of the river? He felt a strange chill in his blood.

He was nearing the library when Alix came out. If she saw him she gave no sign. She crossed the sidewalk threw the bridle rein over the horse's neck, and swung herself gracefully into the saddle. Without so much as a glance over her shoulder, she rode off at a brisk canter in the direction of the ferry. He knew she was on her way to see Mrs. Vick.

The R. F. D. postman making his rounds, came to Amos Vick's shortly after noon that day. He volunteered a bit of information. Rosabel had given him a letter when he stopped the day before. It was addressed to Caleb Vick. She asked him how long he thought it would take the letter to reach its destination. When he told her that it might be delivered to Cale early the next day, she thanked him and returned to the house.

He thought at the time that she looked "kind of white around the gills."

II

Jim Bagley and his new "hired man," pursuing a suggestion made

by the latter, went to the top of Quill's Window for a bird's-eye view of the river and the surrounding country. The sharp eyes of the Pinkerton man descried the rowboat under the willows along the opposite bank of the stream.

Half an hour later, Bagley and several companions came upon the boat. On one of the seats lay Rosabel Vick's heavy coat and the black fur collar she was known to have worn when she left home. Under the seat in the stern was a small paper bundle. It contained a nightgown, a pair of black stockings, and several toilet articles.

Across the river, several hundred yards above Quill's Window, a small gravelly "sand-bar" reached out into the stream. Here the practised eyes of Gilfillan found unmistakable indications of a recent landing. The prow of the boat, driven well out upon the bar, had left its mark. Also, there were two deep cuts in the sand where an oar had been used in pushing off. It was impossible to make out footprints in the loose, shifting gravel.

Mr. Gilfillan pondered deeply.

"That boat crossed over here yesterday," he reflected. "It's pretty clear that it belongs over on that side. If the Vick girl came over in it, there's no use looking for her on this side of the river. That boat couldn't have got back to the other side unless somebody rowed it over. If it was a woman I saw walking across the pasture in the direction of the river, it must have been this girl. Now--one of two things happened--in case it was the Vick girl. Either she was up near that old house before I got there, or she saw me when she was approaching, and turned back. In either case, she had an object in hanging around that house. Now we come to the object. Was she going there to meet some one? If so, it would naturally be a man.

"Now let's get this thing straight. Thane crossed the pasture from this direction. That's positive,--because I followed him. It is a dead certainty he did not meet the Vick girl. I would have witnessed any such meeting. The fact that he lived at her father's house for several weeks may have something to do with the case,--but that's guesswork. What we want is facts. This much is certain. I did not see Miss Crown go into that house,--but I did see her come out. I never was so paralysed in my life. It is clear, therefore, that she was in there before either I or Thane came upon the scene. Now the question is, was she there to meet Thane? I doubt it. Things begin to look a little clearer to me. Suppose, for instance, he went out to that big hill to meet some one else,--presumably the Vick girl, and that they had planned to go to that old deserted house. He was late. So, thinking she had gone on, he hustled across the field and received the surprise of his life. Now, we'll say the Vick girl was over there waiting for him when Miss Crown came to the house,--a thing they couldn't have foreseen in view of the fact that she shunned the place. Our hero comes up and enters the house as if he owned it. The other girl hangs around outside

till it gets dark enough for her to risk making a getaway without attracting my attention,--in case she saw me. She beats it back to the river, and then, being afraid that I saw and recognized her, she concludes to beat it to somebody's house over in the next county, so's she'll have an alibi if I go to Miss Crown with the story. Now, that's one way to look at it. The other angle is that she was jealous and trailed Thane to his rendezvous, as my old friend Nick Carter would say. In that case,--By thunder!" He gave vent to a soft whistle.

"In that case, she may have jumped into the river and--No, that doesn't hang together. She wouldn't have gone to the trouble to row back to the other side. Wait a second! Now, let me think. Here's an idea. We'll suppose somebody waylaid her over there on the other side of the river, put the quietus on her and chucked her into the water. Then he rowed across here and started for the turnpike. Seeing me and also Thane, he turns back. It's a man I see in the darkness instead of a woman. He goes back to the boat, rows over to the other side again and--Holy Mackerel! Here's a new one. That girl's body may be lying up there in the underbrush at this instant. Dumped there by the murderer, who turned back after seeing me--I'll take a look!"

For an hour Gilfillan searched through the underbrush along the bank. Finally he gave it up and started toward the village. He found the town in a state of great excitement. Everybody was hurrying down to the river. Overtaking an old man, he inquired if there was any news of the missing girl.

"They say she's been drowned," chattered the ancient. "My daughter says they found her things in a boat, but no sign of her. Did you ever see the boat? They's been more goin' on in this here town in the last week than--"

Gilfillan hurried on. He caught Charlie Webster as he was leaving the warehouse.

"I want to see Miss Crown as soon as possible, Webster," he said. "Do you suppose she will go up in the air if I mention the fact that I know she was with Thane yesterday up in that old house? It's a rather ticklish thing to spring on her if she--"

"It's all right," interrupted Charlie. "I talked with her about it last night. She had no idea he was coming there. He told her he saw her from across the pasture and hustled over. She was surprised almost out of her skin when he popped in on her. She tells me she ordered him out of the house."

The detective was thoughtful. "I wonder if it has occurred to Miss Crown that Thane might have mistaken her for some one else at that distance."

"Not so's you'd notice it," declared Charlie. "He knew it was Alix

all right. She isn't in any doubt on that score."

"It begins to take shape," mused Gilfillan. "He didn't wait for her, that's all."

"What say?"

"I was just thinking," replied the other. "Where is Thane at the present moment, Webster?"

"He just went off in an automobile with Dick Hurdle and a couple of fellows to stretch one of Joe Hart's big fish nets across the river down at the Narrows, five or six miles below here."

"Would you mind inviting me up to your room at the Tavern for a little while, Webster?"

"Well, I was going down to the ferry. There are half a dozen skiffs down--"

"See here, Webster, as I understand it, my real job is to find out all I can about this chap Thane. I am really working for you, not for Miss Crown, although she is putting up the money. I am just as thoroughly convinced as you are that Thane staged that masked robber business himself. It's an old gag, especially with lovers--and occasionally with husbands."

Charlie grinned sheepishly, a guilty flush staining his rubicund face.

"I guess I might as well confess that I was guilty of something of the sort when I was about seventeen," he said. "That's how I came to figger out that maybe he was up to the same kind of heroism."

"Nearly every kid has done the same thing. It's boy nature."

"I reckon that's right. I fixed it for a boy friend of mine to jump out of a dark place one night when I was walkin' home from a church sociable with my girl. He had false whiskers on. I helped him glue them on,--and he had an awful time getting 'em off. Course when he jumped out and growled 'hands up,' I just sailed into him and the fur flew for a few seconds. Then he run like a whitehead. It didn't work out very well, however. That kid's sister got onto the trick and told my girl about it, and--well, I almost had to leave town. But it ain't a game for a grown-up man to play, and that's what I think this feller Thane has been pulling."

"What you want to find out, before it's too late, is whether Thane is all that he professes to be," said the other. "Well, I'm simply sitting tight on the job, stalling along until I hear from our people in New York. They have cabled England to find out whether he was connected with the British air forces. Now, what I want to do is to get into that fellow's room for ten or fifteen minutes."

Can you fix it?"

"It--it wouldn't be legal," protested Charlie. "You've got to get out a search warrant."

"My dear fellow, I'm not planning to steal anything," exclaimed Gilfillan. "I merely want to get into his room by mistake. That happens frequently,--you know."

Charlie was finally persuaded. He cast an apprehensive glance down the road leading to the ferry, searched the Main Street for observers, and then led the way over to the practically deserted Tavern.

Half an hour later Mr. Gilfillan re-entered Charlie's room.

"Remember I don't know where you've been or what you were up to," warned the fat man firmly. "I'm not a party to this nefarious--"

"Righto!" said the detective cheerily. "Your skirts are clear. They are immaculate. Let's beat it."

"Well, what did you find out?" inquired Charlie, when they were in the street once more. He was bursting with curiosity.

"In as much as you don't know where I was or what I've been doing, it will not compromise you if I say that I found a thirty-eight calibre revolver with three empty shells in the cylinder. I also found a theatrical make-up box, with grease paints, gauze, and all that. Also currency amounting to about three hundred dollars. Nothing incriminating, nothing actually crooked. Simply circumstantial as relating to recent events in your midst, Mr. Webster."

"Makes it look mighty certain that he was the feller with the mask, don't it? Only three shots were fired, you know. I've been thinking a lot about what you said awhile ago. You don't think that he had anything to do with--with putting the Vick girl out of the way? You spoke about him being mistaken in the woman."

"He had nothing to do with it, Webster. I told you I saw a figure in the pasture after he had gone into the house. If it was the Vick girl, she was certainly alive then. He went straight home after leaving that house. He didn't go out of the Tavern again last night, that's positive. Now, what I want to find out is this: was the girl in love with him? Was there anything between them? If she's at the bottom of the river down there, it's a plain case of suicide, my friend, and people do not take their own lives unless there's a mighty good reason. With a young girl it's usually a case of unrequited love,--or worse. According to that letter Miss Miller had from New York, Thane is not above betraying a girl. Of course, if the Vick girl is dead and left nothing behind to implicate Thane, it will be out of the question to charge him with being even indirectly responsible for her death."

"The main thing," said Charlie, who had turned a shade paler during this matter-of-fact, cold-blooded analysis, "is to keep Alix Crown from falling into his clutches. He's a bad egg, that feller is, and he's made up his mind to win her by fair means or foul."

"Well, if she falls for him after reading that lawyer's letter and when she hears what I believe to be the truth about that heroic episode the other night,--why, she ought to get what's coming to her, that's all I have to say," said Mr. Gilfillan flatly. "I've discovered one thing, Mr. Webster. If a woman makes up her mind to marry a man, hell-fire and brimstone can't stop her. The older I get and the more I see of women, the more I am convinced that vice is its own reward. I guess we'd better stroll down to the river and see what's doing."

"I've been thinking," said Charlie as they walked along, "that if Thane wasn't in the British Army and wasn't in our army, then he must be a slacker and wanted by the government for--"

"Nothing doing on that line. You forget he was crippled long before the war. He couldn't get by a medical board. They'd turn him down in a second. If he was in this country at the time of the draft, he would have had no trouble getting an exemption. What I can't understand is why he, a New Yorker, should be hiding out here in the jungles of Indiana. There's something queer about that, my friend."

"Kind of fishy," said Charlie darkly. Then upon reflection, he added with considerable vehemence: "Damn him!"

Already half a dozen rowboats were out in the stream, with men peering over the sides into the deep, slow-moving water. Burk's Ferry did a thriving business. It plied back and forth from one "road-cut" to the other, crowded with foot passengers, all of whom studied the water intently. Men, women and children tramped close to the edge of both banks. People spoke in subdued voices; an atmosphere of the deepest solemnity hung over the scene.

The sky itself was overcast; a raw wind moaned through the trees, sighing a requiem. The drab, silent river went placidly, mockingly on its way down to the sea, telling no tales: if Rosabel Vick was rolling, gliding along the bottom, gently urged by the current, the grim waters covered well the secret.

The word went from lip to lip that motor-boats were on the way down from the city, with police officers and grappling-hooks and men experienced in the gruesome business of "dragging." The boss of the railway construction gang at Hawkins, where the new bridge was being built, had started for Windomville with a quantity of dynamite to be exploded on the bottom of the river in the hope and expectation of bringing the body to the surface.

CHAPTER XXI

OUT OF THE NIGHT

All afternoon the search continued. At intervals and at widely separated points dull explosions took place on the bed of the river, creating smooth, round hillocks that lasted for the fraction of a second and then dissolved into swift-spreading wavelets, stained a dirty yellow by the upheaval of sand and mud, and went racing in ruffles to the banks which they tenderly licked before they died. White-bellied fish, killed by the shock of the explosions, came to the surface and floated away,--scores of them, large and small. Spider-like grappling hooks, with their curving iron prongs, raked the bottom from side to side, moving constantly downstream, feeling here, there and everywhere with insensate fingers for the body of Rosabel Vick.

A pall settled over the river; it reached far beyond the environs of Windomville, for Amos Vick was a man known and respected by every farmer in the district.

Night came. Courtney Thane, considerably shaken by the tragedy, set out immediately after dinner for the home of Alix Crown. He had been silent and depressed at dinner, taking his little part in the conversation, which dealt exclusively with the incomprehensible act of young Rosabel Vick.

"What possible reason could that pretty happy young girl have had for killing herself?" That was the question every one asked and no one answered. Mrs. Maude Baggs Pollock repeatedly asked it at dinner, and once Thane had replied:

"I still don't believe she killed herself. It is beyond belief. If she is out there in the river, as they suspect, it is because there was foul play. Some fiend attacked her. I will never believe anything else, Mrs. Pollock. I knew her too well. She would never dream of killing herself. She loved life too well. I can't help feeling that she is alive and well somewhere, that they will hear from her in a day or two, and that--"

"But how about the things they found in that boat?" demanded Doc Simpson. "She wouldn't be so heartless as to play a trick like that on her folks."

Courtney's answer was a gloomy shake of the head.

His heart was pounding heavily as he trudged up the walk to

Alix's door. He knew that the crisis in his affairs was at hand. She had asked him to come. He had not given up hope. He was still confident of his power to win in spite of her amazing perversity. Inconsistency, he called it. Of one thing he was resolved: he would brook no delay. She would have to marry him at once. He wanted to get away from Windomville as soon as possible. He loathed the place.

Hilda came to the door.

"Miss Crown is over at Mr. Vick's," she announced. "She's not at home."

He stiffened. "I had an appointment with her for this evening, Hilda. She must be at home."

"She ain't," said the maid succinctly.

"Did she leave any word for me?"

"Not with me, sir. She telephoned to Mrs. Strong this evening to say she was going to stay with Mrs. Vick."

"All night?"

"No, sir. The car's going down to meet her at the ferry about ten o'clock."

He departed in a very unpleasant frame of mind. This was laying it on a bit thick, he complained. If she thought she could treat him in this cavalier fashion she'd soon find out where she "got off." What business had she, anyhow, over at the Vicks? All the old women in the neighbourhood would be there to--An idea struck him suddenly.

"I'll do it," he muttered. "I'll have to go over some time, so why not now? It's the decent thing to do. I'll go tonight."

He hurried up to his room. Opening his trunk, he took out his revolver, replaced the discharged shells and stuck it into his overcoat pocket. Picking up the little package of bank-notes, he fingered them for a moment and then, moved by an impulse for which he had no explanation, he not only counted them but quickly stuffed them into his trousers' pocket. Afterwards he was convinced that premonition was responsible for this incomprehensible act.

He crossed the ferry with several other people. The moon had broken through the clouds. Its light upon the cold, sluggish water produced the effect of polished steel. It reminded him of the grey surface of an ancient suit of armour. The crossing was slow. He could not repress a shudder when he looked downstream and saw lights that seemed to be fixed in the centre of the river. He closed his eyes. He could not bear to look at the cold, silent water. The soft splashing against the broad, square bow of the old-fashioned ferry served to increase his nervousness. The horrid fancy struck him

that Rosabel Vick was out there ahead clawing at the slimy timbers in the vain effort to draw herself out of the water....He wished to God he had not come.

He was the first person off the ferry when it came to a stop on the farther side of the river. Ahead of him lay the road through the narrow belt of trees that lined the bank. He knew that a scant hundred yards lay between the river and the open road beyond and yet a vast dread possessed him. He shrank from that black opening in the wall of trees where dead leaves rustled and the wind whispered secrets to the barren branches.

He fell in behind a couple of men who strode fearlessly into the dark avenue. After him came two men and a woman. They were all strangers to him, so far as he could make out, but he felt a sense of security in their nearness. He gathered that they were bound for Amos Vick's. Presently they came to the open road beyond the trees. The half moon rode high and clear; the figures of his companions took shape, dusky and ghost-like; the fences alongside the road became visible, while straw-ricks, lone trees and other shadowy objects emerged from the maw of the night. Here and there in the distance points of light indicated the presence of invisible farmhouses, while straight ahead, a mile or more away, a cluster of lights marked the house of Amos Vick.

As he drew nearer, Thane was able to count the lights. He looked intently for the sixth window, an upstairs corner room was where it would be,--but there were lights in only five. The corner window was dark. He knew that window well....He wished he had a stiff drink of whiskey.

Half a dozen automobiles stood at the roadside in front of the house. He stopped beside one of them to look at his wrist-watch. It was half-past eight. Alix would be starting home in less than an hour. No doubt it had been arranged that one of these cars was to take her down to the ferry. He had seen her saddle horse late that afternoon standing in front of the blacksmith's shop, evidently waiting to be re-shod.

If he had his way,--and he was determined to have it,--Alix would walk with him to the ferry.

As he turned in at the gate he observed that the woman and her two companions, after pausing for a moment to look at the house, continued their way up the road. The men who had preceded him all the way were already on the front porch. He followed the disappearing trio with his eyes. The woman, he noticed for the first time, was very tall,--quite as tall as the men. She wore a shawl over her head, and some sort of a long cloak.

Setting his jaw he strode up the walk, looking neither to right nor left, mounted the steps where many a night he had sat with Rosabel beside him, and after passing a group of low-voiced neighbours,

knocked on the closed door. He was admitted by an elderly woman who looked askance at this well-dressed stranger.

"I am Mr. Thane, a friend," he said. "Will you tell Mrs. Vick, please?"

"She's upstairs, and I--I--"

"I think she is expecting me. But,--wait. I thought I might be able to comfort her, but I can see by your expression that she isn't feeling up to seeing people. I came over primarily to see if there is anything I can do, Madam. You see, Rosabel and I were great pals." His voice broke a little, and he bit his nether lip.

"We've finally got her to lie down," said the woman. "She's--she's nearly crazy with the suspense and--everything. If you'll wait a little bit, I'll find out if she feels like seeing you. Alix Crown is with her. She coaxed her to stretch out on the bed. Miss Crown understands these things. She did some hospital work during the war--"

"Yes, I know Miss Crown," he interrupted.

"--and saw a lot of suffering, 'specially among mothers who came to see their crippled and sick sons in the hospitals."

"Perhaps if you were to tell Miss Crown that I am here she could--but no, I sha'n't even bother Miss Crown. She's got her hands full. I will sit down and wait awhile, however. If by any chance, you should be able to get word to Mrs. Vick that I am here, I think she might feel like seeing me."

"I'll see," said the woman dubiously, and went away.

Courtney sat down on a sofa in the parlour. He looked around the lamp-lit room....Over in the corner was the upright piano on which Rosabel used to play for him. He could see her now--the shapely, girlish back; the round, white neck and the firm young shoulders; the tilt of her head; the strong, brown hands,--he could see her now. And she used to turn her head and smile at him, and make dreadful grimaces when this diversion resulted in a discord....He got up suddenly and walked out into the dining-room.

Beyond, in the kitchen, he heard the rumble of men's voices. He hesitated for a moment, and then opened the door. There were half a dozen men in the kitchen, and one of them was Amos Vick. They were preparing to go out into the night. Vick's face was haggard, his garments were muddy, his long rubber boots were covered with sludge and sand. Catching sight of Thane in the doorway, the farmer went toward him, his hand outstretched.

"I'm glad you came, Courtney," he said, his voice hoarse but steady. "Lucinda will be pleased. Does she know you're here?"

"I sent word up, but if she doesn't feel like--"

"She'll want to see you. We're starting out again. Down the river."
(His voice shook a little.) "My soul,--boy,--you look as white as a sheet. Here,--take a good swig of this. It's some rye that Steve White brought over. We all needed it. Help yourself. You've been overdoing a little today, Courtney. You're not fit for this sort of--That's right! That will brace you up. You needed it, my boy."
Courtney drained half a tumbler of whiskey neat. He choked a little.

"I guess we'd better be starting, Amos," said Steve White.

"Take me along with you, Mr. Vick," cried Courtney, squaring his shoulders. "I can't stand being idle while--"

"You'd catch your death of cold," interrupted Vick, laying his hand on the young man's shoulder. "It's mighty fine of you and I--I sha'n't forget it. But you're not fit for an all night job like this. I feel sort of responsible for you, my boy. Your mother would never forgive me if anything happened to you, and this is a time when we've got to think about the mothers. Good night,--God bless you, Courtney."

"Good night, Amos."

The men trooped heavily out of the kitchen door.

Presently he heard the chugging of automobile engines and then the roar as they sped off down the road. He returned to the parlour. The whiskey had given him fresh confidence.

The elderly woman was talking to a couple of men in the hall. From the scraps of conversation he was able to pick up, he gathered that they were reporters from the city. She invited him into the room.

"We would prefer a very recent picture," one of the men was saying. "Something taken within the last few weeks, if possible. A snap-shot will do, Madam."

The speaker was a middle-aged man with horn-rimmed spectacles. His companion was much the younger of the two. The latter bowed to Thane, who had taken a position before the fireplace and was regarding the strangers with interest.

"I'll have to speak to Mrs. Vick," murmured the woman. "I don't know as she would want Rosabel's picture printed in the papers."

"It would be of incalculable assistance, Madam, in case she has run away from home. We have an idea that she may have planted those garments in the boat in order to throw people off the track."

"Oh, she--she wouldn't have done that," cried the woman. "She

couldn't be so heartless."

"You overlook the possibility that her mind may be affected. Dementia frequently takes the form of--er--you might say unnatural cunning."

"I'll speak to Mrs. Vick. There's a scrap-book of Kodak pictures there on the table. I was looking through it today. She and her brother, Cale, made heaps of pictures. You might be looking through it while I go upstairs."

Thane was lighting a cigarette.

"Have you told Miss Crown that I am here?" asked he, as she started toward the stairs.

"She says she'll be down in a few minutes. Mrs. Vick wants to see you before you go."

The two reporters were examining the contents of the scrap-book. The younger of the two was standing at the end of the little marble-topped table, his body screening the book from Courtney's view.

There were a number of loose prints lying between the leaves toward the end of the book. Rosabel had neglected to paste them in. The man with the horn-rimmed spectacles ran through them hastily. He stealthily slipped two of these prints up his sleeve.

Thane would have been startled could he have seen those prints. They were not pictures of Rosabel Vick, but fair-sized, quite excellent likenesses of himself!

The woman returned to say that Mrs. Vick was very much upset by the thought of her daughter's picture appearing in the paper, and could not think of allowing them to use it.

The elder man bowed courteously. "I quite understand, Madam. We would not dream of using the picture if it would give pain to the unhappy mother. Please assure her that we respect her wishes. Thank you for your kindness. We must be on our way back to town. Good night, Madam."

"These reporters are awful nuisances," remarked Courtney as the front door closed behind the two men. "Always butting in where they're not wanted."

"They seemed very nice," observed the woman.

"I've never seen one that wasn't a sneak," said he, raising his voice a little. The whiskey was having its effect.

Mrs. Vick and Alix entered the room together. The former came straight toward the young man. Her rather heavy face was white and

drawn, but her eyes were wide and bright with anxiety. There was no trace of tears. He knew there would be no scene, no hysterics. Lucinda Vick was made of stern, heroic stuff. As he advanced, holding out his hands, he noticed that she was fully dressed. She could be ready at a moment's notice to go to her daughter.

"Oh, Courtney!" she cried, and a little spasm of pain convulsed her face for a fleeting second or two. Her voice was husky, tight with strain.

He took her cold, trembling hands in his.

"It's inconceivable," he cried. "I can't believe it, I won't believe it. You poor, poor thing!"

"It's true. She's gone. My little girl is gone. I could curse God." She spoke in a low, emotionless voice. "Why should He have taken her in this way? What have we done to deserve this cruelty? Why couldn't He have let her die in my arms, with her head upon my breast,--where it belongs?"

"Don't give up--yet," he stammered, confounded by this amazing exhibition of self-control. "There is a chance,--yes, there is a chance, Mrs. Vick. Don't give up. Be--be brave."

She shook her head. "She is dead," came from her stiff lips, and that was all.

He laid his arm across her shoulder. "I wish to God it was me instead of her," he cried fervently. "I would take her place--willingly, Mrs. Vick."

"I--I know you would, Courtney," said she, looking into his eyes. "You were her best friend. She adored you. I know you would,--God bless you!"

He looked away. His gaze fell upon Alix, standing in the door. His eyes brightened. The hunted expression left them. An eager, hungry light came into them. She was staring at him. Gradually he came to the realization that she was looking at him with unspeakable horror.

Mrs. Vick was speaking. He hardly heard a word she uttered.

"It was kind of you to come, Courtney. Thank you. I must go now. I--I can't stand it,--I can't stand it!"

She left him abruptly. Alix stood aside to allow her to pass through the door. They heard her go up the stairs, heavily, hurriedly.

"Alix!" he whispered, holding out his hands.

She did not move.

"I went up to the house to see you," he hurried on. "They told me you were here. I--"

Her gesture checked the eager words.

"You snake!" She fairly hissed the word.

He drew back, speechless. She came a few steps nearer.

"You snake!" she repeated, her eyes blazing.

"Wha--What do you mean?" he gasped, a fiery red rushing to his face.

"Would you have died for the Ritter girl?"

A bomb exploding at his feet could not have produced a greater shock. His mouth fell open; the colour swiftly receded, leaving his face a sickly white.

"Who the hell--" he began blankly.

"Be good enough to remember where you are," cried Alix, lowering her voice as she glanced over her shoulder. "I can say all I have to say to you in a very few words, Mr. Thane. Don't interrupt me. I have been a fool,--a stupid fool. We need not go into that. Thank heaven, I happen to be made of a little stronger stuff than others who have come under your influence. You would have MARRIED me,--yes, I believe that,--because it would have been the only way. I have the complete history of your betrayal of the Ritter girl. I know how your leg was injured. I know that you were kicked out of the American Ambulance and advised to leave France. I don't believe you ever served in the British Army. I have every reason to believe that you poisoned my dog, and that you,--were the man who came to my window the other night. And I suspect that you are the cause of poor Rosabel Vick's suicide. Now you know what I think of you. My God, how could you have come here tonight? These people trusted you,--they still trust you. Until now I did not believe such men as you existed. You--"

"I had nothing, absolutely nothing to do with Rosabel," he cried hoarsely. He was trembling like a leaf. "Don't you go putting such ideas into their heads. Don't you--"

"Oh, I am not likely to do that," she interrupted scornfully. "I shall not add to their misery. If I could prove that you betrayed that poor, foolish child,--then I would see to it that you paid the price. But I cannot prove it. I only know that she would have been helpless in your hands. Oh, I know your power! I have felt it. And I did not even pretend to myself that I loved you. What chance would she have had if she loved and trusted you? I shudder at the thought of--If Amos Vick should even suspect you of wronging his child, he would not wait for proof. He would tear you to pieces.

You may be innocent. That is why I am giving you your chance. Now, go!"

"You certainly will give me the opportunity to defend myself, Alix. Am I to be condemned unheard? If you will allow me to walk to the ferry with you--"

"And who is to act as my bodyguard?" she inquired with a significant sneer. "Go! I never want to see your face again."

With that, she left him. He stood perfectly still, staring after the slender, boyish figure until it was hidden from view by the bend of the stairway.

His eyes were glassy. Fear possessed his soul. Suddenly he was aroused to action.

"I'd better get out of this," he muttered.

His hand clutched the weapon in his coat pocket as he strode swiftly toward the front door. Once outside he paused to look furtively about him before descending the porch steps. Several men were standing near the gate. The porch was deserted. He wondered if Amos Vick was down there waiting for him. Then he remembered what Alix had said to him: "These people trust you,--they still trust you." What had he to fear? He laughed,--a short, jerky, almost inaudible laugh,--and went confidently down the walk. As he passed the little group he uttered a brief "good night" to the men, and was rewarded by a friendly response from all of them.

Down the moonlit road he trudged, his brain working rapidly, feverishly. In his heart was the rage of defeat, in his soul the clamour of fear,--not fear now of the dark strip of woods but of the whole world about him. He communed aloud.

"The first thing to do is to pack. I've got to do that tonight. I'm through here. The jig's up. She means it. How the devil did she find out all this stuff?...But if I leave immediately it will look suspicious. I've got to stick around for a few days. If I beat it tomorrow morning some one's bound to ask questions. It will look queer. Tomorrow I'll receive an urgent letter calling me home. Mother needs me. Her health is bad....I wonder if an autopsy would reveal anything....Tomorrow sure. I can't stand it here another day....There's nothing to worry about,--not a thing,--but what's the sense of my hanging around here any longer? She's on. Some meddling whelp has been--Good Lord, I wonder if it could be that fat fool, Webster?...If I skip out tonight, it would set Vick to thinking....What a fool I was...."

And so on till he came to the woods. There, his face blanched and his heart began to pound like a hammer. He drew the revolver from his pocket and plunged desperately into the black tunnel; he was out of breath when he ran down to the landing.

Through the gloom he distinguished the ferry boat three-quarters of the way across the river, nearing the opposite bank. His "halloa" brought an answer from the ferryman. Cursing his luck in missing the boat by so short a margin of time, he sat down heavily on the stout wooden wall that guarded the approach. It would be ten or fifteen minutes before the tortoise-like craft could recross and pick him up. His gaze instantly went downstream. The faint, rhythmic sound of oarlocks came to his ears. There were no lights on the river, but after a time he made out the vague shape of an object moving on the surface a long way off. From time to time it was lost in the shadows of the tree-lined bank, only to steal into view again as it moved slowly across a jagged opening in the far-reaching wall of black. It was a boat coming upstream, hugging the bank to avoid the current farther out.

Some one approached. He turned quickly and beheld the figure of a woman coming down the road. His heart leaped. Could it be Alix? He dismissed the thought immediately. This was a tall woman--in skirts. She came quite close and stopped, her gaze evidently fixed upon him. Then she moved a little farther down the slope and stood watching the ferry which, by this time, was moving out from the farther side. He recognized the figure. It was that of the gaunt woman who crossed with him earlier in the night.

The ferry was drawing out from the Windomville side when a faint shout came from down the river. Burk answered the call, which was repeated.

"This is my busy night," growled the ferryman. "I ain't been up this late in a coon's age. Not since the Old Settlers' Picnic three years ago down at the old fort. I wonder if those fellers have got any news?"

Courtney stepped off the boat a few minutes later and hurried up the hill. The woman followed. At the top of the slope he passed three or four men standing in the shelter of the blacksmith shop, where they were protected from the sharp, chill wind that had sprung up. A loud shout from below caused him to halt. Burk, the ferryman, had called out through his cupped hands:

"What say?"

The wind bore the answer from an unseen speaker in the night, clear and distinct: "We've got her!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE THROWER OF STONES

An icy chill, as of a great gust of wind, swept through and over Courtney Thane. His mouth seemed suddenly to fill with water. He could not move. The men by the forge ran swiftly down the hill. The tall woman turned and after a moment followed the men, stopping in the middle of the road a few rods above the landing. She was still standing there when Courtney recovering his power of locomotion struck off rapidly in the direction of Dowd's Tavern. Halfway home he came to an abrupt halt. An inexplicable irresistible force was drawing his mind and body back to the river's edge. He did not want to go back there and see--Rosabel. He tried not to turn his steps in that direction, and yet something like a magnet was dragging him. A sort of fascination,--the fascination that goes with dread, and horror, and revulsion--took hold of him....He moved slowly, hesitatingly at first, then swiftly, not directly back over the ground he had just covered but by a circuitous route that took him through the lot at the rear of the forge. He made his way stealthily down the slope, creeping along behind a thick hedge of hazel brush to a point just above the ferry landing and to the left of the old dilapidated wharf. Here he could see without himself being seen.... He watched them lift a dark, inanimate object from the boat and lay it on the wharf....He heard men's voices in excited, subdued conversation....He saw the tall woman running up the road toward the town. She paused within a dozen feet of his hiding place.... Then something happened to him. He seemed to be losing the sense of sight and the sense of hearing. His brain was blurred, the sound of voices trailed off into utter silence. He felt the earth giving way beneath his quaking knees....The next he knew, men's voices fell upon his dull, uncomprehending ears. Gradually his senses returned. Out of the confused jumble words took shape. He heard his own name mentioned. Instantly his every faculty was alive.

Through the brush he could see the dark, indistinct forms of three or four men. They were in the road just below him.

"You shouldn't have let him out of your sight," one of the men was saying. "Hang it all, we can't let him give us the slip now."

The listener's eyes, sharpened by anxiety, made out the figure of the woman. She spoke,--and he was startled to hear the deep voice of a man.

"He was making for the boarding house. Webster says he is not in his room. I took it for granted he was going home or I wouldn't have turned back."

Where had he heard that voice before? It was strangely familiar.

"Well, we've got to locate him. I'll stake my life he is George Ritchie. I compared this snap-shot with the photograph I have with

me. Shave off that dinky little moustache and I'll bet a hundred to one you'll have Ritchie's mug all right. Hustle back there, Gilfillan,--you and Simons. He'll be turning up at the house unless he's got wind of us. Don't let him see you. You stay here with me, Constable. The chances are he'll come back here to wait for Miss Crown, if he's as badly stuck on her as you say, Gilfillan. They're all fools about women."

The hidden listener was no longer quaking. His body was tense, his mind was working like lightning. He was wide awake, alert; the fingers that clutched the weapon in his pocket were firm and steady; he scarcely breathed for fear of betraying his presence, but the courage of the hunted was in his heart.

The little group broke up. Constable Foss and one of the strangers remained on the spot, the others vanished up the road. He glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the wharf. A long dark object was lying near the edge, while some distance away a small knot of men stood talking. The moon, riding high, cast a cold, sickly light upon the scene.

"I've always been kind of suspicious of him," Foss was saying, his voice lowered. "What did you say his real name is?"

"His real name is Thane, I suppose. I guess there's no doubt about that. Mind you, I'm not sure he's the man we've been looking for these last six months, but I'm pretty sure of it. Last February two men and a woman tried to smuggle a lot of diamonds through the customs at New York. I'll not go into details now further than to say they landed from one of the big ocean liners and came within an ace of getting away with the job. The woman was the leader. She was nabbed with one of the men at a hotel. The other man got away. He was on the passenger list as George Ritchie, of Cleveland, Ohio. The woman had half a dozen photographs of him in her possession. I've got a copy of one of 'em in my pocket now, and it's so much like this fellow Thane that you'd swear it was of the same man. This morning Gilfillan,--that's the Pinkerton man,--telephoned to his chief in Chicago to notify the federal authorities that he was almost dead certain that our man was here. He's a wonder at remembering faces, and he had seen our photographs. Simons and I took the three o'clock train. Gilfillan met us in the city and brought us out after we had instructed the police to be ready to help us in case he got onto us and gave us the slip."

"How much of a reward is offered?" inquired Foss.

"We are not supposed to be rewarded for doing our duty," replied the Secret Service man curtly. "He got away from us and it's our business to catch him again. You can bet he's our man. He wouldn't be hanging around a burg like this for months unless he had a blamed good reason for keeping out of sight."

"He's been in mighty bad health,--and, if anybody should ask you,

there ain't a healthier place in the world than right here in--"

"It's healthier than most jails," admitted the other with a chuckle.

"Umph!" grunted Mr. Foss, delivering without words a full and graphic opinion on the subject of humour as it exists in the minds of people who live in large cities. He chewed for a time in silence.

"What became of the woman and the other man?"

"Oh, they were sent up,--I don't know for how long. They're old hands. Husband and wife. Steamship gamblers before the war. Fleeced any number of suckers. She must be a peach, judging from the pictures I've seen of her. They probably would have got away with this last job if she and Ritchie hadn't tried to put something over on friend husband. She had the can all ready to tie to him when he got wise and laid for her lover with a gun. The revenue people had been tipped off by agents in Paris and traced the couple to the hotel. They sprung the trap too soon, however, and the second man got away."

"Well, I guess there ain't any question but what this feller here is old Silas Thane's grandson. They say he's the livin' image of old Silas. So he must have sailed under a false name."

"They usually do," said the other patiently.

"And you want me to arrest him on suspicion, eh?"

"Certainly. You're a county official, aren't you?"

"I'm an officer of the law."

"Well, that's the answer. We are obliged to turn such matters over to the local authorities. What do you suppose I'm telling you about the case for? When I give the word, you land him and--well, Uncle Sam will do the rest, never fear."

"That's all right, but supposin' he ain't the man you're after and he turns around and sues me for false arrest?"

"You can detain anybody on information and belief, my friend. Don't you know that?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Foss with commendable asperity. "Supposin' he's got a revolver?"

"He probably has,--but so have we. Don't worry. He won't have a chance to use it. Hello! Isn't that a man standing up there by that telephone pole? We'll just stroll up that way. Don't hurry. Keep cool. Talk about the drowning."

They were halfway up the hill before Courtney moved. Every nerve was aquiver as he raised himself to his feet and looked cautiously

about. The thing he feared had come to pass, but even as he crouched there in the shelter of the bushes the means of salvation flashed through his mind. He realized that the next fifteen or twenty minutes would convince these dogged, experienced man chasers that their quarry had "got wind of them" and was in flight. The hunt would be on in grim earnest; the alarm would go out in all directions. Men would be watching for him at every cross-roads, every railway station, every village, and directing the hunt would be--these men who never give up until they "land" their man.

His only chance lay in keeping under cover for a day or two,--or even longer,--until the chase went farther afield and he could take the risk of venturing forth from his hiding place. He had the place in mind. They would never think of looking for him in that sinister hole in the wall, Quill's Window! There he could lie in perfect safety until the coast was clear, and then by night steal down the river in the wake of pursuit.

Their first thoughts would be of the railroad, the highways and the city. They would not beat the woods for him. They would cut off all avenues of escape and set their traps at the end of every trail, confident that he would walk into them perforce before another day was done.

Like a ghost he stole across the little clearing that lay between the road and the willows above the ferry. The snapping of a twig under his feet, the scuffling of a pebble, the rustling of dead leaves and grass, the scraping of his garments against weeds and shrubbery, were sounds that took on the magnitude of ear-splitting crashes. It was all he could do to keep from breaking into a mad, reckless dash for the trees at the farther side of this moonlit stretch. With every cautious, fox-like step, he expected the shout of alarm to go up from behind, and with that shout he knew restraint would fail him; he would throw discretion to the winds and bolt like a frightened rabbit, and the dogs would be at his heels.

He was nearing the trees when he heard some one running in the road, now a hundred yards behind him. Stooping still lower, he increased his speed almost to a run. The sound of footsteps ceased abruptly; the runner had come to a sudden halt. Thane reached the thicket in another stride or two and paused for a few seconds to listen. A quick little thrill of relief shot through him. No one was coming along behind him. The runner, whoever he was, had not seen him; no cry went up, no loud yell of "There he goes!"

Picking his way carefully down the slope he came to the trail of the Indians, over which he had trudged recently on his trip to the great rock. He could tell by the feel of the earth under his feet that he was on the hard, beaten path by the river's edge. Now he went forward more rapidly, more confidently. There were times when he had to cross little moon-streaked openings among the trees, and at such times he stooped almost to a creeping position.

Occasionally he paused in his flight to listen for sounds of pursuit. Once his heart seemed to stop beating. He was sure that he heard footsteps back on the trail behind him. Again, as he drew near the rock-strewn base of the hill, a sound as of some one scrambling through the underbrush came to his straining ears, but the noise ceased even as he stopped to listen. He laughed at his fears. An echo, no doubt, of his own footsteps; the wind thrashing a broken limb; the action of the water upon some obstruction along the bank.

Nevertheless he dropped to his hands and knees when he came to the outlying boulders and jagged slabs close to the foot of the black, towering mass. There was no protecting foliage here. Never in his life had he known the moon to shine so brightly. He whispered curses to the high-hanging lantern in the sky.

The murmur of the river below brought a consoling thought to him. He would not suffer from thirst. He could go without food for a couple of days, even longer. Had not certain English women survived days and days of a voluntary hunger strike? But he could not do without water. In the black hours before dawn he would climb down from his eerie den and drink his fill at the river's brink.

Now a sickening fear gripped him. What if he were to find it impossible to scale that almost perpendicular steep? What if those hand-hewn clefts in the rock fell short of reaching to the cave's entrance? The processes of time and the elements may have sealed or obliterated the shallow hand and toe holds. His blood ran cold. He had dreaded the prospect of that hazardous climb up the face of the rock. Now he was overcome by an even greater dread: that he would be unable to reach the place of refuge.

He had no thought of Alix Crown now--no thought of her beauty, her body, her riches. His cherished dream was over. She took her place among other forgotten dreams. The sinister business of saving his own skin drove her out of his mind. It drove out all thought of Rosabel Vick. The hounds were at his heels. It was no time to think of women!

II

Anxiety that touched almost upon despair hastened his steps. Abandoning caution, he ran recklessly up the path among the rocks, stumbling and reeling but always keeping his feet, and came at last to the gloomy, forbidding facade of Quill's Window. Here he groped along the wall, clawing for the sunken cleats with eager, trembling hands. He knew they were there--somewhere. Not only had he seen them, he had climbed with ease, hand over hand, ten or a dozen feet up the cliff. He had shuddered a little that day as he looked first over his shoulder and then upward along the still unsealed stretch that lay between him and the mouth of the cave, seventy or eighty feet away. But that was in broad daylight. It would be different now, with darkness as his ally.

He remembered thinking that day how easy it would be to reach Quill's Window by this rather simple route. All that was required was a stout heart, a steady hand, and a good pair of arms. All of these were bestowed upon him by magic of darkness. It was what the light revealed that made a coward of him. Why, he could shut his eyes tight and go up that cliff by night as easily as--but where were the slots?

At last his hand encountered one of the sharp edges. He reached up and found the next one above,--and then for the first time realized that his eyes had been closed all the time he was feeling along the cold surface of the rock. He opened them in a start of actual bewilderment. The blackish mass rose almost sheer above him, like a vast wall upon which the moon cast a dull, murky light. He closed his eyes again and leaned heavily against the rock. His heart began to beat horribly. He felt his courage slipping; he wondered if he had the strength, the nerve to go on; he saw himself halfway up that endless wall, clutching wildly to save himself when a treacherous hand-hold broke loose and--

He opened his eyes and tried to pierce the shadows below the rocky path. Was it best to hide in that hole up there, after all? Would it not be wiser, now that he had a fair start, to keep on up the river, trusting to--

A chorus of automobile horns in the distance came to his ears suddenly,--a confused jumble of raucous blasts produced by many cars. The alarm! The search was on! The wild shriek of a siren broke the stillness near at hand, followed a few seconds later by the gradually increasing roar of an engine as it sped up the dirt road not three hundred yards to his left,--the road that ran past the gate on the other side of the hill. God! They were getting close!

Another and even more disturbing sound came to him as he stood with his fingers gripping one of the little ledges, the toe of his shoe fumbling for a foothold in another. Somewhere back on the trail he had just traversed, a rock went clattering down to the river. He heard it bounding--and the splash as it shot into the water.

He hesitated no longer. Shutting his eyes, he began the ascent....

A dark object turned the corner of the cliff below and moved slowly, cautiously along the wall. Suddenly it stopped. From somewhere in the gloom ahead came a strange and puzzling sound, as of the dragging of a tree limb across the face of the rock. The crouching object in the trail straightened up and was transformed into the tall, shadowy figure of a man.

For many seconds he stood motionless, listening, his eyes searching the trail ahead. The queer sound of scraping went on, broken at intervals by the faint rattle of sand or dirt upon the rocky path. At last he looked up. Far up the face of the cliff a bulky, shapeless

thing was crawling, slowly but surely like a great beetle.

The watcher could not believe his eyes. And yet there could be no mistake. Something WAS crawling up the sheer face of the cliff, a bulging shadow dimly outlined against the starlit sky.

The man below went forward swiftly. Twice he stooped to search with eager hands for something at his feet, but always with his gaze fixed on the creeping shadow. He knew the creeper's goal: that black streak in the wall above, rendered thin by foreshortening. He knew the creeper!

Twenty or thirty paces short of the ladder he stopped. From that spot he hurled his first rock. His was a young, powerful arm and the missile sped upward as if shot from a catapult. It struck the face of the cliff a short distance above the head of the climber and glanced off to go hurtling down among the trees beyond.

Thane stopped as if paralysed. For one brief, horrible moment he felt every vestige of strength deserting him, oozing out through his tense, straining finger-tips. The shock had stunned him. He moaned,--a little whimpering moan. He was about to fall! He could hold on no longer with those weak, trembling hands. His brain reeled. A great dizziness seized him. He clung frantically to the face of the rock, making a desperate effort to regain his failing senses. Suddenly his strength returned; he was stronger than ever. A miracle had happened.

The mouth of the cave was not more than half a dozen feet above him. He opened his eyes for one brief, daring glance upward. Not more than five or six steps to go. Gritting his teeth he went on. Now only four more ledges to grip, four more footholds to find.

A second stone whizzed past his head and struck with a crash beyond him. He heard it whistle, he felt the rush of air.

"God! If that had got my head! What an inhuman devil he is! The dirty beast!"

The fourth stone caught him in the side after glancing off the wall to his left. He groaned aloud, but gripped more fiercely than ever at his slender support. For a few seconds he could not move. Then he reached up and felt for the next "cleat." He found it but, like many others he had encountered, it was filled with sand and dirt. That meant delay. He would have to dig it out with his fingers before risking his grip on the edge. Fast and feverishly he worked. Another stone struck below his feet.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Let up on that! Do you want to kill me? Cut it out! I can't get away, you damned fool! You've got me cornered." His voice was high and shrill.

The answer was another stone which grazed his leg.

A moment later he reached over and felt along the floor of the cave for the final hold. Finding it, he drew himself up over the edge and crawled, weak and half fainting, out of range of the devilish marksman.

For a long time he lay still, gasping for breath. They had him cold! There was no use in trying to think of a way out of his difficulty. All he wanted now was to rest, a chance to pull himself together. After all was said and done, what were a few years in the penitentiary? He was young. Five years--even ten,--what were they at his time of life? He would be thirty-five, at the most forty, when he came out, and as fit as he was when he went in.

"It was all my fault anyway," he reflected bitterly. "If I had let Madge alone I--Oh,--what's the use belly-aching now! That's all over,--and here am I, paying pretty blamed dearly for a month's pleasure. They've got me. There's no way out of it now. Jail! Well, worse things could happen than that. What will mother think? I suppose it will hurt like the devil. But she could have fixed this if she'd loosened up a bit. She could have gone to Washington as I told her to do and--hell, it wouldn't have cost her half as much as it will to defend me in court. She can't get a decent lawyer under--well, God knows how many thousands."

He sat up and unbuttoned his overcoat in order to feel of the spot where the stone had struck him. He winced a little. After a moment's reflection he drew a box of matches from his pocket.

"No harm in striking a match now," he chattered aloud. "I may as well see what sort of a place it is."

He crawled farther back in the cave, out of the wind, and struck a match. His hand shook violently, his chin quivered. During the life of the brief flare, the interior of Quill's Window was revealed to him. The cave was perhaps twenty feet deep and almost as wide at the front, with an uneven, receding roof and a flat floor that dropped at no inconsiderable slant toward the rear. It appeared to be empty except for the remains of two or three broken-up boxes over against one of the walls. He struck a second match to light a cigarette, continuing his scrutiny while the tiny blaze lasted. He saw no bones, no ghastly skulls, no signs of the ancient tragedies that made the place abhorrent.

He crawled back to the entrance. Lying flat, he peered over the ledge.

"Hallo, down there!" he called out. No response. He shouted once more, his voice cracking a little.

"Where are you?"

This time he got an answer. A hoarse voice replied:

"I'm here, all right."

Thane forced a laugh.

"Well, I'm up here, all right. You've got me treed. What's the idea? Waiting for me to come down?" No answer, "Say, it's worth a lot of money to you if you'll just walk on and forget that I'm up here. I'll give you my word of honour to come across with enough to put you on easy street for the rest of your life." He heard the man below walking up and down the path.

"Did you hear what I said? You can't pick up twenty-five thousand every day, you know." He waited for the response that never came. "Honesty isn't always the best policy. Think it over." Another long silence. Then: "I suppose you know the government does not pay any reward." Still that heavy, steady tread. "If you think I'm going to come down you're jolly well off your nut." He wriggled nearer the edge and peered over. The black form shuttled restlessly back and forth past the foot of the ladder, for all the world like a lion in its cage. Presently it moved off toward the bend at the corner of the cliff, where it stopped, still in view of the man above,--a vague, shapeless object in the faint light of the moon.

Many minutes passed. Ten, fifteen,--they seemed hours to the trapped fugitive,--and then he heard a voice, suppressed but distinct.

"Who's there?"

There was a moment's silence, and then another voice replied, but he could not make out the words.

The man stepped out of sight around the bend. A few seconds later, Thane heard a jumble of voices. Drawing away from the ledge, he slunk deeper into the cave. He heard some one running along the trail, and a muffled voice giving directions. He drew a deep, long breath.

"The death watch, eh?" he muttered. "They're going to sit there till I have to come out. Like vultures. They haven't the nerve to come up here after me. The rotten cowards!"

Then he heard something that caused him to start up in a sort of panic. He stood half erect, crouching back against the wall, his eyes glued on the opening, his hand fumbling nervously for the revolver in his pocket.

Some one was climbing up the cliff!

CHAPTER XXIII

A MESSAGE AND ITS ANSWER

Charlie Webster met Alix at the ferry. The body of the drowned girl had been removed to Hart's Undertaking Parlours and Expert Carpenter's Shop in obedience to the County Coroner's instructions by telephone.

The fat man was so overcome by excitement he could hardly speak. Sitting beside Alix in the automobile, he rattled on at a great rate about the extraordinary turn of affairs, and it was not until they were nearly home that he discovered she was sobbing quietly in her corner of the car.

"Gosh, what are you crying for, Alix?" he demanded. "It's the greatest piece of good fortune that ever--"

"I am thinking of poor Mrs. Vick," she murmured chokingly.

"Oh! Yes, that's right. It's terrible for that poor woman. Terrible. As I was saying, the last anybody saw of him was when he started for the Tavern. Gilfillan follered him part ways and then went back to the ferry, never dreaming he--But didn't I tell you that before? I'm so upset I don't seem to remember what I--Oh, yes, now I know where I was. The detectives insisted on searching every room in the Tavern. Angie Miller got as sore as a boiled lobster when they knocked on her door and asked if he was in her room. You ought to have heard what she said to 'em from behind the door when she finally opened it and let 'em in,--and she nearly had a fit when she saw old Tintype was with 'em. She lit into him,--my gosh, how she lit into him! Accused him of suspecting her of having an erudite affair with Courtney,--erudite wasn't the word she used, but it don't matter, it's as good as any for an old maid. We searched everywhere, but no sign of him. You needn't be surprised to find one of the detectives hanging around your place, Alix. They think maybe he'll turn up there before long."

"He can't be very far away," said she suddenly aroused to anxiety. She had ceased crying and was drying her eyes with her handkerchief. The car was nearing the entrance to her grounds. "He wouldn't dare come to my house after--after what I said to him tonight. He could not expect me to help him in any--"

"Well, you see, it's barely possible he don't know they're after him, Alix. I guess maybe I'd better stay here for a while. You won't be so nervous with me in the house."

"I am not afraid, Charlie. Of course, I am terribly unstrung and unhappy over poor little Rosabel,--but I am not afraid of HIM. He

will not come here. Tell me again just what he is accused of doing."

The car had drawn up under the porte-cochere. Webster repeated the story he had had from Gilfillan. She sat perfectly still during the lengthy recital.

"And to think--" she began, but checked the words in time. "Oh, what fools we have been, Charlie!"

"Anyhow," said Charlie, divining her thoughts, "there's a good deal to be said for that saying, 'All's well that ends well.' I've been thinking what a difference there is in men. Now, take for instance David Strong. Just stack him up alongside this slick, smooth-talking--"

"Oh, Charlie!" It was almost a wail.

He took her hand in one of his and gently patted it with the other.

"I guess you'd kind of like to see Davy for a change, wouldn't you, Alix?"

She caught her breath sharply, as if in pain.

"Now, there's a feller," went on Charlie after a moment, "that's all wool and a yard wide. He--"

"Good night, Charlie," she broke in abruptly. "Thank you for coming to meet me. You--you are the best, the dearest man in the world. I--"

"You needen't thank me for standin' up for Davy Strong. That's what you're really thankin' me for, you know," said he. "I've always loved that boy, Alix." She pressed his hand. "That's good!" he cried fervently. "I love him so much I wish he was sitting right here where I'm sitting now. I'll bet he'd be the happiest feller in all--Well, so long, Alix. You've had a hard day. I won't make it any worse for you by talking about David Strong. I know how much you hate him. Just the same, I wish he was sitting here in my place."

"So do I, Charlie," she confessed, with a deep sigh.

"So's you could hate him to your heart's content, eh?" he chaffed.

"Yes," she murmured,--"to my heart's content."

"Well, I've got to get busy," he exclaimed briskly. "Can't sit here talkin' nonsense to you when there's so much to do. Link Pollock and Doc and Tintype are waiting for me down at the Tavern. I promised to hurry back with the car. That reminds me, Alix. We're going to use your car to go hunting in. I guess you don't mind, do you?"

She spoke to the chauffeur as she got out. "Take Mr. Webster wherever

he wants to go, Ed. I shall not need the car until eleven o'clock in the morning."

Mrs. Strong was waiting up for her. There was a big fire in the living-room, and a tray with hot coffee and toast on a table beside the comfortable chair that had been drawn up near the fender.

Alix dropped wearily into the chair and stretched her booted, pantalooned legs out in complete relaxation.

"You poor child," cried Mrs. Strong. "You're all done up. My, but you're white and tired-looking. It's been a terrible strain. Sit still now and I'll take your hat off for you. Better have your coat and boots off, too, dear. Hilda will have a hot bath ready for you whenever you're ready to--"

"I suppose you know they've found her, Auntie? In the river."

"Yes. Ed told me. Now, don't talk about it. Here's some hot coffee."

"Never mind my coat. I'm too tired. You know about Courtney Thane?"

"I only know they're hunting for him. There's a man out in the kitchen. Is--is it in connection with Rosabel's death?"

"No. Thank you, Auntie. That feels better. I haven't had it off since morning. Charlie told me about Thane, but I am not sure whether I can get it straight. He was so excited,--and I was so distressed."

Her voice was low and husky with fatigue and emotion; it was apparent that she controlled it with difficulty. In her dark eyes there was a brooding, haunted look. She repeated as best she could Charlie's rambling, disjointed story.

"And just to think," cried Mrs. Strong at the end, "you let that beast kiss you and--"

"Oh, don't! Don't!" cried the girl, covering her eyes with her hands. "I can't bear the thought of it. I wasn't myself. I don't know what came over--"

"There, there! Don't think about it any more. It's all right now. And you're not the only woman that's lost her head since God made Adam, my dear. It's pretty hard not to sometimes. You--"

"Oh, I couldn't,--I COULDN'T have done anything bad. I couldn't--"

"God bless you, of course you couldn't," cried the older woman, stroking the girl's hair. "Do you think this coffee will keep you awake?" She poured out a steaming cup and dropped two lumps of sugar into it.

"I sha'n't go to sleep anyway, Auntie, so--"

The ringing of the door bell startled them. Alix sprang to her feet in alarm.

"Don't go to the door!" she cried. "It's--it's Courtney Thane!"

"Nonsense! He'll not be coming here. Sit down. I'll inquire who it is before I open the door."

"Under no circumstances are you to let him in, Mrs. Strong," ordered Alix peremptorily.

"I should say not! It would look pretty, wouldn't it, if the papers came out and said the notorious bandit was captured in the home of Miss Alix Crown, the beautiful and wealthy heiress? They always--" The bell rang again. "Put the cream in yourself, Alix. I'll see who it is."

Alix followed her with anxious, apprehensive eyes as she passed into the hall. She heard the following dialogue:

"Who is it?"

"Does Miss Crown live here?" came in a clear, boyish voice from the outside.

"She does. Who are you and what do you want?"

"I'm a messenger boy. I got a letter for her."

"A letter? Who's it from?"

"Say, open up! I can't stand out here all night."

"Who is it from?" repeated Mrs. Strong firmly.

"How do I know? I ain't no mind-reader."

Mrs. Strong looked in at Alix. "I guess it's all right, isn't it?"

"Open the door," said Alix quietly.

A small, shivering messenger boy in uniform entered.

"Are you Miss Crown?"

"No, I'm not. Where's the letter?"

"I got to deliver it to her. If she ain't here I'm to wait. I got to get an answer."

Alix came forward. "I am Miss Crown. Come in, my boy, and warm yourself by the fire."

"Sign here," said the boy, indicating a line in his receipt book.

While Alix was signing her name, Mrs. Strong looked the boy over. "Dear me, you must be nearly frozen, child. No overcoat on a night like this. Did you come all the way out here from the city on a bicycle?"

"Give him some coffee, Mrs. Strong," said Alix, handing back the book and receiving the envelope in return.

"I got a taxi waiting for me out in front," said the boy. "Say, what's goin' on in this burg? We been held up three times, and just now a man stopped me out here in the yard and--"

"What's the matter, Alix?" cried Mrs. Strong.

The girl was staring at the address on the envelope. Doubt, wonder, incredulity filled her eyes.

"Why,--why, Auntie,--it's David's writing! David's!" she cried.

"See! Isn't it? I would recognize it--"

"Bless my soul, so it is!" exclaimed David's mother.

"Oh,--what does it mean? Boy, where did you get this letter?" Her voice trembled with excitement, her eyes were gleaming.

"Never mind," put in Mrs. Strong, turning her head to hide a smile.

"You run upstairs and read it, Alix, and I--"

"Auntie Strong, do you know anything about this?" demanded Alix suspiciously. The colour was flowing back into her cheeks. "Have you been keeping something--"

"--and I will entertain this young gentleman during your absence," went on the other serenely,--but there was a flush in her cheeks and her eyes were very bright and happy. "You go and read your letter and,--did you say there was to be an answer, boy?"

"Yes'm."

"And write your answer," concluded Mrs. Strong. "Come along, my lad, and have a nice hot cup of coffee and some toast. I hope you take sugar. There are two lumps in it already."

Alix fairly ran from the room. They heard her racing up the stairs.

"Will you have cream, my boy?" asked Mrs. Strong, steadying her voice with an effort. He had shuffled along behind her to the fireplace.

"Yes'm," and then as an afterthought: "if you please, ma'am." He looked up and saw that his hostess's eyes were swimming in tears.

"I--I hope it ain't bad news," he stammered uncomfortably.

"Don't you know there are such things as tears of joy?" inquired the lady.

He looked very doubtful. "No ma'am," he solemnly confessed. The tears he knew about were not joyous.

"Wasn't it just like David to hire an automobile to send you out here to deliver the letter to her? I suppose it must have cost him a pretty penny. Most men would have put a two cent stamp on it. But my son is not like other men. He is always doing the most unexpected things,--and the very nicest things. Now, who else in the world would have thought of hiring an automobile to send a message by?"

"Is he your son, ma'am?"

"Yes. My son David. Did you see him?"

"Sure I did."

"How was he looking?"

"Fine," said the lad. "Gee, but he's tall."

"Six feet three, my boy," said David's mother. "That's very hot. Be careful not to scald your mouth. Shall I put in another lump,--or two?"

"Will it cool it off any?"

"I am sure it will."

Meanwhile, Alix was greedily devouring the contents of the letter. She stood beside the light over her dressing-table; her heart was pounding furiously, her eyes were radiantly bright.

DEAR ALIX:

I have just this instant arrived in town, and I am scribbling this in the hotel writing-room, with my overcoat still on my back. I shall not go to sleep tonight until I have had your reply. Somehow I will find a way to get this letter to you tonight, I don't know how at present, but where there's a will there's a way. If mother and Charlie Webster are mistaken, or if they have assumed something that is not true, I shall go away again without bothering you. But if you want me, I will come straight out to you. You are in trouble. I am not asking anything for myself, dear,--you know me well enough to understand that,--I am only asking you to let me do anything in the world I can for you. That is why I dropped everything to come. I am happy, you don't know how happy, to be even this close to you. I have always wanted to hang out my shingle in this dear old town. I do not like the East. I am a Westerner and I can't seem

to make myself fit in with the East. I shall always be a Hoosier, I fear,--and hope. Just the few minutes I have been here in this familiar old hotel, and the ride through the quiet streets, and getting off the train at the insignificant little depot, and having the hackman,--they are taxi-drivers now,--yell out,--"Hello, Davy," and run up to shake hands with me,--well, I am so homesick I could cry. But you know why I cannot come here to live and practise. If I can't be very, very near to you, Alix darling, I must keep myself as far away as possible. It is the only way. But if I keep on at this rate, you will think I am writing a love letter to you, when, as a matter of fact, I am only asking you if you care to see me and tell me what I can do to help you now,--if you need the help of your

Always devoted

DAVID.

P.S.--If you would rather not see me, don't hesitate to say so. I will understand. And please do not blame mother and Charlie. They would both die for you, dear.

P.S.S.--You will be pleased to know, I am sure, that I have the five hundred I still owe you in my pocket, all in brand new bills, and I think you might give me the happiness of quarrelling face to face with you about the matter instead of under the protection of a two-cent stamp.

D.

She read the letter aloud. When she came to the end she kissed the sheet of paper rapturously and then pressed it to her breast. For a few moments she stood there with her eyes closed, a little smile on her lips, the blush of roses deepening in her cheeks.

Suddenly she roused herself. Hurrying to the desk across the room, she snatched a sheet of note paper from the rack, seated herself, and began to write.

DEAREST DAVID:

THIS is a love letter. I love you. I have always loved you, ever since I can remember, only I did not realize how much until you wouldn't let me have my own way about the money. Then I tried to hate you. The best thing I can say for the experiment was that it kept me thinking about you all the time. You were never out of my thoughts, David dear. Oh, how many nights have I laid awake inventing reasons for hating you, and how many, many times have I ended up by hating myself. I am a very mean, despicable creature. I am a loathsome, poisonous reptile, and you ought to put your foot on my neck and keep it there forever and ever. Now I know why I have been so mean to you. It is because I love you so much. You cannot grasp that, can you? You could if you were a woman.

The boy is waiting for this. How wonderful of you to send him out here in a taxi!!! I shall tell him to go back to town as fast as the car can travel. I hope it is a fast one, because I want you to get in it and come to me at once. I shall wait up for you, David. Please come tonight. You don't know how badly I need you. You must stay here with your mother and me, and I don't want you ever to go away again,--unless you take me with you.

Your humble sweetheart,

ALIX.

P.S.--I wouldn't quarrel with you for five hundred million dollars.

P.S.S.--Oh, how I wish some kind genie could transport you to me INSTANTLY! A.

Sealing the envelope, she sprang to her feet and started for the door. She stopped halfway, dashed back and fished in a drawer of her desk, found her purse and extracted a crumbling bank-note. Without so much as a glance to ascertain its denomination, she turned and sped downstairs.

Her eyes were aglow with excitement, her lips were parted in a divine smile. She was a little out of breath. The boy gazed upon her spellbound. In that brief, transcendent moment he fell deeply, hopelessly in love,--and that is why, a moment later, he manfully endeavoured to refuse the prodigious tip she was offering him. Only when she stuffed it, with her own fingers, into the depths of his breast pocket, directly over his heart, was he able to persuade himself that he ought to accept it if for no other reason than it would hurt her feelings if he didn't.

"You must go straight back just as fast as you can," she was saying,--and what a sweet, wonderful voice she had, just like some kind of a song he thought,--"and see that Mr. Strong has this letter at once. He is waiting for it, you know. You WILL hurry, won't you,--that's a good boy."

"Yes'm," gulped the lad, and then, realizing he had not quite come up to expectations, amplified his promise with a stirring: "You bet your life I will."

She went to the door with him, and said good night so sweetly, and with such a thrill in her voice, that he experienced the amazing sensation of having wings on his feet as he sped down to the gate.

Alix ran to Mrs. Strong and threw her arms around her neck.

"Oh, Auntie,--he's in town. He is coming out and--and I am going to marry him. Yes, I am! Tomorrow, if he'll let me. I ought not to be so happy, I know. It is terrible, with so much grief and sorrow

over at--But I can't help it! I never was so happy in my life--never!"

Rushing up to the waiting taxi, the boy thrust the letter in through the open door. It was seized by a big, eager hand. An instant later the owner of that hand was out on the ground, reading the missive by the light of a forward lamp.

He was not long in getting to the end. Thrusting the precious letter into his overcoat pocket, he sprang to the door of the cab, jerked out a heavy suitcase and a small black satchel, which he deposited unceremoniously on the sidewalk, and then dug down into his trousers' pocket for a handful of bills, one of which he pressed into the small boy's hand. Then, turning to the driver, the tall, impetuous fare clapped another into his extended palm.

"There you are, genie!" he exclaimed exultantly, and, grabbing up his bags, was off up the walk as fast as his long legs would carry him.

"What was that he called me, kid?" demanded the driver uneasily.

"Janie."

CHAPTER XXIV

AT QUILL'S WINDOW

The scraping, laboured sound grew nearer and louder, and presently there was added the thick, stertorous breathing of the climber as he drew close to the mouth of the cave.

Courtney crept farther away from the opening and watched with narrow, frowning eyes for the head to appear above the ledge. He held the revolver in his shaking hand, but he knew he was not going to shoot. He thrilled with a strange sort of glee, however, at the thought of the ease with which he could send the fool crashing to the ground far below, but what would be the use? He was trapped.

He had a queer and strangely ungrudging respect for the courage of this man of Uncle Sam's, this man who was not to be turned back or daunted by the prospect of sudden death when engaged in the performance of his duty. What use to slay this single, indomitable pursuer when nothing was to be gained by the act? There were others down there to avenge him,--to starve him out, or to burn him out if needs be. Murder, that's what it would be, and they would hang him for murder. If he shot this fellow there would be but one course

left open to him. He would have to shoot himself. And he loved life too well for that. Five, even ten years behind the bars,--and then freedom once more. But the gallows,--God, no!

He stood up and leaned with his back against the wall, bracing his legs which threatened to crumple up under him. With a sort of craven bravado, he inhaled deeply. The end of the cigarette created a passing but none the less comforting glow which died away almost instantly. A jolly brave thing, a cigarette,--No wonder the soldiers smoked them! Nerve steadying,--no question about it.

He waited. Once he thought he was going to scream. Why was the fellow so slow? Surely it had not taken him so long to come up that ladder of stone,--and he was the pioneer, he had cleared the slots of dirt and sand, he had made the hand holds safe, he had torn his finger-tips digging them out,--what made the fellow so slow?

At last he made out a vague, slender object moving like the tentacle of an octopus above the ledge,--and then the bulky head and shoulders of the climber.

"I surrender!" he called out. "I give up. If you had waited till I pulled myself together, I would have come down. I'm all in. I surrender."

The man scrambled over the ledge and drew himself erect. His figure was dimly outlined against the moon-lit sky. He came a few steps inside the cave and stopped, evidently striving to pierce the darkness with his questing eyes.

Courtney pushed himself away from the supporting wall and advanced slowly.

"Here's my gun," he faltered, and the weapon clattered on the rocky floor at his feet. "Don't shoot! I am unarmed. My hands are up,--comrade."

"Stand still," warned the other hoarsely. He was breathing heavily. "Don't move!"

Courtney took another pull at the cigarette that hung limply between his sagging lips. He could be as brave, as cool as the other fellow! He would give them something to talk about when they related the story of his capture. He would--

Suddenly the man lunged forward...A pair of iron arms wrapped themselves about his waist. He went down with a crash. Even as the cry of surprise and indignation rose to his lips, his head struck and his mind became a blank.

Slowly, as out of a fog, his senses came back. He was hazily aware of a light shining in his eyes, and of a dull pain somewhere. Things began to take shape before his whirling eyes. He strove to steady

them, to concentrate on the bright thing that flitted back and forth before them. At last the blaze became stationary.

Quite close at hand was a fire,--a bright, crackling fire whose flames danced merrily. Where was he? It was not like any other fire he had ever seen before....Then he saw a face. It gradually fashioned itself out of the gloom high above the flames. He blinked his eyes and stared. Somehow it was vaguely familiar, that face.... He lifted his head and peered intently. Then he raised himself on his elbow, all the while trying to fix that floating face in his mind.

Suddenly his brain cleared. The full picture was revealed: A man standing over the blazing pile of box-wood, gazing down at him with great, unblinking eyes. The sloping roof of the cave, half lost in the thin cloud of smoke, almost touched the crown of the watcher's head,--and this watcher was in the garb of a sailor.

Caleb Vick! Young Caleb Vick!

For a long time the two looked into each other's eyes. Courtney's wavering and uncertain, Caleb's fixed and triumphant.

"Is--is that you, Cale?" mumbled the former wonderingly.

Young Vick nodded his head slowly.

"How did you get here?" asked Thane, sensing peril in those boring, unfaltering eyes. His hand went out to feel for the revolver he had dropped. "Where--What has become of the man that jumped on me? The detective."

"I am the man," said Cale levelly.

"You? What's the matter with you, Cale? This is a hell of a way to treat a friend. What do you mean by helping these--"

"Cut that out," snarled Cale. "It don't go with me. Get up! You dirty cur,--get up!"

"My God, Cale,--have you gone crazy?" gasped Thane, going cold to the marrow. He shot a swift, terrified look toward the mouth of the cave.

"Get up! It won't do you any good to yell. No one will hear you."

Courtney drew himself to his knees.

"It won't, eh? There's a gang of Secret Service men down there. They'll blow your brains out if you--"

"There is no one down there," said the boy, a crooked smile on his lips.

"I tell you there is," cried the other, desperately. "I heard them. They trailed me here. They--"

"I guess I put one over on you, Courtney," interrupted Cale, his voice low and deadly. "I am the fellow that chased you here. There's nobody else. Oh, I know they're looking for you,--but they don't know where you are. Nobody knows but me. I saw you sneaking across that lot back yonder. I was down at the ferry--I saw--Rosabel--there." His voice faltered. He steadied it with an effort before going on. "I was too late. She wrote me. Then father telegraphed me--They let me off. I came as soon as I could. I ran all the way from Hawkins. I knew what had happened. She wrote me. But I thought maybe she'd lose her nerve,--or, maybe you would do the right thing by her and save her. I saw her down there on the dock. You did it. You got her into trouble. You--"

"I don't know what you are talking about," cried the other. "What's this you are saying? Have you lost your mind, Cale? My God, boy,--I,--why, what sort of a beast do you think I am? I--I adored her. Come, come, Cale! Calm yourself! You know perfectly well how fond I was of her. I couldn't have done anything so foul as--Why, Cale, she was nothing but a kid, a little girl to me. I--"

"Yes,--that's what she was,--a kid, just a poor little kid. She trusted you. I trusted you. We all trusted you. And now she's--she's dead. My sister! My pretty little sister!" He straightened up and threw his arm across his eyes, only to withdraw it instantly. "GOD DAMN YOU! Get up! Come over here! Here's her letter. Read it! Read it, you dirty swine!"

He reached inside his blouse and drew forth a folded bit of paper.

"I--I don't want to read it," faltered Thane, shrinking back. "I know nothing about all this nonsense you are--"

"I give you ten seconds to do what I tell you," grated Cale, harshly. "If you don't I'll blow your head off." He levelled the revolver. "It's your own gun,--so I guess you know it's loaded. Come on!"

Thane crawled to the fire.

"My God,--you wouldn't kill me, Cale?" he gasped, reaching out his shaking hand for the letter.

"Read it!" ordered the inexorable voice.

It was a short letter. Courtney took it in as a whole; the dancing, jumbled web of words that raced before his glazed eyes. Parts of sentences, a word here and there, his own name, filtered through the veil,--and were lost in the chaos of his own thoughts.

He was not thinking of Rosabel's letter. If he could only catch

Cale off his guard,--just for a second or two! A swift leap, a blow, and--but a lightning glance out of the corner of his eye killed the thought even as it was being created. Cale would not be off his guard. He was watching like a hawk, his body bent slightly forward, the revolver held in a grip of steel.

"Well?" cried Cale. "Have you read it?"

"Yes," whispered Courtney through his stiff lips. "It's not true, Cale,--it's not true!"

"Yes, it is true. Rosie would not lie about herself like that. No girl would. Every word of it is true." He snatched the paper from Courtney's palsied hands and cast it into the waning fire. "No one shall ever see that letter. I would not have mother know what I know for all the world. She'll never know about Rosie."

Courtney took hope. "By gad, Cale, that's fine of you. I promise you, on my word of honour, no one ever shall know. I'll keep the secret with you. You--"

"There will be only one person left in all the world that knows about Rosie," said Cale in a strangely quiet tone.

His left hand went out swiftly. The fingers clutched Courtney's hair, pushing his head back. Even as the wretch opened his lips to squeal for mercy, the cold muzzle of the weapon was jammed against the flesh under his ear. There was a loud explosion....

Young Cale Vick stood for a long time looking down at the inert thing at his feet. Then he calmly stooped over and placed the pistol in one of the outstretched hands, closing the stiff fingers over it. Scattering the fire with his feet, he trampled out what was left of the feeble flames, and then strode to the mouth of the cave. He stood rigid for a long time, listening. A dog was howling mournfully away off in the night; an owl was hooting somewhere in the trees nearby. He turned and began the descent, and there was neither remorse nor terror in his soul.

A few days later the report reached Windomville that a farmer up the river had seen a light in Quill's Window the night that Rosabel Vick was found, and all the superstitious shook their heads and talked of ghosts.

THE END

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