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[Illustration: Lord James dropped without a groan. "You coward!--you murderer!" she gasped. Chapter XXX]

OUT OF THE PRIMITIVE

BY ROBERT AMES BENNET

Author of "Into the Primitive," etc.

WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLORS

BY ALLEN T. TRUE

1911

TO MY FRIEND
JAMES COLLIER

CHAPTER I

THE CASTAWAYS

The second night north of the Zambezi, as well as the first, the little tramp rescue steamer had run out many miles into the offing and laid-to during the hours of darkness. The vicinity of the coral reefs that fringe the southeast coast of Africa is decidedly undesirable on moonless nights.

When the Right Honorable the Earl of Avondale came out of his close, hot stateroom into the refreshing coolness that preceded the dawn, the position of the Southern Cross, scintillating in the blue-black sky to port, told him that the steamer was headed in for the coast. The black surface of the quiet sea crinkled with lines of phosphorescent light under the ruffling of the faint breeze, which crept offshore heavy with the stench of rotting vegetation. It was evident that the ship was already close in again to the Mozambique swamps.

Lord James sniffed the rank odor, and hastened to make his way forward to the bridge. As he neared the foot of the ladder, his resilient step and the snowy whiteness of his linen suit attracted the attention of the watcher above on the bridge.

"Good-morning, m' lord," the officer called down in a bluff but respectful tone. "You're on deck early."

"Hullo, Meggs! That you?" replied his lordship, mounting the steps with youthful agility. "It seems you're still earlier."

"Knowing your lordship's anxiety, I decided to run in, so that we could renew the search with the first glimmer of daylight," explained the skipper. "We're now barely under headway. According to the smell, we're as near those reefs as I care to venture in the dark."

"Right-o! We'll lose no time," approved the young earl. "D'you still think to-day is apt to tell the tale, one way or the other?"

"Aye, your lordship. I may be mistaken; but, as I told you, reckoning together all the probabilities, we should to-day cover the spot where the Impala must have been driven on the coral--that is, unless she foundered in deep water."

"But, man, you said that was not probable."

"A new boat should be able to stand the racking of half a dozen cyclones, m' lord, without straining a bottom plate. No; it's far more probable she shook off her screw, or something went wrong with the steering gear or in the engine room. I've recharted her probable course and that of the cyclone. It was as well for us to begin our search at the Zambezi, as I told your lordship. But if to-day we fail to find where she piled her bones on the coral, it's odds we'll not to-morrow. On beyond, at Port Mozambique, we got only the north rim of the storm. I put in there for shelter when the barometer dropped."

"That was on your run south. Glad I had the luck to chance on a man who knows the coast as you do," remarked Lord James. "Look at those steamers Mr. Leslie chartered by cable--a good week the start of us, and still beating the coverts down there along Sofala! Wasting time! If only I'd not gone off on that shunt to India--And they six weeks in these damnable swamps--if they won ashore at all! You still believe they had a chance of that?"

"Aye. As I explained to your lordship, if the Impala hadn't lost all her boats before she struck, there's a fair probability that the water inside the reefs--"

"Yes, yes, to be sure! If there was the slightest chance for any one aboard--Lady Bayrose, Miss Leslie and their maids, the only women passengers, and a British ship! Everything must have been done to save them. While Tom--he'd be sure to make the shore, if that was within the bounds of possibility. Yet even if they were cast up alive--six weeks on the vilest stretch of coast between Zanzibar and the Zambezi! They may be dying of the fever now--this very hour! Deuce take it, man! d'you wonder I'm impatient?"

"Aye, m'lord! But here's the dawn, and McPhee is keeping up a full head of steam. We'll soon be doing seven knots."

As he spoke, the skipper turned to step into the pilot house. Lord James faced about to the eastern sky, where the gray dawn was beginning to lessen the star-gemmed blackness above the watery horizon. Swiftly the faint glow brightened and became tinged with pink. The day was approaching with the suddenness of the tropical sunrise. In quick succession, the pink shaded to rose, the rose to crimson and scarlet splendor; and then the sun came leaping above the horizon, to flood sea and sky with its dazzling effulgence.

Captain Meggs had entered the pilot house in the blackness of night. He came out in the full glare of day. Lord James had turned his back to the sun. He was staring at the bank of white mist that, less than two miles to westward, shrouded the swampy coast. Meggs had brought out two pairs of binoculars, one of which he handed to his charterer.

"Your lordship sees," he remarked. "We're none too far out from the reefs."

"Beastly mist!" complained Lord James, his handsome high-bred face creased with impatience and anxiety. "D'you fancy we're anywhere near the islet from which we put off last evening?"

"I've tried to hold our position, m'lord. But these Mozambique Channel currents are so strong, and shift so with the tides, we may have been either set back or ahead."

Already the bank of morning mist was beginning to break up and melt away under the fervent rays of the sun. The young earl raised his glasses and gazed southwards along the face of the dissolving curtain. Through and between the ghostly wreaths and wisps of vapor he could see the winged habitants of the swamps--flamingoes, cranes, pelicans, ibises, storks, geese, all the countless tropical waterfowl--swimming and wading about the reedy lagoons or circling up to fly to other feeding grounds. Opposite the steamer the glasses showed with startling distinctness a number of hideous crocodiles crawling out on a slimy mudbank to bask in the sunshine. But nowhere could the searcher discern a trace of man or of man's habitation.

"Gad! not a sign! Rotten luck!" he muttered.

He turned and swept the four-mile curve of coast around to the north-northeast. Suddenly he stiffened and held the glasses fixed.

"Look!" he cried. "Off there to the northwards--cliffs!"

"Cliffs? Aye, a headland," confirmed the skipper.

"Put about for it immediately," directed Lord James. "If they were cast up here, they'd not have lingered in these vile bogs--would have made for the high ground."

Meggs nodded, and called the order to the steersman. The ship's bows swung around, and the little steamer was soon scuttling upcoast

towards the headland, along the outer line of reefs, at a speed of seven knots.

From the first, Lord James held his glasses fixed on the barren guano-whitened ledges of the headland. But though he could discern with quickly increasing distinctness the seabirds that soared about the cliff crest and nested in its crevices, he perceived no sign of any signal such as castaways might be expected to place on so prominent a height.

When, after a full half-hour's run, the steamer skirted along the edge of the reefs, close in under the seaward face of the headland, the searcher at last lowered his binoculars, bitterly disappointed.

"Not a trace--not a trace!" he complained. "If they've been here, they've either gone inland or--we're too late! Six weeks--starvation--fever!"

Meggs shook his head reassuringly. "The top of the headland may be inaccessible, m'lord. We may find that they--Heh! what's that?"

He leaned forward to peer through his glasses at a second headland that was swinging into view around the corner of the cliffs.

"_Smoke!_" he cried. "_Smoke!--and a flag!_"

"Gad!" murmured Lord James, hastily bringing his own glasses to bear.

The second headland was about five miles away. The thin column of smoke that was ascending from its crest near the outer end, could plainly be seen with the naked eye. But a sunlit cloud beyond necessitated the full magnifying power of the binoculars to disclose the white signal flag that flapped lazily on a slender staff near the beacon.

Lord James drew in a deep breath, and his gray eyes glowed with hope. Here was evidence that not all aboard the wrecked or foundered _Impala_ had been lost.

"Meggs," he cried, "you're the one and only skipper! It must be their signal--it _is_ their signal! But which of them?--who went under and who escaped!--Miss Genevieve? Tom?"

"This Mr. Blake?" ventured Meggs. "I take it, he's some relation to your lordship."

"No; chum--American engineer. Gad! if he went down! But it's impossible--Most resourceful man I ever knew. He must have won ashore with the others. And the women--a British captain! It must be we'll find crew and all safe!"

"Not on this coast," replied Meggs. "They'd have lost most their boats before the _Impala_ struck."

"In that event--Deuce take it! will we never get there? If I had my motor-boat now! By Jove, this stretch here between the headlands is not swamp. It's dry plain--and black. Been burnt over. There's a place--tree-trunks still smouldering. The grass has been fired within the last day or two."

"No one in sight as yet, on the cliffs," said the skipper, who had continued to scrutinize the northern headland. "No watch above; no sign of any one or any camp below. Must all be around on the far side. We'll clear the point, and run in through the first break in the reefs."

"If they fail to show up on this side," qualified Lord James, slowly sweeping the cliffs from foot to crest and inland along the dry fire-blackened plain.

About half a mile from the beach the wall of rock was cleft by a wooded ravine that ran up through the cliff ridge. At its foot was a grove of trees whose bright green foliage seemed to indicate an abundance of water. Above, a gigantic baobab tree towered out of the cleft and upreared its enormous cabbage-shaped crown high over the crest of the ridge.

In the midst of the general barrenness and aridity, the verdant oasis of the ravine appeared to be the most certain place to look for the castaways. Lord James fancied that he could discern a slight haze of smoke rising out of the cleft beneath the baobab. But if there was a camp in the cleft bottom, it was hidden from view by the trees and cliff walls. The only certain sign of man within sight was the signal flag and the smoke of the smouldering fire in the midst of the seabird colony near the outer end of the cliff crest.

The steamer was gliding along, with slackened headway, close in under the headland, when a breath of air opened out the folds of the tattered white flag. Meggs had been watching it through his binoculars. He lowered the glasses, and remarked knowingly: "Thought so. That's no ship's canvas. It's linen or duck--A woman's skirt ripped open."

"What! Then at least one of the women got ashore!"

"Aye. But d' you make out how that cloth is lashed to the bamboo? It was knotted on by a landsman. We'll find neither officers nor crew among the survivors."

The steamer was now opposite the face of the headland, Meggs sprang into the pilot house. Within the next few moments the speed of the vessel fell off to less than a knot. Slowly the old steamer swung her bows around towards the shore and began feeling her way into a narrow gap through the half hidden barrier of the reefs, which here were merged into a single line.

For the time being all the attention of Meggs was concentrated upon the safe conning of his ship through the dangerous passage. It was otherwise with Lord James. The last two shiplengths before the turn had opened up the view around the north corner of the headland. From the flank of the cliff ridge a wedge of brush-dotted plain extended a quarter-mile or so to a dense high jungle bordering a small river. The first glance had shown his lordship that it was of no use to look beyond the river. The coast trended away northwards in another vast stretch of fetid swamps and slimy lagoons.

With almost feverish eagerness, he turned to scan the little plain. First to catch his eye were a dozen or more graceful animals dashing away from the shore in panic-stricken flight. He turned his glasses upon them and saw that they were antelope. This was not encouraging. That the timid animals had been feeding in the vicinity of a human habitation a full hour after dawn was not probable. Nor did a careful search of the plain through the glasses disclose any sign of a hut or tent or the smoke of a camp-fire.

An order from Meggs preparatory for letting go anchor roused Lord James from his momentary pause. He faced the skipper, who was leaning from a window of the pilot house.

"Sound your siren, man!" he exclaimed. "There's no camp in sight. Yet they must be within hearing."

Meggs nodded, called an order for the lowering of a boat, and drew back into the pilot house. As he reappeared in the doorway, to step out on the bridge, the tramp's siren shrilled a blast loud enough to carry for miles. It echoed and re-echoed along the cliff walls, and was flung back upon the little steamer in a deafening blare.

Lord James turned to sweep the border of the river jungle with his glasses. A herd of fat ungainly hippopotami, on the bar out beyond the mangroves of the river mouth, fixed his gaze. But a moment afterwards one of the sailors in the bows pointed upwards and yelled excitedly: "Hi! hi!--there aloft! Lookut th' bloomin' mad 'un!"

At last--one of the castaways! High above, on the very brink of the precipice, near the outer end of the headland, a man stood waving down to the ship in wild excitement.

Lord James hastily focussed his glasses upon the beckoner. Seen through their powerful lenses, he seemed to leap to within a few feet --so near that Lord James could see the heaving of his broad chest under the tattered flannel shirt as he flung his arms about his head and bellowed down at the steamer in half frantic joy.

The looker wasted no second glance on the rude trousers of spotted hyena skin or the big lean body of the castaway. Neither the wild whirling of the sun-blackened arms nor the bristly stubble of a six weeks' growth of beard could prevent him from instantly recognizing the face of his friend.

"Tom!--Tom!" he hailed. "Hullo! hullo, old man! Come down!"

Even as he cried out he realized that he could neither be heard nor recognized at so great a distance. Though the binoculars enabled him to see his friend with such wonderful distinctness, the deep shouts that the other was uttering were hardly audible above the clatter aboard the steamer. But now the ship's siren began to answer the hails of the castaway with a succession of joyous shrieks.

In the same moment Lord James perceived that a second castaway--a woman--was running forward along the crest of the headland. Fearlessly she came darting down the broken ledges, to stand on the cliff edge close beside the man. Lord James stared wonderingly at her dainty girlish form, clad in a barbaric costume of leopard skin. Her bare arms, slender from privation and burned brown by the sun, were upraised in graceful greeting above the sensitive high-bred face and its crown of soft brown hair.

"Genevieve!" murmured the earl. "What luck! Gad! what luck! Even if Hawkins went to the bottom and took the jewels with him! She's safe--both of 'em safe! Hey! what's that? Signalling towards the far side-- There he bolts, and she after him! Couldn't run that way if they had the fever!"

He whirled about and sprang to descend the ladder, but paused to direct the skipper. "I'll command the boat. Men are not to land. D'you take me? There's at least one of the ladies here. Have a sling ready, and tell the stewardess her services will soon be required."

Before Meggs could reply, he was down the ladder and darting across to the side. But there he turned and ran aft to the cabin. The stewardess, a buxom Englishwoman, stood at the head of the companionway, gazing towards the cliff top. At his order, she followed him below. After several minutes he reappeared with a lady's dust-coat folded over his arm. The boat was already lowered and manned. He swung himself outboard and went down the tackle hand under hand.

As he dropped lightly into the sternsheets beside the cockswain he signed the men to thrust off. The boat shot out across the still water, and headed shorewards on a slant for the south corner of the headland. Urged on by their impatient passenger, the rowers bent to their oars with a will, despite the broiling heat of the sun in the dead calm air under the lee of the cliffs.

They were well in to the shore before the cockswain discovered a submerged ledge that ran out athwart their course almost to the coral reefs. This compelled them to put about and follow the ledge until they could round its outer end. As the boat at last cleared the obstruction and headed in again for the shore, the south flank of the cliffs came into view.

A short distance inland, the two castaways that had appeared on the

cliff top were running towards the beach, the girl clinging to the hand of the man.

"Give way! give way, men!" urged Lord James. "At least let's not keep them waiting!"

CHAPTER II

TWO--AND ONE

Spurred to their utmost, the oarsmen drove the boat shorewards so swiftly that it was less than thirty yards out when the castaways came flying out the rocky slope of the cliff foot and scrambled down to the water's edge.

Lord James sprang up and waved his yachting cap.

"Miss Leslie!--Tom, old man!" he joyously hailed them. "You're safe!--both safe!"

"Good Lord! That you, Jimmy?" shouted back the man, "Well, of all the --Hey! down brakes! 'Ware rocks!"

At the warning, the boat's crew backed water and came on inshore with more caution. Without stopping to ask her permission, the man caught up the panting, excited girl in his arms, and waded out to meet the boat.

"That's near enough. Swing round," he ordered.

The boat came about and backed in a length, to where he stood thigh-deep in the still water, with the blushing girl upraised on his broad shoulder. Lord James again lifted his cap. His bow could not have been more formal and respectful had the meeting occurred in the queen's drawing-room.

"Miss Leslie! This is a very great pleasure, 'pon my word! But you've overheated yourself. You should not have run," he remonstrated. As Blake lifted her in over the stern, he deftly unfolded the silk dustcoat and held it open for her." Permit me--No need of such haste, y'know. I assure you, we're not so strict as to our hour of sailing."

"I--I--Of course we--" stammered the girl.

"To be sure! Ah, no hat! I should have foreseen. Very stupid of me not to've brought a hat or parasol. But I dare say you'll make out till we get back aboard ship."

His conventional manner and quiet conversational tone alike tended to

ease her of her embarrassment. By the time she had slipped on the coat and seated herself, the crimson blushes that had flooded her tanned cheeks were fast subsiding, and she was able to respond with a fair degree of composure: "That was extremely thoughtful of you, Lord Avondale!"

"Not at all, not at all," he disclaimed. "Cocks'n, if you'll be so kind as to go forward, I'll take the tiller. Tom, old man! don't stand there all day. You'll get your feet damp. Climb in!"

"No; pull out," replied Blake, his eyes hardening with sudden resolve. "I forgot something. Got to go back to the cleft. You take Jen--Miss Leslie aboard at once."

"Oh, no, Tom!" hastily protested the girl. "We'll wait here for you."

"Here?" he demanded. "And without your hat?"

Miss Leslie put her scarred and begrimed little hands to her dishevelled hair.

Blake went on in an authoritative tone: "It won't do for you to get a sunstroke now--after all these weeks. Jimmy, take her straight aboard. I've got to go back, I tell you. We didn't stop for anything. There's a jarful of mud and so forth that we sure can't leave to the hyenas." He met the girl's appealing glance with firm decision. "You must get aboard, out of this sun, fast as they can take you."

"Yes, of course, if you think it best--Tom," she acquiesced.

Her ready docility would of itself have been sufficient to surprise Lord James. But, in addition, there was a soft note in her voice and a glow in her beautiful hazel eyes that caused him to glance quickly from her to his friend. Blake was already turning about to wade ashore. From what little could be seen of his bristly face, its expression was stern, almost morose. The powerful jaw was clenched.

Though puzzled and a trifle discomposed, Lord James quietly seated himself beside the girl, and signing the men to give way, took the tiller.

"My dear Miss Leslie," he murmured, "if you but knew my delight over having found both you and Tom safe and well!"

"Then you really know him?" she replied. "Yes, to be sure; he called you by your first name. Wait! I remember now. One day soon after we were cast ashore--the second day, when we were thinking how to get fire, to drive away the leopard--"

"Leopard? I say! So that's where you got this odd gown?"

"No--the mother leopard and the cubs. I was going to say, Tom remarked that James Scarbridge had been his chum."

"Had been? He meant _is!_"

"Then it's true! Oh, isn't it strange and--and splendid? You know, I did not connect the remark with you, Lord James. He had told me to try to think how we were to find food for the next meal. His reference to you was made quite casually in his talk with Winthrope."

"Winthrope!" exclaimed Lord James. "Then he, too, reached shore? Yet if so--"

The girl put her hand before her eyes, as if to shut out some terrible sight. Her voice sank to a whisper: "He--he was killed in the second cyclone--a few days ago."

"Ah!" muttered the young earl. After a pause, he asked in a tone of profound sympathy, "And the others--Lady Bayrose?"

"Don't ask! don't ask!" she cried, shuddering and trembling.

But quickly she regained her composure and looked up at him with a calm unwavering gaze that told him how much she had undergone and the strength of character she had gained during the fearful weeks that she had been marooned on this savage and desolate coast.

"How foolish of me to give way!" she reproached herself. "It is what you might have expected of me before--before I had been through all this, with his example to uplift me out of my helplessness and inefficiency. Believe me, Lord Avondale, I am a very different young woman from the shallow, frivolous girl you knew during those days on the Mediterranean."

"Shallow! frivolous!" he protested. "Anything but that, Miss Genevieve! You must have known how vastly different were my--er--impressions. If Lady Bayrose hadn't so suddenly shunted you off at Aden to the Cape boat--Took me quite by surprise, I assure you. Had you kept on to India, I had hoped to--er--"

She gave him a glance that checked his fast-mounting ardor.

"I--I beg pardon!" he apologized. "This of course is hardly the time--About the others, if I may ask--that is, if it's not too painful for you. I infer that Lady Bayrose--that she did not--reach the shore."

The girl's thorn-scarred, sun-blistered hands clasped together almost convulsively. But she met his look of concern with unflinching braveness.

"Poor dear Lady Bayrose!" she murmured. "They had put her and the maids into one of the boats--there at the first, when the ship crashed on the reef. They ran back to fetch me, but before they could rush me across, a wave more terrible than all the others swept the ship. It tore loose the boat and whirled them away, over and over!"

"Gad!" he exclaimed.

"It also carried away the captain and most of the crew. Between the breakers, Winthrope and Tom and I were flung into the one remaining boat. Winthrope cut the rope before the sailors could follow, and then--then the steamer slipped back off the reef and went down."

"I say! Only the three of you left! The boat brought you safe ashore?"

"No, we were overturned in the breakers, but were washed up--flung up--how, I cannot tell. The wind was frightful. It must have blown us out of the surf and along with the water that was being driven up and over into the lagoon. The first I knew, I was behind a little knoll with Winthrope. Tom was near--in a pool. He--he crawled out. It was nearly dark. We were all so beaten and exhausted that we slept until morning. When we awoke, there was no sign of--of any one else, or of the boat--nothing; only the top of the highest mast sticking up above the water, out beside the reef. Tom swam out to it; but he couldn't get anything--even he couldn't."

"Swam out, you say? These waters swarm with sharks. They're keen to nip a swimmer!"

The girl's eyes flashed. "Do you believe he'd fear them?--that he'd fear anything?"

"Not he! I fancy I ought to know, if any one. Knocked about with him, half 'round the world. I dare say he's told you."

"Would it be like him to claim the credit of your friendship? No! Before, on the steamer, we had mistaken him to be--to be what he appears to strangers--rough, almost uncouth. Yet even that frightful morning--it was among the swamps, ten miles or more up the coast. He carried us safe out of them, me nearly all the way--out of the bog and water, safe to the palms; and he as much tortured with thirst as were we!"

"Fancy! No joke about that--thirst!"

"Yet it was only the beginning of what he did for us. Starvation and wild beasts and snakes and the fever--he saved us from all. Yet he had nothing to begin with--no tools or weapons, only his burning glass. Can you wonder that I--that I--"

She stopped and looked down, the color mounting swiftly under the dark coat of tan that covered the exquisite complexion he remembered so pleasantly.

"My word!" he remonstrated, amazed and disquieted. "Surely not that! It's--it's impossible! It can't be possible!"

"Do you think so?" she whispered. "If you but knew the half--the

tenth--of what he has done!"

The rusty side of the tramp loomed up above them. The boat crew flung up their oars, and Lord James steered in alongside, under the sling that was being lowered for the rescued lady. She pointed up at it, and met the reproachful, half-dazed glance of her companion with a look of compassionate regret for his disappointment. Yet she made no effort to conceal the love for his friend and rival that shone with tender radiance from her candid eyes.

"You should know him--his true, his real self!" she said. "Hasten back. Do not delay to come aboard with me. Hasten ashore and to the cleft. See for yourself."

She caught the descending sling with a dexterity that astonished him, and seated herself in it before he could rise to assist her.

"Haul away," she called in a clear voice that held no note of timidity. Those above at the tackle hastened to obey. As she was swung upwards, she looked down at the earl and waved him to put off.

"Hasten!" she urged. "Do not wait. I am all right now. Even if he is returning, go to the cleft and see."

He shook his head, and waited until she had been hauled up the ship's side. But as her little moccasined feet cleared the bulwarks and Meggs himself leaned out to draw her inboard, he signed the oarsmen to thrust off again.

Knowing the course, they made direct for the end of the sunken ledge. Blake had not returned, nor was he anywhere in sight. They skirted in along the rocky slope of the cliff foot to where it curved away into the sand beach of the plain. Lord James sprang ashore alone and hastened inland along the base of the cliffs.

A brisk walk of ten minutes over the sandy plain brought him to the grove at the foot of the cleft. In the midst of the trees was a pool, half choked with the dried mud and rubbish of a recent flood from the ravine. The wash had obliterated all tracks below; but there were traces of a trail leading up the ravine over a four-foot ledge. He took the rock at a bound, and hastened on upwards between the lofty walled sides of the cleft.

At the first turn he was brought to an abrupt halt. From side to side, between two outjutting corners of rock, the ravine had been barricaded with a twelve-foot boma of thorn scrub. It was a fence high enough and strong enough to stop even a hungry lion. In the centre was a low opening, partly masked by the dry spiky fronds of a small date palm.

"Gad!" murmured the Englishman. "Some of Tom's engineering! And she said he started without weapons or tools--on this coast! . . . Yet for him to have won her--No, no, it's impossible! impossible! American or not, she's a lady--thoroughbred! He's a true stone, but in the rough--"

uncut, unpolished! A girl of her breeding--He's worth it, 'pon my word, he is; though I never would have fancied that she, of all girls --She's so different. No! it's impossible! it can't be! Must be pure fancy on her part--gratitude. It can't be anything more!"

A heavy step sounded on the far side of the barrier, and a deep voice called out to him: "Hello, there! That you, Jimmy? Thought it about time you were due. What you doing?--telling yourself how to climb over? Abase yeh noble knee to the dust and crawl through, me lud."

Without pausing to reply, Lord James stooped and crept through the narrow passage under the thorny wall. As he straightened up on the inner side, Blake caught and gripped his hand in a big calloused palm.

"Jimmy!" he exclaimed, his pale blue eyes glistening with the soft light of deep friendship. "Jimmy boy! to think you beat 'em to it! I figured ten to one odds that it was a tramp chartered by Papa Leslie-- And then to see you pop up in the sternsheets, spic and span as a laundry ad! When you sang out--Lord!"

"Ring off, bo! Those're my fingers you're mashing!" objected the victim.

As Blake released him, he stepped aside and ran his eye up and down the sinewy rag-and-skin-clad form of the engineer. He nodded approvingly.

"Lean, hard as nails, no sign of fever--and after six weeks on this beastly coast! How'd you do it, old man? You're fit--deuced fit!"

"Fit to give pointers to the Wild Man from Borneo," chuckled Blake. He drew out a silver cigarette case and snapped open the lid. "See those little beauties?--No! hands off! Good Lord! those're my arrow tips, soaking in snake poison! A scratch would do for you as sure as a drink of cyanide. Brought down an eland with one of those little points-- antelope big as a steer."

"Poison! fancy now!" exclaimed Lord James.

"Yes; from a puff adder that almost got Miss Jenny--fellow big as my leg. Struck at her as she bent to pick an amaryllis. If it had so much as grazed her hand or arm--God!"

He looked away, his teeth clenched together and the sweat starting out on his broad forehead. What he thought of Genevieve Leslie was plainly evident in his convulsed face and dilated eyes. If he could be so overwrought by the mere remembrance of a danger that she had escaped, he must love her, not as most men love, but with all the depth and strength of his powerful nature. Lord James's lips pressed together and his gray eyes clouded with pain.

"Close shave, heh?" he muttered.

"Yes," replied Blake. He drew in a deep breath, and added, "Not the first, though, nor the last. But a miss is as good as a mile, hey, Jimmy boy?"

"Gad, old man, that sounds natural! Can't say you look it, though--not altogether. Must get you aboard and into another style of fine raiment. Fur trousers not good form in this climate, y'know. You picked up that shirt at a remnant counter, I take it. Come aboard. Must mow that alfalfa patch before any one suspects you're trying to raise a beard."

The friendly banter seemed to have the contrary effect from that intended. Blake's face darkened.

"Good Lord, no!" he rumbled. "Go aboard with her? What d'you take me for?"

"Give you my word, I don't take you at all," replied the puzzled Englishman.

"What! Hasn't she told you? But of course she wouldn't--unless she saw you alone," muttered Blake. "Come on up the canon. I've thought it all out--just what must be done. But it'll take some time to explain. Wait! Did you come alone?--any one follow you?"

"No. Told 'em to stay near the boat."

"Just the same, I'll make sure," said Blake. He dived into the barricade passage, and quickly reappeared, dragging at the butt of the date palm. "There, me lud; the door is shut. Nobody is going to walk in on our private conference now. Come on."

CHAPTER III

LORD AND MAN

Blake turned about and swung away up the ravine. Lord James followed in the half-obliterated path, which led along the edge of a tiny spring rill. The cleft was here closed in on each side with sheer walls of rock from twenty to thirty feet high. At the point where this small box canon intersected the middle of the cliff ridge, the gigantic baobab that Lord James had seen from the steamer, towered skyward, its huge trunk filling a good third of the width of the gorge. Across from it and nearer at hand was a thicket of bamboos, around which the spring rill trickled from a natural basin in the rock.

But the visitor gave scant heed to the natural features of the place. His glance passed from a great antelope hide, drying on a frame, to

the bamboo racks on which sun-seared strips of flesh were curing over a smudge fire. Looking to his left, he saw a hut hardly larger than a dog kennel but ingeniously thatched with bamboo leaves. Then his glance was caught and held by a curious contrivance of interwoven thorn branches and creepers, fitted into a high narrow opening in the trunk of the baobab.

"What's that?--hollow tree?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Blake, without turning. "Sixteen-foot room inside. That's where the she-leopard and the cubs were smothered. Fired the gully to drive out the family. All stayed at home and got smothered 'cept old Mr. Leopard. He ran the gantlet. Lord, how he squalled, poor brute! But they'd have eaten us if we hadn't eaten them. He landed in the pool, too scorched to see. Settled him with my club."

"Clubbed him?--a leopard! I say now! A bit different, that, to snipe shooting."

"Well, yes, a trifle different, Jeems--a trifle," conceded Blake.

"My word! What haven't you been through!" burst out the Englishman. "And to think she, too, went through it all--six weeks of it!"

"That's it!" enthused Blake. "She's the truest, grittiest little girl the sun ever had the good luck to shine on! If she thinks now I can't realize--that I'm not going to do the square thing by her! I've been thinking it all over, Jimmy. I've got it all mapped out what I'm going to do. Wait, though!"

He sprang ahead and pulled at the thorny contrivance that stopped the opening in the baobab trunk. It was balanced midway up, on a crossbar. Almost at a touch, the lower part swung up and outward and the upper half down and inward. He stepped in under it, hesitated a moment, and went on into the hollow, with an exclamation of relief: "No, 't isn't her room any more, thank God!"

Lord James stared. Well as he knew the sterling qualities of his friend, he had never suspected him of such delicacy. He gazed curiously around at the unshapely but flawless sand-glazed earthenware set on a bamboo rack beside the open stone fireplace, at the rough-woven but strong baskets piled together near the foot of the baobab, at the pouch of antelope skin, the grass sombreros, the bamboo spits and forks and spoons--all the many useful utensils that told of the ingenuity and resourcefulness of his friend.

But, most of all, he was interested in the weighty hardwood club leaning against the tree trunk and the great bamboo bow hanging above in a skin sheath beside a quiver full of long feather-tipped arrows. He was balancing the club when Blake came out of the tree-cave, carrying a young cocoanut in one hand, and in the other a small pot seemingly full of dried mud. Lord James replaced the club, and waved his hand around at the camp.

"Pon my word, Tom," he commented, "you've out-Crusoed old Robinson!"

"Sure!" agreed Blake. "He had a whole shipful of stuff as a starter, while we didn't have anything except my magnifying glass and Win's penknife and keys."

He pulled out a curious sheath-knife made of a narrow ribbon of steel set in a bone back. "How's that for a blade? Big flat British keys-- good steel. I welded 'em together, end to end."

"Gad! the pater's private keys!" gasped Lord James. "You don't tell me the rascal was imbecile enough to keep those keys in his pocket?-- certain means of identification if he'd been searched!"

"What!" shouted Blake. "Then the duke he cleaned out was your dad. _Whew!_"

He whirled the mud-stoppered jug overhead and dashed it down at his feet. From amidst the shattered fragments he caught up a dirty cloth that was quilted across in small squares. He held it out to Lord James.

"There you are, Jimmy--my compliments and more or less of your family heirlooms."

"My word!" murmured the earl, catching eagerly at the cloth. "You got the loot from him? That's like you, Tom!"

"Look out!" cautioned Blake. "I opened one square to see what it was he had hidden. You'll find he hadn't been too daffy to melt the settings--keys or no keys. Say, but it's luck to learn they're yours! Hope they're all there."

"All the good ones will be. He couldn't have sold or pawned any of the best stones after we cabled. Gad! won't the pater be tickled! Ah!"

From the open square of which Blake had spoken, his lordship drew out a resplendent ruby. "Centre stone of Lady Anne's brooch!"

He ran his immaculate finger-tips over the many squares in the cloth. "A stone in every one--must be all of the really valuable loot! The settings were out of date--small value. How'd you get it from him, Tom?"

Blake hesitated, and answered in a low tone: "He got hurt the night of the second cyclone. But he wasn't responsible--poor devil! He must have been dotty all along. It didn't show much before--but I felt uneasy. That's why I built that thorn door--so she could bar herself in."

Lord James stared in horrified surprise. "You really do not mean--?"

"Yes--and it almost happened! God!" Again Blake clenched his teeth and the cold sweat burst out on his forehead.

"My word! That's worse than the snake!" murmured Lord James.

"She--she'd left the door up--heat was stifling," explained Blake. "I had gone off north, exploring. The beast was crawling in--But I've got to remember he wasn't responsible--a paranoiac!"

"Ah, yes. And then?" questioned the Englishman, tugging nervously at the tip of his little blond mustache.

"Then--then--" muttered Blake. "He got what was coming to him. Cyclone struck like a tornado. Door whirled down and knocked him out of the opening--smashed him!"

"The end he had earned!"

"Yes--even if he wasn't responsible, he had become just that--a beast. She had saved his life, too--night I ran down to the beach after eating a poison fish. Barricade hadn't been finished. He was down with the fever. They were attacked--jackals, hyenas. She got him safe inside the tree, with the yelling curs jumping at her."

"My word! she did that?--she? Of all the young ladies I've ever known, she was the very last I should have expected--"

"What! you've met her before?" demanded Blake.

"Then she hasn't told you?" replied his friend. "Lady Bayrose was one of my old friends, y'know. Met 'em aboard ship--sailed on the same steamer, after my run home."

"You did?" muttered Blake, in blank astonishment. "You know her?"

"You must have heard me sing out to her from the boat. Yes, I--er--had the voyage with her through the Mediterranean and down the Red Sea. But Lady Bayrose got tiffed at me, and at Aden shifted to a Cape boat. I had to go on to India alone."

"India?" queried Blake.

"Trailing Hawkins. He first went to India. But he doubled back and 'round to Cape Colony."

"So that's why you didn't get here sooner," said Blake.

"Yes. Didn't notice that the Impala was posted. Didn't know either you or Miss Leslie was aboard her until after I learned you'd thrown up the management of that Rand mine. Traced you to Cape Town. Odd that you and she and Hawkins should all have booked on the same steamer!"

"Think so?" said Blake. "I don't. Winthrope--Hawkins, that is--was

smooth enough to know he'd not be suspected if travelling as a member of Lady Bayrose's party. He had already wormed himself into her favor. As for me--well, they had come to look at the mine, and I had shown Jenny through the workings. Does that make it clear why I threw up the job and followed them to Cape Town?"

"She had not given you any reason to--surely, not any encouragement? No, I can't believe it!"

"Course not, you British doughhead! It was all the other way 'round. Think I didn't realize? She, a lady, and me--what I am! But I couldn't help it--I just couldn't help myself, Jimmy. Knew her father, too--all about his millions and how he made them! He did me--twice. You'd think the very name would have turned me. Yet the minute I set eyes on her--say!"

"You're certainly hard hit!" murmured the young earl. He flushed, bit his lip, hesitated, and burst out with impulsive generosity: "Gad, old man! If it's true--if she really--er--has come to love you, I own that you've won her fair and square--all this, y'know." He waved his hand around in a sweeping gesture. "Saved her from all this. Yes--if it's really true!"

Blake looked away, and spoke in a hushed voice: "It's--it's true, Jimmy! Only a little while ago, there on the cliff edge when we saw your steamer, she--she told me. It started yesterday after I bluffed off the lion. You see, she--"

"Lion?" ejaculated Lord James.

"Yes." Blake flung up his head in an impatient gesture. "The beast tried to stalk us. Jumped back into the grass when I circled out at him. I got the grass fired before he screwed up courage to tackle me. --Don't cut in!--It was then that Jenny--she--she tried to say something. But I streaked for home. This morning, though, when I saw we were safe, I was weak enough to let her--speak out."

Lord James hesitated just perceptibly, and then caught his friend's big, ill-used hand in a cordial clasp. "So--you're engaged! Congratulations!"

"If only it was just that!" cried Blake. He flushed red under his thick coat of tan. "I--I suppose I've got to tell you, Jimmy--I must. I need your help to carry out my plan."

"Your plan?" repeated the Englishman wonderingly.

"To save her from--from committing herself. It isn't fair to her to let her do it now. She ought to wait till she gets back home, among her own people. You see she wants to--She--she says that ship captains can--" He caught his breath, and bent nearer, but with his face half averted. His voice sank to an almost inaudible murmur--"that ship captains can marry people."

"Ah!" gasped Lord James. But he recovered on the instant. "Gad! that _is_ a surprise, old man. Always the lady's privilege, though, to name the day, y'know. I shipped a stewardess to wait on the women--had hoped they would all have been saved. She'll do for lady's maid. Also brought along some women's togs, in case of emergencies. As for yourself, between mine and Megg's and his own wardrobes, my man can rig you up a presentable outfit. Clever chap, that Wilton."

"You've gone back to a valet again!" reproached Blake, momentarily diverted. Then his fists clenched and his brows met in a frown of self-disgust. "Lord! for me to forget for a second! Look here, Jimmy, you're clean off. You don't savvy a little bit. Don't you see the point? I can't let her commit herself now--here! You know I can't. It wouldn't be fair to her, and you know it."

Lord James met his look with a clear and unfaltering gaze, and answered steadily: "That all depends on one thing, Tom. If she really loves you--"

"D'you think she's the kind to do it, if she didn't?" demanded Blake. "No, that's not the point, at all. I've tried to be square, so far. She saw what I'm like when I cut loose--there on the ship. I was two-thirds drunk when the cyclone flung us ashore. No excuse--except that all of them had turned me down from the first--there at Cape Town. Yes, she knows just what I'm like when the craving is on me. Yesterday, down there at the south headland, before the lion came around, I gave her some idea of what I've done--all that."

"You've lived a cleaner life than most who're considered eligible!" exclaimed Lord James. "I know that with respect to women, you're the cleanest--"

"Eligible!" broke in Blake. "No man is that, far as she's concerned, unless it's you, Jimmy."

"Chuck it! You're always knocking yourself. But about this plan that's bothering you? Out with it."

"That's talking! All right, here it is, straight--I want you to get back aboard and steam away, fast as you can hike. You can run into Port Mozambique, if you're going north, and arrange for a boat to call by for me."

"You're daft!" cried Lord James. "Daft! Mad as a hatter! Can you fancy for a moment I'd go off and leave you here?"

"Guess you can't help yourself, Jimmy. The most you can do is force me to take to the jungle. You can't get me aboard. I tell you, I've figured it all out. I won't go aboard and let her do--what she's planning to do. You ought to know. Jimmy, that when I say a thing, I mean it. She's not going to set eyes on me again until after she's back in America. Is that plain?"

"Tom--old man! that's like you!" cried the Englishman, and again he gripped the other's rough hand. "I see now what you're driving at. It's a thing few men would have the bigness to do. You're giving up a certainty, because your love for her is great enough, unselfish enough to consider only her good. D'you fancy I could do such a thing? You're risking everything. Shows you're fit, even for her!"

"It's little enough--for her!" put in Blake.

"That's like you to say it," rejoined his friend. "See here, old man. You've made a clean breast of it all. I should be no less candid. You know now that I met her before--was all those weeks with her aboard ship. Need I tell you that I, too, love her?"

"You?" growled Blake. "But of course! I don't blame you. You couldn't help it."

"It's been an odd shuffling of the cards," remarked his friend. "What if--Aren't you afraid there may be a new deal, Tom? If you don't come aboard, she and I will be together at least as far as Zanzibar, and probably all the way to Aden, before I can find some one else to take her on to England."

"What of that?" rejoined Blake. "Think I don't know you're square, after the months we roughed-it together?"

"Then--But I can't leave you here in this hell-hole! You've no right to ask me to do that, Tom. If I could bring my guns ashore and stay with you--But she'll never be more in need of some one, if you insist upon your plan. I say! I have it--We'll slip you aboard after dark. You can lie in covert till we reach Port Mozambique. I trust I'm clever enough to keep her diverted that long. Can put it that you're outfitting--all that, y' know."

"Say, that's not so bad," admitted Blake, half persuaded. "I could slip ashore, soon as we ran into harbor, leaving her a note to tell her why."

"Right-o, Tammas! But wait. I'll go you one better. You can write your note and give it out that you've shifted to another ship. But you'll stay aboard with us, under cover. Of all the steamers that touch at Aden, one will soon come along with parties whom either she or I know. Then off she goes to the tight little island, and we follow after in our little tramp or on another liner. Hey, Tammas?"

"Well, I don't know," hesitated Blake. "It sounds all right."

"It is all right," insisted the younger man. "You'll be aboard the same steamer with her as far as Aden, to keep an eye on me, y'know."

"On you?"

"You'd better. My word, Tom! don't you realize? If you--er--put it off, I'm bound to try for myself. Can't help it!"

"Think you've got a show, do you?" rallied Blake.

"I fancied I had as much chance as any one, before all this occurred. I at least should have been in the running, had it not been for the wreck--and you."

Blake stood for several moments, with his head down-bent and eyes fixed upon the ground. When he looked up and spoke, his face was grave and his voice deep and low.

"It's all of a piece, Jimmy. I don't blame you. Fact is, it's all the better. I've had all the advantage here. She and I've been living in the Cave Age, and I've proved myself an A-1 cave-man, if I do say it myself. It may be hard for her to get the right perspective of things, even after she's back in her own environment. Understand?"

"I take it, you mean she has seen the display of your strongest and best qualities, in circumstances that did not call for such non-essentials as mere polish--drawing room culture."

"You mean, for all that counts most with ninety-nine per cent of your class and hers," rejoined Blake. "And there's the craving, too. I'll have to fight that out before I'll be fit to let her do anything. Think I don't know the difference between us? No! I'm going to go the limit, Jimmy. I can't do less, and be square to her. So I give you full leave. You're free to play your hand for all there is in it. I'll stay here--"

"No--no! I'll not hear of it, Tom!"

"Yes, you will. I'll stay here, and you'll see her clear through to America--to Chicago--right to her papa's house and in through the door. Understand? I don't make a single condition. You're to try your best to win; and if you do, why--don't you see?--it'll show that this which she thinks is the real thing is all a mistake."

"My word, old man! you'd not give her up without a fight? That wouldn't be like you!"

"It all depends. I won't if it's true she loves me--God! no! I'd go through hell-fire for her!"

"If I know you, Tom, you'll suffer that and more, should the event prove she is mistaken as to the nature of her present feeling."

"What of it?" muttered Blake, with a look that told the other the uselessness of persuasion. "Think I'd let her marry me, long as there's a shadow of a chance of her being mistaken?"

"Very well, then," replied his friend. "You've said your say. Now I'll say mine. I can ease the tedium of Miss Leslie's trip up the coast; and I stand ready to do so--on two conditions. In the first place; you're to come aboard and stay aboard. After I find a chaperon for her at Aden, you're to go on home with me, to visit at Ruthby."

"Excuse _me!_" said Blake. "I can see myself parading around your ancestral stone-heap with your ducal dad!"

"You not only can, but will," rejoined the earl. "Come now. You'll be allowed to write that note at Port Mozambique, and keep in covert till Miss Leslie is safe off the ship. But you'll do the rest--you'll not stay here. Another thing--you have my word for it now--I shall endeavor no more than yourself to win her, until after she has returned to her home in the States."

"Lord, Jimmy! that's square--to me, I mean. But how about her?"

"No fear," reassured the Englishman. "She's received everywhere. She's been presented--at Court, y'know. If she stays over on this side a bit, there'll be dozens of 'em dancing attendance on her. Come, now; it's all settled."

"Well, I don't know," hesitated Blake.

"I tell you, you'll sail with us, else I shall leave her at Port Mozambique and come back for you."

"Um-m--if you take it that hard! But are you sure you can keep her satisfied till we put in there?"

"Trust me for that. If she becomes apprehensive, I'll put it that you'd rather be married in port, by the American consul."

"That's no lie. Say, what's the use of waiting till dark? You said there's a stewardess aboard. Jenny will sure be below with her until--until she's ready for the ceremony."

"Quite true, yes. Then it's all settled. At Port Mozambique, your note; you bunk forward, under cover, till Aden; then home with me for a visit; neither of us see her beyond Aden until we follow her to the States."

"Since you insist--yes, it's a go, Jimmy!" agreed Blake. He turned to hasten away along the gorge, past the baobab. "I'll be back soon. Got to pull down that flag."

Lord James followed, and saw him ascend to the cliff crest on the right, up a withered, leafless tree. The trunk had been burned through at the base in such manner that the top had fallen over against the edge of the rocky wall. A pile of stones offered an easy means of reaching the lower branches. The earl climbed up into the top, and watched his friend run forward over the broken ledges of the ridge.

The bamboo flagstaff was wrenched from its supports and lowered amidst a wild commotion of the nesting sea birds. Blake came back at a jog-trot, regardless of the fierce heat of the sun. In his arms were gathered the tattered folds of the signal flag.

"That's one thing I'm going to take away," he said, in response to the other's look of inquiry. "She sewed that leopard-skin dress all by herself, with a thorn for needle, so we could have her skirt for the flag."

"Fancy!" murmured the Englishman. "With a thorn, you say!"

Blake nodded, and followed him down the tree-ladder and back along the cleft to the baobab. There he paused to take down his archery outfit.

"Guess I'll keep these, too, as souvenirs," he remarked. He pointed to the blackened strips of flesh on the curing racks. "May I ask Lord Avondale to stay to dinner?"

"Very kind, I'm sure. But I've a previous engagement," declined his lordship.

"Now, now, Jeems. Needn't turn up your aristocratic nose at first-class jerked antelope. Ought to 've been with us the first three days. Great _menu_--raw fish, cocoanuts, more cocoanuts, and then, just when we were whetting our teeth for a nice fat snake or an _entree_ of caterpillars, I landed that old papa leopard. Managed to haggle some of the india rubber off his bones. Tough!--but it was filling. All the same, we didn't wear out any more teeth on him after we got up the cleft and found the cubs. They were tender as spring lambs."

"And Miss Genevieve went through all that!"

"Yes. Told you she's the grittiest little girl ever--and a lady! My God, when I think of it all! . . . Well, she's come through it alive. What's more, she's not going to suffer any bad consequences from it, not if I can help it! Come on. Got your heirloom rag?"

"Safe--inside pocket."

"All right, then. Come on. You don't think I'm aching to hang 'round this cursed hole, do you?--now that she's gone!"

He flung his bow and quiver over his shoulder, thrust the signal flag into the skin pouch, and turned to go.

Lord James stepped before him, with hand outstretched.

"One moment, Tom! Here's for home and America--a fair field, and best man wins!"

"It's a go!" cried Blake, gripping the proffered hand. "May she get

the one that'll make her happiest!"

CHAPTER IV

THE EARL AND THE OTHERS

Miss Dolores Gantry shook the snow from her furs, and with the graceful assurance of a yacht running aslant a craft-swarming harbor, cut into the crowd that surged through the Union Station. She brought up in an empty corner of the iron fence, close beside the exit gate through which passengers were hurrying from the last train that had arrived. Her velvety black eyes flashed an eager glance at the out-pouring stream, perceived a Mackinaw jacket, and turned to make swift comparison of the depot clock and the tiny bracelet watch on her slender wrist.

As she again looked up she met the ardent gaze and ingratiating smile of an elegant young man who was sauntering up the train-platform to the exit gate, fastidiously apart from his fellow passengers. He raised his hat, and at the girl's curt nod of recognition, hastened through the gate for a more intimate greeting.

"My dear Dodie!" he exclaimed, reaching for her hand. "This is a most delightful surprise."

"My dear Laffie!" she mocked, deftly slipping both slender hands into her muff. "I quite agree as to it's being a surprise."

"Then you didn't come down to meet me?"

"You?" she asked, with an irony too fine drawn for his conceit. "Come to meet you?"

"Yes. Didn't you get my note saying that all work on my bridge was stopped by the cold and that I would run down to see you?"

"To see me--plus the world, the flesh, and the devil!"

"Now, Dodie!" he protested, with a smirk on his handsome, richly colored face.

The girl's eyes hardened into black diamonds as she met his assured gaze. "Mr. Brice-Ashton, you will hereafter kindly address me as 'Miss Gantry.' You must be aware that I am now _out_."

"Oh, I've no objections, just so _we're_ not out," he punned.

She gave him her shoulder, and peered eagerly through the pickets of the iron fence at a train that was backing into the station. Ashton

shrugged, lighted a gilt-tipped cigarette, and asked: "Permit me to inquire, Miss Gon-tray, if I'm not the happy man for whom you wait, who is?"

She replied without turning: "How can I tell until I see him? I think it will be the hero. If not, it will be the earl."

"Hero?--earl?" repeated Ashton.

"Yes, whichever one Vievie leaves for me."

"What! Genevieve? Miss Leslie? She's not--Is she really coming home so soon?--when she had such a chance for a gay season in London?"

"Don't give yourself away. The London season is in summer."

"You don't say! Well, in England, then. Why didn't you write me?"

"I'm not running a correspondence-school or news agency, Mr. Brice-Ashton."

"Oh, cut it, Dodie! Post me up, that's a good girl! What I've heard has been so muddled. This hero business, for a starter--what about it? I thought it was an English duke that chartered the steamer to rescue Genevieve."

"No, only the son of a duke,--James Scarbridge, the Right Honorable the Earl of Avondale."

"My ante!"

"It's in the jack-pot, and as good as lost. What chance have you now to win Genevieve,--with a real earl and a real hero in the field?"

"Earl _and_ hero? I thought he was the hero."

"That's one of the jokes on mamma. Earl Jimmy had nothing to do with the rescue ships that Uncle Herbert cabled to search the Mozambique coast. No; Jeems chartered a tramp steamer on his own account, to look for friend Tommy. He found the heroic Thomas and, incidentally, the fair Genevieve--who wasn't so _very_ fair after weeks of broiling in that East African sun."

"It's wonderful--wonderful! To think that she alone of all aboard her steamer should have survived shipwreck on that savage coast!"

"She didn't survive alone--she couldn't have. That's where Tommy came in. There was another man, but he didn't count for much, I guess. Vievie merely wrote that he died during the second cyclone."

"What an experience!--and for a girl like Genevieve!"

"She, of all girls!" chimed in Dolores enviously. "You remember she

never went in for sports of any kind, not even riding. And for her to be flung out that way into the tropical jungles, among lions and crocodiles and snakes and things! Why can't I ever have romantic adventures?"

"You wouldn't give the man a chance to prove himself a hero," objected Ashton. "You'd shoot the lions yourself."

"I _am_ good at archery. A bow and arrows, you know, were all that Mr. Blake had."

"Blake?" repeated Ashton in rather a peculiar tone.

"Yes, Tommy the hero, otherwise Mr. Thomas Blake."

"Blake--Thomas Blake?" echoed Ashton.

"I--rather odd--I once--seems to me I once knew a man of that name. You don't happen to know if he's a--that is, what his occupation is, do you?"

Ashton was not the kind of man from whom is expected hesitancy of speech. The girl spared him a swift glance from the out-flocking stream of passengers. His fixed gaze and slack lower jaw betrayed even more uneasiness than had his voice.

"Don't be afraid," she mocked. "He's not a minister; so he couldn't marry her without help, and he's not done it since the rescue."

"Not done it?" repeated Ashton vaguely.

"No. According to mamma's letter, Earl Jimmy outgeneraled the low-browed hero. At Aden he put Vievie on a P. and O. steamer, in the charge of Lady Chetwynd. He and the hero followed in the tramp steamer to England, where he kept friend Thomas at his daddy's ducal castle until Vievie made mamma start home with her. You know mamma streaked it for London, at Uncle Herbert's expense, the moment Vievie cabled from Port Mozambique that she was safe. Uncle Herbert would have sent me, too, but mamma wouldn't have it. Just like her! It was her first chance to do England and crowd in on Vievie's noble friends. She said I might spoil the good impression she hoped to make, because I'm too much of a tomboy."

"But if it's your mother and Genevieve you're waiting for--I understood you to say the earl and that man Blake."

"Oh, they followed on the next steamer. Mamma wired that they are all coming on together from New York." "Where's Mr. Leslie? Did he go to meet them?"

"He? You should know how busy Uncle Herbert always is. I called by his office for him. He sent out word to go on. He would follow."

"What! after all Genevieve went through, all those hardships and dangers? You'd think that even he--"

"Look I oh, look I there she is now!" cried the girl, pressing close against the fence and waving her handkerchief between the pickets.

"Where? Yes, I see! beside your mother!" exclaimed Ashton, and he lifted his hat on his cane.

The signals won them recognition from the approaching ladies, the younger of whom responded with a quietly upraised hand. Beside her walked a rosy-cheeked blonde young Englishman, while in front a big square-built man thrust the crowd forward ahead of them. They were followed by two maids, a valet, and two porters, with hand luggage.

As the party emerged from the gateway the younger lady leaned forward and spoke in a clear soft voice: "Turn to the left, Tom."

The big man in the lead swerved out of the crowd and across the corner past Miss Gantry, who was advancing with outstretched arms, her eyes sparkling with joyous excitement.

"Vievie!" she half shrieked.

Blake glanced over his shoulder and stopped short at sight of the girls locked in each other's arms. After a moment's fervent embrace, Dolores thrust her cousin out at arm's-length and surveyed her from top to toe with radiant eyes.

"Vievie! Vievie! I really can't believe it! To think you're home again--when we never expected to see you--and you've got almost all the tan off already!"

Genevieve looked up into the vivacious face of the younger girl with an affectionate smile on her delicately curved lips and tears of joy in her hazel eyes.

"It is good to be home again, dear!" she murmured. She drew Dolores about to face the big man, who stood looking on with rather a surly expression, in his pale blue eyes. "Tom," she said, "this is my cousin, Miss Gantry. Dolores, Mr. Blake."

"The hee-row!" sighed Dolores, clasping a hand dramatically on her heart.

Blake's strong face lighted with a humorous smile. "Guess I've got to own up to it, Miss Dolores. Anything Jenny--Miss Leslie--says goes."

As he spoke he raised his English steamer cap slightly and extended a square powerful hand. Dolores entrusted her slender fingers to the calloused palm, which closed upon them with utmost gentleness.

"Really, Mr. Blake!" she exclaimed, "I mean it. You are a hero."

Blake's smile broadened, and as he released her hand, he glanced at her mother, who had drawn a little apart with the Englishman. "Don't let me shut out your mamma and Jimmy."

"Oh, mamma believes that any display of family affection is immodest," she replied. "But duty, you know--duty!"

She whirled about and impressed a loud salute upon the drooping jowl of the stately Mrs. Gantry.

"Dolores!" admonished the dame. "When _will_ you remember you're no longer a hoyden? Such impetuosity--and before his lordship!"

"Goodness! Is he really?" panted her daughter, surveying the Englishman with candid curiosity.

"Is he really!" Mrs. Gantry was profoundly shocked. "If you weren't out, I'd see that you had at least two more years in a finishing school."

"Horrors! that certainly would finish me. But you forget yourself, mamma. You keep his earlship waiting for his introduction."

The Englishman shot a humorous glance at Blake, and drew out his monocle. He screwed it into his eye and stared blandly at the irrepressible Miss Gantry, while her mother, with some effort, regained a degree of composure. She bowed in a most formal manner.

"The Right Honorable the Earl of Avondale: I present my daughter."

The earl dropped his monocle, raised his cap, and bowed with unaffected grace. Dolores nodded and caught his hand in her vigorous clasp.

"Glad to meet you," she said. "It's rare we meet a real live earl in Chicago. Most of 'em are caught in New York, soon as they land."

"It's good of you to say it, Miss Gantry," he replied, tugging at the tip of his little mustache. "I've been over before, you know. Came in disguise. This time I was able to march through New York with colors flying, thanks to your mother and Miss Leslie."

Dolores sent her glance flashing after his, and saw Genevieve responding coldly to the effusive greeting of Ashton. The young man was edging towards the earl. But Genevieve turned to introduce him first to her companion.

"Mr. Blake, Mr. Brice-Ashton."

"I'm sure I'm--pleased to meet you, Mr. Blake," murmured Ashton, his voice breaking slightly as Blake grasped his gloved hand in the bare calloused palm.

"Any friend of Miss Jenny's!" responded Blake with hearty cordiality. But as he released the other's hand, he muttered half to himself, "Ashton?--Ashton? Haven't I met you before, somewhere?"

As Ashton hesitated over his reply, Genevieve spoke for him: "No doubt it's the familiarity of the name, Tom. Mr. Brice-Ashton's father is Mr. George Ashton, the financier."

"What! him?" exclaimed Blake. "But no. It's his face. I remember now. Met him in your father's office."

"In father's office?"

"When I was acting as secretary for your father, Miss Genevieve," Ashton hastened to explain. "You remember, I was in your father's office for a year. That was before I succeeded with my--plans for the Michamac cantilever bridge and went to take charge of the construction as resident engineer."

"Your plans?" muttered Blake incredulously.

"To be sure. I remember now," said Genevieve absently, and she turned to look about, with a perplexed uptilting of her arched brows. "But, Dolores, where is papa?"

"Coming--coming, Viviekins," reassured her cousin, breaking short an animated conversation with the earl. "Don't worry, dear. He'll be along in a few minutes."

Genevieve stepped forward beside Blake to peer at the crowd. Dolores took pity on Ashton, who had edged around, eager for an introduction to the titled stranger.

"Oh, your earlship," she remarked, "this, by the way, is Mr. Laffie Brice-Ashton. I'd like to present him to you, but I'm afraid your Right Honorableness wouldn't take him even as a gift if you knew him as well as I do."

"Oh, now, Do--Miss Gon-tray!" protested Ashton.

The Englishman bowed formally and adjusted his monocle, oblivious of the hand that Ashton had stripped of its glove.

"Your--your grace--I should say, your lordship," stammered Ashton, hastily dropping his hand, "I'm extremely delighted--honored, I mean--at the unexpected pleasure of meeting your lordship."

"Ah, really?" murmured his lordship.

"Mr. Brice-Ashton's father is one of our most eminent financiers," interposed Mrs. Gantry.

"Ah, really? What luck!" politely exclaimed the Englishman. He stepped past the son of the eminent financier, to address Genevieve in an impulsive, boyish tone, "I say, Miss Leslie, hop up on a suitcase between Tom and me. You'll see over their heads."

"Hold on," said Blake, who was staring towards the outer door. "He's coming now."

"Where? Are you sure, Tom?" asked Genevieve, here eyes radiant.

"Sure, I'm sure," said Blake. "Met your father _once_. That was enough for me."

"Tom! You'll not-?"

"Enough for me to remember him," he explained with grim humor. "Don't worry. I don't want a row any more than you do."

"Or than he will! He'll not forget that had it not been for you--"

"And Jimmy!"

"Chuck it, old man," put in Lord James. "Miss Leslie knows as well as you do that one or more of the steamers chartered by her father must certainly have sighted your signal flag within a fortnight. I merely had the luck to be first."

"A lot of things can happen inside two weeks, down on the Mozambique coast. Eh, Miss Jenny?" said Blake.

For the moment, forgetful even of her father, Genevieve clasped her gloved hands and gazed upwards over the heads of the rushing multitude at a vision of swampy lagoons, of palm clumps and tangled jungles, of towering cliffs, and hot sand beaches, all aglare with the fierce downbeat of the tropical sun.

CHAPTER V

A REFRACTORY HERO

A short, stout, gray-haired man burst out of the crowd, jerked off his hat to Mrs. Gantry, and hastened forward, his gray-brown eyes fixed hungrily upon Genevieve. A moment later he had her in his arms. She returned his embrace with fervor yet with a well-bred quietness that drew a nod of approval from Mrs. Gantry.

"So! you're home--at last--my dear!" commented Mr. Leslie, patting his daughter's back with a sallow, vein-corded hand.

"At last, papa! I should have hurried to you at once, in spite of your cables, if you hadn't said you were starting for Arizona."

"Couldn't tell how long I'd be on that trip. Wanted you to enjoy the month in England, since Lady Chetwynd had asked you. But come now. I must see you started home. Cut short one Board meeting. Must be at another within half an hour."

He stepped apart from her and jerked out his watch.

"Yes, papa, only--" She paused and looked at him earnestly. "Did you not receive my telegram, that we had met Mr. Blake and Lord James in New York, and that they were to come on with us?"

"Hey?" snapped Mr. Leslie, his eyes glinting keen and cold below their shaggy brows. First to be transfixed by their glance was young Ashton, who stood toying with the fringe of Dolores' muff. "What's this, sir? What you doing here?"

Ashton gave back a trifle before the older man's irascibility, but answered with easy assurance: "I thought it would do no harm to run down for a few days. All work at Michamac is stopped--frozen up tight."

"It's not the way your father got his start in life--frivolity! Stick to your work all the time--stick!" rejoined Mr. Leslie. He turned and met the monocled stare of the earl. "H'm. This, I suppose, is the gentleman who--"

"My dear Herbert, permit me," interposed Mrs. Gantry. "Ah--the Right Honorable the Earl of Avondale: I have the honor to present--"

"Glad to meet you, sir!" broke in Mr. Leslie, clutching the Englishman's hand in a nervous grip. "Glad of the chance to thank you in person!"

"But, I say, I'm not the right man, y' know," protested Lord James. "The small part I had in it is not worth mentioning." He laid a hand on Blake's broad shoulder. "It's my friend Thomas Blake you should thank."

Mr. Leslie stepped back and eyed Blake's impassive face with marked coldness. "Your friend Blake?" he repeated.

"Old friend--camp-mate, chum--all over Western America and South Africa. It's he who's entitled to the credit for the rescue of Miss Leslie."

"We'll talk about your part later. You'll, of course, call on us," said Mr. Leslie. He fixed his narrowing eyes on Blake. "H'm. So you're Tom Blake--the same one."

"That's no lie," replied Blake dryly.

"You heard me say I'm busy. Have no time to-day. I'll give you an appointment for to-morrow, at my office, ten A. M. sharp."

"Thanks. But you're a bit too previous," said Blake. "I haven't asked for any appointment with you that I know of."

"But, Tom!" exclaimed Genevieve, astonished at the hostility in his tone, "of course you'll go. Papa wishes to thank you for--for all you've done. To-day, you see, he's so very busy."

Blake's hard eyes softened before her appealing glance, only to stare back sullenly at her father.

"I'm not asking any thanks from him, Miss Jenny," he replied.

The girl caught the arm of her father, who stood glowering irritably at Blake. "Papa, I--I don't understand why you and Tom--Couldn't you--won't you please be a little more cordial? Wait! I have it!" She flashed an eager glance at Blake. "Tom, you'll dine with us this evening."

He looked at Lord James, and replied steadily: "Sorry, Miss Jenny. You know I'd like to come. But I've got a previous engagement."

"If I ask you to break it, Tom?"

"Can't do it. I've given my word--worse luck!"

"But I do so wish you and papa to come to an understanding."

"Gaess I understand him already; so it's no use to--There now, don't worry. Long as you want me to, I'll accept his polite invitation for to-morrow."

"Ten A.M. sharp!" rasped Mr. Leslie. He drew Genevieve about, and rushed her off, with a curt call to Mrs. Gantry: "Come, Amice. Dolores brought the coupe. I'll put you in. The maids and baggage can follow in my car. Hurry up."

Genevieve was whirled away into the thick of the crowd, with scarcely time for a parting glance at Blake and Lord James. Mrs. Gantry lingered an instant to address the young Englishman:

"Pray do not forget, earl, you are to dine with me."

As Lord James bowed in polite agreement, Ashton, who had been scribbling on one of his cards, held it out. "Pardon me, your lordship. Here's a list of my favorite clubs. Look me up. I'll steer you to all the gay spots in little old Chi."

"Mr. Brice-Ashton is one of our hustling young grain speculators," explained Dolores. "Before he went to Michamac he almost cornered the

market in wild oats."

"Now, Miss Dodie!" smirked Ashton. "Wait! I'll do your elbowing."

But the girl was already plunging into the crowd, in the wake of her mother, the maids, and the porters. Ashton hastened after, in a vain attempt to overtake her. Crowds part easier before a pretty, smiling, fashionably dressed girl than before a foppish young man who affects the French mode.

The card with the list of clubs fell from the hand that Lord James raised to screw in his monocle.

"Stow it, Jimmy," growled Blake. "I feel just prime for smashing that fool window."

Lord James slipped the monocle into his pocket, and twisted at the end of his short mustache.

"Don't blame you, old man," he remarked. "Her guv'nor _was_ a bit crusty. Quite a clever girl that--the cousin--eh?"

"Miss Dolores? She sure is a hummer. Doesn't take after her mother; so she's all right," assented Blake. He added eagerly, "Say, Jimmy, she's just the one for you. You're so blondy blonde you need a real brunette to set off your charms."

"Sorry, Tom. Saw too much of some one else coming up to Aden--and before. Shouldn't have to remind you of that."

"Damn the luck!" swore Blake. "Well, we've come to the show-down. She's home now; agreement's off."

"To-morrow," corrected his friend.

"Lord! If only you weren't you! I'd knock you clean out of the running!"

"Rotten luck!" murmured Lord James sympathetically. "Had it been any other girl, now! But having met her before you did--Deuce take it, old man, how could I help it?"

"T ain't your fault, Jimmy. You know I don't blame you. I don't forget you began to play fair just as soon as you got next to how matters stood between.--how they stood with me."

"Couldn't play the cad, you know. I say, though, it's time we talked it all over again. Give me your trunk check. I'll have my man send your luggage to my hotel. You're to keep on bunking with me."

"No," replied Blake. "It was all right, long as we were travelling. Now I've got to hunt a hallroom and begin scratching gravel."

"But at least until you find a position."

"No. I'm sure of something first pop, if old Grif is in town. You remember, I once told you all about him--M. F. Griffith, my old engineer--man who boosted me from a bum to a transitman. Whitest man that ever was! Last I heard, he'd located here in Chicago as a consulting engineer. He'll give me work, or find it for me; and Mollie--that's Mrs. Grif--she'll board me, if she has to set up a bed in her parlor to do it."

"Oh, if you're set on chucking me," murmured Lord James. "But I'll stay by you till you've looked around. If you don't find your friend, you're to come with me."

"Must think I need a chaperon," rallied Blake in a fond growl. "Well, signal your Man Friday, and we'll run a line to the nearest directory."

Lord James signed to his valet, who stood near, discreetly observant. On the instant the man stepped forward with his master's hand luggage, and reached down to grasp Blake's suitcase, which had been left by one of the porters. But Blake was too quick for him. Catching up the suitcase himself, he swung away through the crowd and up the broad stairway, to the Bureau of Information.

Two minutes later he was copying an address from the city business directory.

"Got his office O.K.," he informed his friend. "Over on Dearborn Street. Next thing's to see if he's in town. Shunt your collar-buttoner, and come on. We can walk over inside ten minutes."

Lord James instructed his valet to take a taxicab to the hotel. He himself proceeded to button up his overcoat from top to bottom and turn up the collar.

"Your balmy native clime!" he gibed, staring ruefully through the depot windows at the whirling snowstorm without. "If I freeze my Grecian nose, you'll have to buy me a wax one."

Blake chuckled. "Remember that night up in the Kootenay when the blizzard struck us and we lost the road?"

"Pleasant time to recall it!" rejoined Lord James, with a shiver. "But come on. I'm keen to meet your Mr. Griffith."

CHAPTER VI

THREE OF A KIND

They reached the great office building on Dearborn Street, red-faced and tingling from the whirling drive of the powdery snow. It was so dry with frost that scarcely a flake clung to their coats when they pushed in through the storm doors. The elevator shot them up to the top floor of the building before they could catch their breath in the close, steam-heated atmosphere.

"_Whew!_" said Blake, stepping out and dropping his suitcase, to shed his English raincoat. "Talk about Mozambique! Guess you know now you're in Hammurica, me lud. All the way from the Pole to Panama in one swing of the street door."

"What was your friend's number?" asked Lord James, eying the doors across the corridor.

"Seventeen-fifteen. Must be down this way," answered Blake.

Catching up his suitcase, he led around to the rear corner of the building. At the end of the side hall they came to a door marked "No. 1715." On the frosted glass below the number there was painted in plain black letters a modest sign:

M. F. GRIFFITH, C. E.
CONSULTING ENGINEER

Blake led the way in and across to the plain table-desk where a young clerk was checking up a surveyor's field book.

"Hello," said Blake. "Mr. Griffith in?"

"Why, yes, he's in. But I think he's busy," replied the clerk, starting to rise. "I'll see. What business?"

"Don't bother, sonny," said Blake. "We'll just step in and sit down."

The clerk stared, but resumed his seat, while Blake crossed to the door marked "Private," and motioned Lord James to follow him in. When they entered, a lank, gray-haired man sat facing them at a table-desk as plain as the clerk's. It was covered with drawings, over which the veteran engineer was poring with such intentness that he failed to perceive his callers.

"Hello! What's up now?" asked Blake in a casual tone. "Going to bridge Behring Straits?"

"Hey?" demanded the worker, glancing up with an abstracted look.

His dark eyes narrowed as he took in the trim figure of the earl and Blake's English cap and tweeds. But at sight of Blake's face he shoved back his chair and came hurrying around the end of the desk, his thin dry face lighted by a rare smile of friendship. He warily caught the tip of Blake's thick fingers in his bony clasp.

"Well! I'll be--switched!" he croaked. "What you doing here, Tommy? Thought we'd got rid of you for good."

"Guess you'll have to lump it," rejoined Blake. "I'm here with both feet, and I want a job--P-D-Q. First, though, I want you to shake hands with my friend, Jimmy Scarbridge--Hold on! Wait a second."

He drew himself up pompously, and bowed to Lord James in burlesque mimicry of Mrs. Gantry. "Aw, beg pawdon, m'lud. Er--the--aw--Right Hon'able the--aw--Earl of Avondale: I present--aw--Mistah Griffith."

"Chuck it! The original's enough and to spare," cut in his lordship. He turned to Griffith with unaffected cordiality. "Glad to meet one of Tom's other friends, Mr. Griffith."

"The only other," added Blake.

"Then I'm still gladder!" said Lord James, gripping the bony hand of Griffith. "Don't let Tom chaff you. My name's just Scarbridge--James Scarbridge."

"Owh, me lud! Himpossible!" gasped Blake, "And your papa a juke!"

At sight of Griffith's upcurving eyebrows, Lord James smiled resignedly and explained: "Quite true--as to His Grace, y'know. But I assure you that even in England I am legally only a commoner. It's only by courtesy--custom, you know--that I'm given my father's second title."

"That's all right, Mr. Scarbridge," assured Griffith, in turn. "Glad to meet you. Have a seat."

While the callers drew up chairs for themselves, he returned to his seat and hauled out a box of good cigars. Blake helped himself and passed the box to Lord James. Griffith took out an old pipe and proceeded to load it with rank Durham.

"Well?" he croaked, as he handed over a match-box. "What's the good word, Tommy?"

"Haven't you heard?" replied Blake. "I'm a hero, the real live article,--T. Blake, C. E. H. E., R. O.--Oh!"

"No joshing, you Injin," admonished Griffith, pausing with a lighted match above the bowl of his pipe.

Lord James gazed reproachfully at the grinning Blake. "He tries to belittle it, Mr. Griffith, but it's quite true. Haven't you seen about it in the press?"

"Too busy over this Arizona dam," said Griffith, jerking his pipe towards the drawings on his desk.

"What dam?" demanded Blake, bending forward, keenly alert.

"Zariba--big Arizona irrigation project. Simple as A, B, C, except the dam itself. That has stumped half a dozen of the best men. Promoters are giving me a try at it now. But I'm beginning to think I've bitten off more 'n I can chew."

"You?" said Blake incredulously.

"Yes, me. When it comes to applying what's in the books, I'm not so worse. You know that, Tommy. But this proposition--Only available dam site is across a stretch of bottomless bog, yet it's got to hold a sixty-five foot head of water."

"Je-ru-salem!" whistled Blake. "Say, you've sure got to give me a shy at that, Grif. It can't be worked out--that's a cinch. Just the same, I'd like to fool with the proposition."

Griffith squinted at the younger engineer through his pipe smoke, and grunted: "Guess I'll _have_ to let you try, if you're set on it." He nodded to Lord James. "You know how much use it is bucking against Tommy. The boys used to call him a mule. They were half wrong. That half is bulldog."

"Aw, come off!" put in Blake. "You know it's just because I hate to quit."

"That's straight. You're no quitter. Shouldn't wonder if you held on to this dam problem till you swallowed it."

"Stow the kidding," said Blake, embarrassed.

"I'm giving it to you straight. This dam has made a lot of good ones quit. I'm about ready to quit, myself. But I'll be--switched if I don't think you'll make a go of it, Tommy."

"In your eye!"

"No." Griffith took out his pipe and fixed an earnest gaze on Blake. "I'm not one to slop over. You know that. I can put it all over you in mathematics--in everything that's in the books. So can a hundred or more men in this country. Just the same, there's something--you've got something in you that ain't in the books."

"Whiskey?" suggested Blake, with bitter self-derision.

"Tom!" protested Lord James.

"What's the use of lying about it?" muttered Blake.

"You've no whiskey in you now," rejoined Griffith. "I'm talking about what you are now,--what you've got in your head. It's brains."

"Pickled in alcohol!" added Blake, more bitterly than before.

"That's a lie, and you know it, Tommy. You're not yet on the shelf-- not by a long sight."

Blake grinned sardonically at Lord James. "Hear that, Jimmy? Never take the guess of an engineer. They're no good at guessing. It's not in the business."

"Chuck it. You know you've got something worth fighting for now."

"Lots of chance I'll have to win out against you!" Blake's teeth ground together on his unlighted cigar. He jerked it from his mouth and flung it savagely into the wastebasket. But the violent movement discharged the tension of his black humor.

"Lord! what a grouch I am!" he mumbled. "Guess I'm in for a go at the same old thing."

Griffith and Lord James exchanged a quick glance, and the former hastened to reply: "Don't you believe it, Tommy. Don't talk about _my_ guessing. You're steady as a rock, and you're going to keep steady. You're on the Zariba Dam now,--understand?"

"It's a go!" cried Blake, his eyes glowing. "That fixes me. You know my old rule: Not a drop of anything when I'm on a job. Only one thing more, and I'm ready to pitch in. I must get Mollie to put me up."

Griffith looked down, his teeth clenching on the pipe stem. There was a moment's pause. Then he replied in a tone more than ever dry and emotionless: "Guess my last letter didn't reach you. I lost her, a year ago--typhoid."

"God!" murmured Blake. He bent forward and gripped his friend's listless hand.

Griffith winced under the sympathetic clasp, turned his face away, coughed, and rasped out: "Work's the one thing in the world, Tommy. Always believed it. I've proved it this year. Work! Beats whiskey any day for making you forget ... I've got rooms here. You'll bunk with me. Pretty fair restaurant down around the corner."

"It's a go," said Blake. He nodded to Lord James. "That lets you out, Jimmy."

"Out in the cold," complained his lordship.

"What! With Mamma Gantry waiting to present you to the upper crust?--I mean, present the crust to you."

"Best part of the pie is under the crust."

"Now, now, none of that, Jimmy boy. You're not the sort to take in the town with a made-in-France thing like that young Ashton."

"Ashton?" queried Griffith. "You don't mean Laffie Ashton?"

"He was down at the depot to give our party the glad hand."

"Your party?" repeated Griffith. He saw Blake wink at Lord James, and thought he understood. "I see. He knows Mr. Scarbridge, eh? It's like him, dropping his work and running down here, when he ought to stick by his bridge."

"His bridge?" asked Blake. "Say, he did blow about having landed the Michamac Bridge. But of course that's all hot air. He didn't even take part in the competition. Besides, you needn't tell me he's anything more than a joke as an engineer."

"Isn't he, though? After you pulled out the last time--after the competition,--he put in plans and got the Michamac Bridge."

"You're joking!" cried Blake. "He got it?--that _gent!_"

"You'll remember that all who took part in the competition failed on the long central span," said Griffith.

"No!" contradicted Blake. "_I_ didn't. I tell you, it was just as I wrote you I'd do. I worked out a new truss modification. I'd have sworn my cantilever was the only one that could span Michamac Strait."

"And then to have your plans lost!" put in Griffith with keen sympathy beneath his dry croak. "Hell! That bridge would have landed you at the top of the ladder in one jump."

"Losing those plans landed me on a brake-beam, after my worst spree ever," muttered Blake.

"Don't wonder," said Griffith. "What gets me, though, is the way this young Ashton, this lily-white lallapaloozer of a kid-glove C. E., came slipping in with his plans less than a month after the contest. I looked up the records."

"What were you doing, digging into that proposition?" demanded Blake.

"What d' you suppose? Ashton was slick enough to get an ironclad contract as Resident Engineer. His bridge plans are a wonder, but he's proved himself N. G. on construction work. Has to be told how to build his own bridge. I'm on as Consulting Engineer."

"You?" growled Blake. "You, working again for H. V. Leslie!"

"Give the devil his due, Tommy. He's sharp as tacks, but if you've got his name to a straightforward contract--"

"After he threw us down on the Q. T. survey?"

Griffith coughed and hesitated. "Well--now--look here, Tommy, you're not the kind to hold a grudge. Anyway, the bridge was turned over to the Coville Construction Company." He turned quickly to Lord James. "Say, what's that about his being in the papers? If it's anything to his credit, put me next, won't you? I couldn't pry it out of him with a crow-bar."

"So you're going to use a Jimmy instead, eh?" countered Blake.

"Right-o, Tammas," said Lord James. "We're going to open up the incident out of hand."

"Lord!" groaned Blake. He rose, flushing with embarrassment, and swung across, to stare at a blueprint in the far corner of the room.

Lord James flicked the ash from his cigar with his little finger, and smiled at Griffith.

"Tom and I had been knocking around quite a bit, you know," he began. "Fetched up in South Africa. American engineers in demand on the Rand. Tom was asked to manage a mine."

"He could do it," commented Griffith. "Was two years on a low-grade proposition in Colorado--made it pay dividends. Didn't he suit the Rand people?"

"Better than they suited him, I take it. I left for a run home. Week before I arrived a servant looted the family jewels--heirlooms, all that, you know--chap named Hawkins. Thought I'd play Sherlock Holmes. Learned that my man had booked passage for India. Traced him to Calcutta. Lost two months; found he'd doubled back and gone to the Cape. Cape Town, found he'd booked passage for England under his last alias--Winthrope. Steamer list also showed names of my friend Lady Bayrose, Miss Leslie, and Tom."

"Hey?" ejaculated Griffith, opening his narrowed eyes a line.

"Same time, learned the steamer had been posted as lost, somewhere between Port Natal and Zanzibar."

"Crickey!" gasped Griffith. "Then it was Tom who pulled H. V.'s daughter--Miss Leslie--through that deal! Heard all about it from H. V. himself, when he took me out to Arizona to look over this Zariba Dam proposition. But he didn't name the man. Well, I'll be--switched! Tommy sure did land in High Society that time!"

"They landed in the primitive, so to speak,--he and Miss Leslie and Hawkins,--when the cyclone flung them ashore in the swamps."

"Hawkins? Didn't you just say--"

"Rather a grim joke, was it not? Every soul aboard drowned except those three--Tom and Miss Leslie and Hawkins, of all men!"

"Bet Tommy shook your family jewels out of his pockets mighty sudden."

Lord James lost his smile. "He got them, later on, when the fellow--died."

"Died? How?"

"Fever--another cyclone."

"Eh? Well, God's country is good enough for me. Those tropical holes sure are hell. Tommy once wrote me about one of the Central American ports. You don't ever catch me south of the U. S. This East African proposition, now? Must have been a tough deal even for Tommy."

"They were doing well enough when I found him, both he and Miss Leslie,--skin clothes, poisoned arrows, house in a tree hollow--all that, y'know."

"Well, I'll be--! But that's Tommy, for sure. He's got the kind of brains that get there. If he can't buck through a proposition, he'll triangulate around it. Go on."

"There's not much to tell, I fancy, now that you know he was the man. You're aware that, had it not been for his resourcefulness and courage, Miss Leslie would have perished in that savage land of wild beasts and fever. Yet there is something more than you could have heard from her father, something I'm not free to tell about. Wish I was, 'pon my word, I do! Finest thing he ever did,--something even we would not have expected of him."

"Dunno 'bout that," qualified Griffith. "There's mighty little I don't expect of him--if only he can cut out the lushing."

Lord James twisted his mustache. "Ever think of him as wearing a dress suit, Mr. Griffith?"

Griffith looked blank. "Tommy?--in a dress suit!"

"There's one in his box. When we landed in England I took him down to Ruthby. Kept him there a month. You'd have been jolly well pleased to see the way he and the gov'nor hit it off."

"Governor?"

"Yes, my pater--father, y' know."

"So he's a governor? Then Tommy was stringing me about the earl and duke business."

"Oh, no, no, indeed, no. The pater is the Duke of Ruthby, seventh in

the line, and twenty-first Earl of Avondale; but he's a crack-up jolly old chap, I assure you. Not all our titled people are of the kind you see most of over here in the States."

"But--hold on--if your father is a real duke, then you're not Mr.--"

"Yes, I must insist upon that. Even in England I am only Mr. Scarbridge--legally, y' know. Hope you'll do me the favor of remembering I prefer it that way."

"I'd do a whole lot for any man _he_ calls his friend," said Griffith, gazing across at Blake's broad back. Lord James glanced at his watch, and rose. "Sorry. Must go."

"Well, if you must," said Griffith. "You know the way here now. Drop in any time you feel like it. Rooms are always open. If I'm busy, I've got a pretty good technical library--if you're interested in engineering,--and some photographs of scenery and construction work. Took 'em myself."

"Thanks. I'll come," responded Lord James. He nodded cordially, and turned to call slangily to Blake: "S' long, bo. I'm on my way."

Blake wheeled about from the wall. "What's this? Not going already?"

"Ah, to be sure. Pressing engagement. Must give Wilton time to attire me--those studied effects--last artistic touches, don't y' know," chaffed the Englishman.

But his banter won no responsive smile from his friend. Blake's face darkened.

"You're not going to see her to-day," he muttered.

"How could you think it, Tom?" reproached the younger man, flushing hotly. "I have it! We'll extend the agreement until noon to-morrow. You have that appointment with her father in the morning."

"That's square! Just like you, Jimmy. Course I knew you'd play fair-- It's only my grouch. I remember now. Madam G. gave you a bid to dine with her."

Lord James drew out his monocle, replaced it, and smiled. "Er--quite true; but possibly the daughter may be a compensation."

"Sure," assented Blake, a trifle too eagerly, "You're bound to like Miss Dolores. I sized her up for a mighty fine girl. Not at all like her mamma--handsome, lively young lady--just your style, Jimmy."

"Can't see it, old man. Sorry!" replied his lordship. "Good-day. Good-day, Mr. Griffith."

CHAPTER VII

THE HERO EXPLAINS

For half a minute after his titled friend had bowed himself out, Blake stood glowering at the door. The sharp crackle of a blueprint under the thrumming fingers of Griffith caused him to start from his abstraction and cross to the desk, where he dropped heavily into his former seat.

"Well?" demanded Griffith. "Out with it."

"With what?"

"You called him your friend. He's a likely-looking youngster, even if he _is_ the son of a duke. Same time, there's something in the wind. Cough it up. Haven't happened to smash any heads or windows, have you, while you were--"

"No!" broke in Blake harshly. "It's worse than that, ten times worse! It's--it's Jenny--Miss Leslie!"

Griffith's thin lips puckered in a soundless whistle. "Well, I'll be--! Don't tell me you've gone and--Why, you never cared a rap for girls."

"No, but this time, Grif--It began when I showed her through that Rand mine. Jimmy has told you what followed."

Griffith blinked, and discreetly said nothing as to what lie had heard from Miss Leslie's father. "H'm. I'd like to hear it all, straight from you."

"Can't now. Too long a yarn. I want to tell you about the results. Couldn't do it to any one else," explained Blake, blushing darkly under his thick layer of tropical tan. He sought to beat around the bush. "Well, I proved myself fit to survive in that environment, tough as it was--sort of cave-man's hell. Queer thing, though, Jenny--Miss Leslie--proved fit, too; that is, she did after right at the start. She's got a headpiece, and _grit!_"

"Takes after her dad," suggested Griffith.

"Him!"

"As to the brains and grit."

"Not in anything else, though. They're no more alike than garlic and roses."

"Getting poetic, eh?" cackled Griffith.

"Don't laugh, Grif. It's too serious a matter. I'd do anything in the world for her. She's the truest, grittiest girl alive. She told me straight out, there at the last, that she--she loved me."

"Crickey!" ejaculated Griffith. "She told you that?--she?--Miss--"

"Hush! not so loud!" cautioned Blake. Again the color deepened in his bronzed cheeks. His pale eyes shone very blue and soft. "It was when we heard the siren of Jimmy's steamer. She--You'll forget this, Grif? Never whisper a hint of it?"

"Sure! What you take me for?"

"Well, she wouldn't agree to wait. Wanted to be married as soon as we got aboard ship."

"She--!" Griffith lacked breath even for an expletive.

"I agreed. Couldn't help it, with her looking at me that way. Then we went down around through the cleft to the shore, where the boat was pulling in. Well, there was Jimmy in the sternsheets, in a white yachting suit--Me with my hyena pants, and Jenny in her leopard-skin dress!"

"Say, you were doing the Crusoe business!" cackled Griffith.

"It shook me out of my dream all right, soon as I set eyes on Jimmy. I waded out with--Miss Leslie, and put her into the boat. Told him to hurry her aboard. I cut back to the cleft--the place where we'd been staying."

"Off your head, eh?"

"No. Don't you see? I had to save Jenny. I had proved myself a pretty good cave-man, and she had been living so close to that sort of thing that she had lost her perspective. Wasn't fair to her to let her tie herself up to me till she'd first had a chance to size me up with the men of her class."

"You mean to say you passed up your chance?"

"I'd have been a blackguard to 've let her marry me then!" cried Blake, his eyes flashing angrily. He checked himself, and went on in a monotone: "I waited till Jimmy came back to fetch me. Course I had to explain the situation. Asked him to pull out without me, and send down a boat from Port Mozambique. No go. Finally we fixed it up for me to slip aboard into the fore-castle."

"Well, I'll be--switched!" croaked Griffith. "You did that, to escape marrying the daughter of a multi-millionaire!"

"It would have been the same if she'd been poor, Grif. She's a lady, through and through, and I--I love her! God! how I love her!"

"Guess that's no lie," commented Griffith in his dryest tone.

Blake relaxed the grip that seemed to be crushing the arms of his chair.

"Well, I went aboard and kept under cover. Jimmy managed to keep her diverted till we put into Port Mozambique. There I sent a note aft to her, letting on that I had already landed, and swearing that I was going to steer clear of her until after she got back to her father. But I kept aboard, in the forecastle, as Jimmy had made me promise to do. At Aden, Jimmy put her on a P. and O. liner in the care of a friend of his, Lady Chetwynd, who was on her way home to England from India."

"He went along, too; leaving you to shift for yourself, eh?"

"Don't you think it! He had been spending half the time forward with me in that stew-hole of a forecastle. Soon as she was safe, I hiked aft and bunked with him. No; Jimmy's as square as they make 'em. To prove it--he had met Jenny before; greatly taken with her. There on the steamer was the very chance he had been after. But he played fair; didn't try to win her. Told me all about it, right at the first, and we came to an agreement. We were both to steer clear of her over on that side. That's why we stuck close to Ruthby Castle till Jenny sailed for home. No; Jimmy is white. He had invitations to more than one house-party where she was visiting around with Lady Chetwynd and Madam Gantry."

"So neither of you have seen her since there at Aden?"

"Yes, we have. Came on from New York with her and her aunt. They had stopped over when they landed, and we blundered into them before we could dodge."

"And Miss Leslie? You look glum. Guess you got what was coming to you, eh?"

Blake's face clouded. "Haven't seen her apart from her aunt yet. She has been kind but--mighty reserved. I'd give a lot to know whether--" He paused, gripping his chair convulsively. "Just the same, I haven't quit. The agreement with Jimmy is off to-morrow afternoon. She's had plenty of time for comparisons. I'll make my try then."

"Don't fash yourself, Tom. If she's the sort you say, and went as far as you say, she's not likely to throw you over now."

"You don't savvy!" exclaimed Blake. "There on that infernal coast I was the real thing--and the only one, at that. Here I'm just T. Blake, ex-bum, periodic drunkard, all around--"

"Stow that drivell!" ordered Griffith. "What if you were a kid hobo? What are you now?--one of the best engineers in the country; one that's going to make the top in short order. I tell you, you're going to succeed. What's more, Mollie said--"

"Mollie!" repeated Blake softly. "Say, but wasn't she a booster! Had even you beat, hands down. Good Lord, to think that she, of all the little women--! Only thing, typhoid isn't so bad as some things. They don't suffer so much."

"Yes," assented Griffith. "That helps--some--when I get to thinking of it. She went out quietly--wasn't thinking of herself."

"She never did!" put in Blake, "Say, but can't a woman make a heap of difference--when she's the right sort!"

"There was a message for you. She said, almost the last thing: 'Tell Tom not to give up the fight. Tell him,' she said, 'he'll win out, I know he'll win out in the end.'"

"God!" whispered Blake. "She said that?" He bent over and covered his eyes with his hand.

Griffith averted his head and peered at the blueprints on the nearest wall with unseeing eyes. A full minute passed. Keeping his face still averted, he began to tap out the ash and half-smoked tobacco from his pipe.

"H'm--guess you'd better work in a room apart," he remarked in a matter-of-fact tone. "Too much running in and out here. D' you want to start right off?"

"No," muttered Blake. He paused and then straightened to face his friend. His eyes were blood-shot but resolute, his face impassive.

"No. I'll wait till after to-morrow. Big order on for to-morrow morning. Appointment to meet H. V."

"Hey?"

"He was down at the depot. You can imagine how effusive he wasn't over my saving his daughter. Curse the luck! If only she had had any one else for a father!"

"Now, now, Tommy, don't fly off the handle. You know there are lots of 'em worse than H. V."

"None I'm in so hard with. First place, there's that Q. T. survey."

"That's all smoothed over. He came around all right. Just ask for your pay-check. He'll shell out."

"I'll ask for interest. Ought to have a hundred per cent. I needed the money then mighty bad."

"We all did. Let it slide. He's her father. You can't afford to buck his game."

"I'd do it quick enough if it wasn't for her," rejoined Blake. "That's where he's got me. Lord! if only he and she weren't--!" Blake's teeth clenched on the end of the sentence.

"Now look here, Tommy," protested Griffith. "This isn't like you to hold a grudge. It's true H. V. did us dirt on the survey pay. But he gave in, soon as I got a chance to talk it over with him."

"Cause he had to have you on the Michamac Bridge, eh?" demanded Blake, his face darkening.

"Stow it! That may be true, but--didn't I tell you he turned the bridge over to the Coville Company?"

"Afraid he'd be found out, eh?"

"Found out? What do you mean?"

"Mean!" repeated Blake, his voice hoarse with passion. He brought his big fist down upon the desk with the thud of a maul. "Mean? Listen here! I didn't write it to you--I couldn't believe it then, even of him. But answer me this, if you can. I was fool enough not to send my plans for the bridge competition to him by registered mail; I was fool enough to hand them in to his secretary without asking a receipt. After the contest, I called for my plans. Clerk told me he couldn't find them; couldn't find any record that they'd been received. I tell you my plans solved that central span problem. Who was it could use my plans?--who were they worth a mint of money to?"

Griffith stared at his friend, his forehead furrowed with an anxious frown. "See here, Tom--this tropical roughing--it must be mighty overtaking on a man. You didn't happen to have a sunstroke or--"

Blake's scowl relaxed in an ironical grin. "All right, take it that way, if you want to. He let on he thought I was trying to blackmail him."

"Crickey! You don't mean to say you--"

"Didn't get a chance to see him that time. Just sent in a polite note asking for my plans. He sent out word by his private-detective office-boy that if I called again he'd have me run in."

"And now you come back with this dotty pipe-dream that he knows what became of your plans! Take my advice. Think it all you want, if that does you any good; but keep your head closed--keep it closed! First thing he'd do would be to look up the phone number of the nearest asylum."

"I'd like to see him do it," replied Blake. He shook his head dubiously. "That's straight, Grif. I'd like to see him do it. I can't forget he's her father. If only I could be sure he hadn't a finger in the disappearance of those plans--Well, you can guess how I feel about it."

"You're dotty to think it a minute. He's a money-grubber--as sharp as some others. But he wouldn't do a thing like that. Don't you believe it!"

"Wish I'd never thought of it--he's her father. But it's been growing on me. I handed them in to his secretary, that young dude, Ashton."

"Ashton? There you've hit on a probability," argued Griffith. "Of all the heedless, inefficient papa's boys, he takes the cake! He wasn't H. V.'s secretary except in name. Wine, women, sports, and gambling--nothing else under his hat. Always had a mess on his desk. Ten to one, he got your package mixed in the litter, and shoved all together into his wastebasket."

"I'll put it up to him!" growled Blake.

"What's the use? He couldn't remember a matter of business over night, to save him."

"Lord! I sweat blood over those plans! It was hard enough to enter a competition put up by H. V., but it was the chance of a lifetime for me. Why, if only I'd known in time that they were lost, I'd have put in my scratch drawings and won on them. I tell you, Grif, that truss was something new."

"Oh, no, there's no inventiveness, no brains in your head, oh, no!" rallied Griffith. "Wait till you make good on this Zariba Dam."

"You just bet I'll make a stagger at it!" cried Blake. His eyes shone bright with the joy of work,--and as suddenly clouded with renewed moroseness.

"I'll be working for you, though," he qualified. "I don't take any jobs from H. V. Leslie--not until that matter of the bridge plans is cleared up."

CHAPTER VIII

FLINT AND STEEL

At three minutes to ten the following morning Blake entered the doorway of the mammoth International Industrial Company Building. At one minute to ten he was facing the outermost of the guards who fenced

in the private office of H. V. Leslie, capitalist.

"Your business, sir? Mr. Leslie is very busy, sir."

"He told me to call this morning," explained Blake.

"Step in, sir, please."

Blake entered, and found himself in a well-remembered waiting-room, in company with a dozen or more visitors. He swung leisurely across to the second uniformed doorkeeper.

"Business?" demanded this attendant with a brusqueness due perhaps to his closer proximity to the great man.

Blake answered without the flicker of a smile: "I'm a civil engineer, if you want to know."

"Your business here?"

"None that concerns you," rejoined Blake.

His eyes fixed upon the man with a cold steely glint that visibly disconcerted him. But the fellow had been in training for years. He replied promptly, though in a more civil tone: "If you do not wish to state your business to me, sir, you'll have to wait until--"

"No, I won't have to wait until," put in Blake. "Your boss told me to call at ten sharp."

"In that case, of course--Your name, please."

"Blake."

The man slipped inside, closing the door behind him. He was gone perhaps a quarter of a minute. When he reappeared, he held the door half open for Blake.

"Step in, sir," he said. "Mr. Leslie can spare you fifteen minutes."

Blake looked the man up and down coolly. "See here," he replied, "just you trot back and tell Mr. H. V. Leslie I'm much obliged for his favoring me with an appointment, but long as he's so rushed, I'll make him a present of his blessed quarter-hour."

"My land, sir!" gasped the doorkeeper. "I can't take such a message to _him_!"

"Suit yourself," said Blake, deliberately drawing a cigar from his vest pocket and biting off the tip.

This time the man was gone a full half-minute. He eyed Blake with respectful curiosity as he swung the door wide open and announced:

"Mr. Leslie asks you to come in, sir."

As the door closed softly behind him, Blake stared around the bare little room into which he had been shown. He was looking for the third guardian of the sanctum,--the great man's private secretary. But the room was empty. Without pausing, he crossed to the door in the side wall and walked aggressively into the private office of Genevieve's father.

Mr. Leslie sat at a neat little desk, hurriedly mumbling into the trumpet of a small phonograph.

"Moment!" he flung out sideways, and went on with his mumbling.

Blake swung around one of the heavy leather-seated chairs with a twist of his wrist, and drew out a silver matchsafe. As he took out a match, Mr. Leslie touched a spring that stopped the whirring mechanism of the phonograph, and wheeled around in his swivel desk-chair.

"Dictate on wax," he explained. "Cuts out stenographer. Any clerk can typewrite. No mislaid stenographer's notes; no mistakes. Well, you're nearly on time."

"Sharp at the door, according to your waiting-room clock," said Blake, striking the match on his heel.

"Good--punctuality. First point you score. Now, what do you expect to get out of me?"

Blake held the match to his cigar with deliberate care, blew it out, and flipped it into the wastebasket, with the terse answer: "Just _that_ much."

The other's bushy eyebrows came down over the keen eyes. For a full minute the two stared, the man of business seeking to pierce with his narrowed glance Blake's hard, open gaze. The failure of his attempt perhaps irritated him beyond discretion. At any rate, his silent antagonism burst out in an explosion of irascibility.

"Needn't tell me your game, young man," he rasped. "You think, because you were alone with my daughter, you can force me to pay hush money."

Blake rose to his feet with a look in his eyes before which Mr. Leslie shrank back and cringed.

"Wait! Sit down! sit down! I--I didn't mean that!" he exclaimed.

Blake drew in a deep breath and slowly sat down again. He said nothing, but puffed hard at his cigar.

Mr. Leslie rebounded from panic to renewed irascibility. "H'm! So you're one of that sort. I might have foreseen it."

Blake looked his indifference. "All right. That's the safety-valve. Blow off all the steam you want to through it. Only don't try the other again. You're her father, and that gives you a big vantage. Any one else have said what you did, he wouldn't have had the chance to take it back."

"Do you mean to threaten me?"

"I've smashed men for less."

"You look the part."

"It's not the part of a lickspittle."

"Look here, young man. As the man who happened to save the life of my daughter--"

"Suppose we leave her out of this palaver," suggested Blake.

"Unfortunately, that is impossible. It is solely owing to the obligations under which your service to her have put me that I--"

"That you're willing to let me come in here and listen to your pleasant conversation," broke in Blake ironically. "Well, let me tell you, I'm some busy myself these days. Just now I'm out collecting one of your past-due obligations, I've heard you admit you owe for that first Q. T. Railroad survey."

"There was no legal claim on me. I conceded the point at the request of Mr. Griffith."

"Had to hire him, eh? Best consulting engineer in the city. And he held out for a settlement," rallied Blake.

"You were one of the party?"

"Transitman."

"Then apply to my auditor. He has your pay-check waiting for you."

"How about interest? It's two years over-due."

"I never allow interest on such accounts."

Blake took out his cigar and looked at his antagonist, his jaw out-thrust. "If I had a million, I wouldn't mind spending it to make you pay that interest."

"You could spend twice that, and then not get it," snapped Mr. Leslie. "You'll soon find out I can't be driven, young man. On the other hand --how big a position do you think you could fill?"

"Quien sabe?"

"See here. You've put me under obligations. I'd rather it had been any other man than you--"

"Ditto on you!" rejoined Blake.

The blow struck a shower of flinty sparks from Mr. Leslie's narrowed eyes.

"You'll do well to be more conciliatory, young man," he warned.

"Conciliatory? _Bah!_"

"Didn't take you for a fool."

"Well, you won't take me in for one," countered Blake.

"You seem determined to hurt your own interests. Unfortunately you've put me in your debt--an obligation I must pay in full."

"Why not get a receiver appointed, and reorganize?" gibed Blake.

"That's one of the ways you dodge obligations, isn't it?"

Mr. Leslie's wrinkled face quickly turned red, and from red to purple. He thrust a quivering finger against a push-button. Blake grinned exultantly and picked up his hat.

"Don't bother your bouncer," he remarked in a cheerful tone. "I don't need any invitation to leave."

The tall doorkeeper stepped alertly into the room, but turned back on the instant at sight of his master's repellent gesture.

"Mistake," snapped Mr. Leslie, and as the man disappeared, he turned to Blake. "Wait! Don't go yet."

Blake was rising to his feet. He paused, considered, and resumed his seat. Mr. Leslie had regained his normal color and his composure. He put his finger-tips together, and jerked out in his usual incisive tone: "I propose to liquidate this obligation to you without delay. Would you prefer a cash payment?"

"No." Again Blake set his jaw. "You couldn't settle with me for cash, not even if you overdrew your bank account."

"Nonsense!" snapped Mr. Leslie. He studied the young man's resolute face, and asked impatiently, "Well--what?"

"Can't you get it into your head?" rejoined Blake. "I'm not asking for any pay for what I did."

"What, then? If not a money reward--I see. You're perhaps ambitious. You want to make a name in your profession."

"Ever know an engineer that didn't?"

"I see. I'll arrange to give you a position that--"

"Thanks," broke in Blake dryly. "Wait till I ask you for a job."

"What are you going to do?--loaf?"

"That's my business."

Mr. Leslie again studied Blake's face. Though accustomed to read men at a glance, he was baffled by the engineer's inscrutable calm.

"You nearly always win at poker," he stated.

"Used to," confirmed Blake. "Cut it out, though. A gambler is a fool. More fun in a nickel earned than a dollar made at play or speculating."

"So! You're one of these socialist cranks."

Blake laughed outright. "It's the cranks that make the world go 'round! No; I've been too busy boosting for Number One--like you--to let myself think of the other fellow. The trouble with that crazy outfit is they want to set you to working for the people, instead of working the people. No; I've steered clear of them. 'Fraid I might get infected with altruism. Like you, I'm a born anarchist--excuse me!--individualist. What would become of those who have the big interests of the country at heart if they didn't have the big interests in hand?"

Mr. Leslie ignored the sarcasm. "Either you're a fool, or you're playing a deep game. It occurs to me you may have heard that my daughter has money in her own right."

"Three million, she said," assented Blake.

"She told you!"

"Guess she told me more than she seems to have told you."

"About what?"

"Ask her."

Mr. Leslie's eyes narrowed to thin slits. "Her aunt wrote me that she suspected you had the effrontery to--aspire to my daughter's hand. I couldn't believe it possible."

"That so?" said Blake with calm indifference.

Mr. Leslie started as though stung. "It's true, then! You--you!--" He

choked with rage.

"I thought that would reach you," commented Blake.

"You rascal! you blackguard!" spluttered Mr. Leslie. "So that's your game? You know she's an heiress! Think you have the whip-handle--bleed me or force her to marry you!--Alone with her after the other man--! You--you scoundrel! you blackguard! I'll--"

"Shut up!" commanded Blake, his voice low-pitched and hoarse, his face white to the lips. For the second time during the interview Mr. Leslie cringed before his look. His pale eyes were like balls of white-hot steel.

Slowly the glare faded from Blake's eyes, and the color returned to his bronzed face. He relaxed his fists.

"God!" he whispered huskily. "God! ... But you're her father!"

Something in his tone compelled conviction, despite Mr. Leslie's bitter prejudice. He jerked out reluctantly: "I'm not so sure--perhaps I spoke too--too hastily. But--the indications--"

"Needn't try to apologize," growled Blake.

"I'll not--in words. How about a twenty-five-thousand-dollar position?"

"What?" demanded Blake, astonished.

"That, as a beginning. If you prove yourself the kind of man I think you are,--the kind that can learn to run a railroad system,--I'll push you up the line to a hundred thousand, besides chances to come in on stock deals with George Ashton and myself."

"But if you think I'm a--"

"You're the only man that ever outfaced me in my own office. I'll chance the rest,--though I had your record looked up as soon as your name was cabled to me. I know not only who you are but what you are."

Blake bent forward, frowning. "I've stood about enough of this."

"Wait," said Mr. Leslie. "I'm not going to drag that in. I mention it only that you will understand without argument why my offer is based on the condition that you at once and for all time give over your ridiculous idea of becoming my son-in-law."

"You--mean--that--?"

"That I'd rather see my daughter in her grave than married to you. Is that plain enough? You're a good engineer--when you're not a

drunkard"

For a moment Blake sat tense and silent. Then he replied steadily: "I haven't touched a drop of drink since that steamer piled up on that coral reef."

"Three months, at the outside," rejoined Mr. Leslie. "You've been known to go half a year. But always--"

"Yes, always before this try," said Blake. "It's different, though, now, with the backing of two such--ladies!"

"Two?" queried Mr. Leslie sharply.

"One's dead," replied Blake with simple gravity.

"H'm. I--it's possible I've misjudged you in some things. But this question of drink--I'll risk backing you in a business way, if it costs me a million. I owe you that much. But I won't risk my daughter's happiness--supposing you had so much as a shadow of a chance of winning her. No! You saved her life. You shall have no chance whatever to make her miserable. But I'll give you opportunities--I'll put you on the road to making your own millions."

Blake raised his cigar and flecked off the ash. "_That_ for your damned millions!" he swore.

Mr. Leslie stared and muttered to himself: "Might have known it! Man of that kind. Crazy fool!"

"Fool?" repeated Blake contemptuously. "Just because money is _your_ god, you needn't think it's everybody else's. You--money--hog! You think I'd sell out my chance of winning _her!_"

"You have no chance, sir! The thought of such a thing is absurd--ridiculous!"

"Well, then, why don't you laugh? No; you hear me. If I knew I didn't have one chance in a million, I'd tell you to take your offer and--"

"Now, now! make no rash statements. I'm offering you, to begin with, a twenty-five-thousand-dollar position, and your chance to acquire a fortune, if you--"

Blake's smouldering anger flared out in white heat. "Think you can bribe me, do you? Well, you can just take your positions and your dollars, and go clean, plumb to hell!"

"That will do, sir!--that will do!" gasped Mr. Leslie, shocked almost beyond speech.

"No, it won't do, Mr. H. V. Leslie!" retorted Blake. "I'm not one of your employees, to throw a fit when you put on the heavy pedal, and

I'm not one of the lickspittles that are always _baa-ing_ around the Golden Calf. You've had your say. Now I'll have mine. To begin with, let me tell you, I don't need your positions or your money. Griffith has given me work. I'm working for him, not you. Understand?"

"You are? He's my consulting engineer."

"That cuts no ice. I'm doing some work for him--for _him_; understand? It's not for you. He gave me the job--not you. After what you've said to me here, I wouldn't take a _hundred_-thousand-dollar job from you, not if I was walking around on my uppers. Understand?"

"But--but--"

Blake's anger burst out in volcanic rage. "That's it, straight! I don't want your jobs or your money. They're dirty! You've looked up my record, have you? How about your own? How about the Michamac Bridge? Griffith says the Coville Company has taken it over; but you started it--you called for plans--you advertised a competition. Where are my plans?--you!"

Mr. Leslie shrank back before the enraged engineer.

"Calm yourself, Mr. Blake!" he soothed in a quavering voice. "Calm yourself! This illusion of yours about lost plans--"

"Illusion?" cried Blake. "When I handed them in myself to your secretary--that dude, Ashton."

Mr. Leslie sat up, keenly alert. "To him? You say you handed in a set of bridge plans to my former secretary?"

"He wasn't a _former_ secretary then."

"To young Ashton, at that time my secretary. Where was it?"

"In there," muttered Blake, jerking his thumb towards the empty anteroom. "I had to butt in to get even that far."

"Why didn't you show your receipt when you applied for your plans?"

"Hadn't a receipt."

"You didn't take a receipt?"

"And after that Q. T. survey, too!" thrust Blake. "I sure did play the fool, didn't I? But I was all up in the air over the way I had worked out that central span, and didn't think of anything but the committee you'd appointed to pass on the competing plans. Those judges were all right. I knew they'd be square."

"Sure you had any plans? Where's your proof?" demanded Mr. Leslie with a shrewdness that won a sarcastic grin from Blake.

"Don't fash yourself," he jeered. "You're safe--legally. Of course my scratch copy of them went down in the steamer. The fact I wrote Griffith about them before the contest wouldn't cut any ice--with your lawyers across the table from any I could afford to hire."

"Griffith knows about your plans?"

"Didn't get a chance to show them to him. All he knows is I wrote him I was drawing them to compete for the bridge--which of course was part of my plan to blackmail you," gibed Blake. He rose, with a look that was almost good-humored. "Well, guess we're through swapping compliments. I won't take up any of your valuable time discussing the weather."

With shrewd eyes blinking uneasily under their shaggy brows, Mr. Leslie watched his visitor cross towards the door. The engineer walked firmly and resolutely, with his head well up, yet without any trace of swagger or bravado.

As he reached for the doorknob, Mr. Leslie bent forward and called in an irritable tone: "Wait! I want to tell you--"

"Excuse _me!_ My time's too valuable," rejoined Blake, and he swung out of the room.

Mr. Leslie sat for a few moments with his forehead creased in intent thought. He roused, to touch a button with an incisive thrust of his finger. To the clerk who came hastening in he ordered tersely: "Phone Griffith--appointment nine-fifteen to-morrow. Important."

CHAPTER IX

PLAYS FOR POSITION

About three o'clock of the same day a smart electric _coupe_ whirled up Lake Shore Drive under a rattling fusillade of sleet from over the lake. At the entrance of the grounds of the Leslie mansion it curved around and shot in under the _porte cochere._

A footman in the quiet dark green and black of the Leslie livery sprang out to open the _coupe_ door, while the footman with the _coupe_, whose livery was not so quiet, swung down to hand out the occupants. Before the servant could offer his services, Dolores Gantry darted out past him and in through the welcome doorway of the side entrance. Her mother followed with stately leisure, regardless of a wind-flung dash of sleet on her sealskins.

Having been relieved of their furs, the callers were shown to the

drawing-room. As the footman glided away to inform his mistress of their arrival, Dolores danced across to the door of the rear drawing-room and called in a clear, full-throated, contralto voice: "Ho, Vievie! Vievie! You in here? Hurry up! There's something I do so want to tell you."

Mrs. Gantry paused in the act of seating herself. "Dolores! Why must you shriek out like a magpie? Will you never forget you're a tomboy?"

"I'm not, mamma. I'm simply acting as if I were one. You forget I'm a full-blown _debutante_. Vievie has already promised me a ball."

"Behave yourself, if you wish to attend it."

Dolores jumped to a chair and sank into it with an air of elegant languor. "Yes, mamma. This--ah--driving in moist weather is so fatiguing, don't you find it?"

Mrs. Gantry disposed herself upon the comfortable seat that she had selected, and raised her gold lorgnette. "Do not forget that the ball Genevieve has so generously promised you is to be honored by the presence--"

"Of a real live earl and a real hero, with Laffie Ashton thrown in for good--I mean, bad--measure!" cut in Dolores with enthusiasm. "You know, I asked Vievie to 'put him on her list, else he never may be kissed!"

Again Mrs. Gantry raised her lorgnette to transfix her daughter with her cold stare. "_You_ asked her to invite Lafayette Ashton? And you know his reputation!"

"Of course. But you mustn't ask for the details, mamma," reproved the girl. "It's best that you should not become aware of such things, my dear. Only, you know, 'boys will be boys,' and we must not lose sight of the fact that poor dear Laffie will be worth twenty millions some day--if his papa doesn't make a will. Besides, he dances divinely. Of course Earl Jimmy's mustache is simply too cute for anything, but, alas! unless Vievie clings to her heroic Tommy--"

"Tommyrot!" sniffed Mrs. Gantry. "The presumption of that low fellow! To think of his following her to America!"

"You should have forewarned the authorities at Ellis Island, and had him excluded as dangerous--to your plans."

"No more of this frivolity! I've confided to you that that man is dangerous to Genevieve's happiness. I'll not permit it. What a fortunate chance that the earl came with him! I shall see to it that Genevieve becomes a countess."

Dolores pulled a mock-tragic face. "Oh, mamma," she implored, "why don't you root for me, instead? I'm sure a coronet would fit me to

perfection, and his mustache is _so_ cute!"

To judge by Mrs. Gantry's expression, it was fortunate for her daughter that Genevieve came in upon them. Dolores divined this last from the sudden mellowing of her mother's face. She whirled up out of her chair and around, with a cry of joyous escape: "Oh, Vievie! You're just in time to save me!"

"From what, dear?" asked Genevieve, smilingly permitting herself to be crumpled in an impetuous embrace.

"Mamma was just going to run the steam-roller over me, simply because I said Jimmy's mustache is cute. It _is_ cute, isn't it?"

"Jimmy'?" inquired Genevieve, moving to a chair beside Mrs. Gantry.

"His honorable earlship, then--since mamma is with us."

"You may leave the room," said her mother.

"I may," repeated the girl. She pirouetted up the room and stopped to look at a painting of a desolate tropical coast.

"It's such a dreadful day out, Aunt Amice," said Genevieve. "And you can't be rested from the trip."

"Quite true, my dear," agreed Mrs. Gantry. "But I had to see you--to talk matters over with you. I did not wish to break in on your enjoyment of those delightful English house parties; and crossing over, you know, I was too wretchedly ill to think of anything. Can I never get accustomed to the sea!"

"It's so unfortunate," condoled Genevieve. "I believe I'm a born sailor."

"You proved it, starting off with that globe-trotting Lady Bayrose."

"Poor Lady Bayrose! To think that she--" The girl pressed her hands to her eyes. "The way that frightful breaker whirled the boat loose and over and over!--and the water swarming with sharks!"

"Do not think of it, my dear! Really, you must not think of it!" urged Mrs. Gantry. "Be thankful it happened before the sailors had time to put you in the same boat. Better still, my dear, do not permit yourself to think of it at all. Put all that dreadful experience out of your mind."

"But you do not understand, Aunt Amice. I fear you never will. Except for that--for poor Lady Bayrose--I've told you, I do not wish to forget it."

"My dear!" protested Mrs. Gantry, "cannot you realize how very improper--? That man! What if he should talk?"

"Is there anything to be concealed?" asked Genevieve, with quiet dignity.

"You know how people misconstrue things," insisted her aunt. "That newspaper notoriety was quite sufficiently--It's most fortunate that Lord Avondale is not affected. I must admit, his attitude towards that man puzzles me."

"I can understand it very well," replied Genevieve, firmly.

"You both insist that the fellow is--is not absolutely unspeakable! I should never have thought it of you, Genevieve, nor of such a thorough gentleman as Lord Avondale--gentleman in our sense of the term,--refined, cultured, and clean. Were he one of the gentry who have reasons for leaving England,--who go West and consort with ruffians--remittance men--But no. Lady Chetwynd assured me he has been presented at Court, and you know the strictness of Queen Mary."

"You admit that Lord Avondale is, shall I say--perfect. Yet--"

"He is irreproachable, my dear, except as regards his extraordinary insistence upon an intimate friendship with that man."

"That is what confirms my good opinion of him, Aunt Amice."

"That!"

"It proves he is himself manly and sincere."

Mrs. Gantry raised a plump hand, palm outward. "Between the two of you--"

"We know Mr. Blake--the real man. You do not."

"I never shall. I will not receive him--never. He is impossible!"

"What! never?--the man who saved me from starvation, fever, wild beasts, from all the horrors of that savage coast?--the intimate friend of the Earl of Avondale?"

"Does he paint, Vievie?" called Dolores. "Is this a picture of your Crusoe coast?"

"No, dear. I bought that in New York. But it is very like the place where Tom--"

"Tom!" reproached Mrs. Gantry. She looked around at her daughter.

"Dolores, I presumed you left us when I ordered you."

"Oh, no, not 'ordered,' mamma. You said 'may,' not 'must.'"

"Leave the room!"

The girl sauntered down towards the arched opening into the rear drawing-room. As she passed the others, she paused to pat her cousin's soft brown hair.

"I do believe the sun has burnt it a shade lighter, Vievie," she remarked. "What fun it must have been! When _are_ you going to show me that leopard-skin gown?"

"Leave the room this instant!" commanded Mrs. Gantry.

Dolores crossed her hands on her bosom and crept out with an air of martyred innocence. Her mother turned to Genevieve for sympathy. "That girl! I don't know what ever I shall do with her--absolutely irrepressible! These titled Englishmen are so particular--she is your cousin."

Genevieve colored slightly. "You should know Lord Avondale better. If he is at all interested--"

"He is, most decidedly. He dined with us last evening. Laffie Ashton called; so I succeeded in getting the earl away from Dolores. We had a most satisfying little _tete-a-tete_. I led him into explaining everything."

"Everything?" queried Genevieve.

"Yes, everything, my dear. His aloofness since you reached Aden has been due merely to his high sense of honor,--to an absurd but chivalrous agreement with that fellow to not press his suit until after your arrival home. At Aden he had given the man his word--"

"At Aden?" interrupted Genevieve. "How could that be, when Tom left the ship at Port Mozambique?"

"He didn't. It seems that the fellow was aboard all the time, hiding in the steerage or stoke-hole, or somewhere--no doubt to spy on you and Lord Avondale."

Genevieve averted her head and murmured in a half whisper: "He was aboard all that time, and never came up for a breath of air all those smothering days! I remember Lord James speaking of how hot and vile it was down in the fore-castle. This explains why he went forward so much!"

"It explains why he did not book passage with you from Aden--why he did not hasten to you at Lady Chetwynd's--all because of his chivalrous but mistaken sense of loyalty to that low fellow."

"If you please, Aunt Amice," said Genevieve, in a tone as incisive as it was quiet, "you will remember that I esteem Mr. Blake."

Mrs. Gantry stared over her half-raised lorgnette. She had never

before known her niece to be other than the very pattern of docility.

"Well!" she remarked, and, after a little pause; "Fortunately, that absurd agreement is now at an end. The earl intimated that he would call on you this afternoon. I am sure, my dear--"

Of what the lady was sure was left to conjecture. The footman appeared in the hall entrance and announced: "Mr. Brice-Ashton."

Ashton came in, effusive and eager. "My dear Miss Genevieve! I--ah, Mrs. Gantry! Didn't expect to meet you here, such a day as this. Most unexpected--ah--pleasure! _N'est-ce pas?_--No, no! my dear Miss Leslie; keep your seat!"

Genevieve had seemed about to rise, but he quite deftly drew a chair around and sat down close before her. "I simply couldn't wait any longer. I felt I must call to congratulate you over that marvellous escape. It must have been terrible--terrible!"

Genevieve replied with perceptible coldness: "Thank you, Mr. Ashton. I had not expected a call from you."

"Mr.' Ashton!" he echoed. "Has it come to that?--when we used to make mudpies together! Dolores said that you--"

"Not so fast, Laffie!" called the girl, as she came dancing into the room in her most animated manner. "Don't forget I'm Miss Gantry now."

Ashton continued to address Genevieve, without turning: "I came all the way down from Michamac just to congratulate you--left my bridge!"

"You're too sudden with your congratulations, Laffie," mocked Dolores. "Genevieve hasn't yet decided whether it's to be the hero or the earl."

"Dolores," admonished her mother. "I told you to leave the room."

"Yes, and forgot to tell me to stay out. It's no use now, is it? Unless you wish me to drag out Laffie for a little _tete-a-tete_ in the conservatory."

"Sit down, dear," said Genevieve.

Mrs. Gantry turned to Ashton with a sudden unbending from hauteur. "My dear Lafayette, I observed your manner yesterday towards that--towards Mr. Blake. Am I right in surmising that you know something with regard to his past?"

"About Blake?" replied Ashton, his usually wide and ardent eyes shifting their glance uneasily from his questioner to Genevieve and towards the outer door.

"About my friend Mr. Blake," said Genevieve.

"You call him a friend?--a fellow like that!" Ashton rashly exclaimed.

"He has proved himself a disinterested friend,--which I cannot say of all with whom I am acquainted."

"Oh, of course, if you feel that way."

"My other friends will remember that he saved my life."

"If only he had been a gentleman!" sighed Mrs. Gantry.

"Yes, Vievie," added Dolores. "Next time any one goes to save you, shoo him off unless he first offers his card."

"Mr. Blake is what many a seeming gentleman is not," said Genevieve, her levelled glance fixed upon Ashton. "Tom Blake is a man, a strong, courageous man!"

"We quite agree with you," ventured Ashton. "He is a man of the type one so frequently sees among firemen and the police."

Mrs. Gantry intervened with quick tact: "Mr. Blake is quite an eminent civil engineer, we understand. As a fellow engineer, you have met him, I dare say--have had dealings with him."

"I?--with him? No--that is--" Ashton stammered and shifted about uneasily under Genevieve's level gaze. "It was only when I was acting as Mr. Leslie's secretary. Blake handed me the bridge plans that he afterwards claimed were lost. I tell you, I had nothing to do with them--nothing! I merely received them from him. That was all. I went away the very next day--resigned my position. I don't know what became of his plans,--nothing whatever! I tell you, the Michamac Bridge--"

"Why, Lame!" giggled Dolores. "What makes you squirm so? You're twitching all over. I thought you'd had enough of the simple life at Michamac to recover from the effects of that corner in oats. You haven't started another corner already, have you?"

"No, I have--I mean, yes--just a few cocktails at the club--yes, that's it. So bitter cold, this sleet! You'll understand, Mrs. Gantry --perhaps one too much. Haven't had any since I went back to the bridge last time."

"Then up at Michamac you take it straight?" asked Dolores.

Ashton forced a nervous laugh. "Keep it up, Dodie! You'll make a wit yet." He bent towards Genevieve. "You'll pardon me, won't you, Genevieve?"

The girl raised her fine brows ever so slightly. "'Miss Leslie,' if you please."

"Of course--of course! Just another slip--that last cocktail and the sleet. Wet cold always sends it to my head. That about Blake, too--I oughtn't to 've spoken of it after you said he was your friend. It's, of course, your father's affair."

"Then you need say no more about it," said Genevieve with ironical graciousness. He shifted about in his chair, and she caught him deftly. "Must you be going?--really! Good-day."

He rose uncertainly to his feet, his handsome face flushed, and his full red lower lip twitching.

"I--I had not intended--" he began.

"Good-day!" said Mrs. Gantry with significant emphasis.

"So sorry you must rush off so soon, Laffie," mocked Dolores.

Social training has its value. Ashton pulled himself together, bowed gracefully, and started up the room with easy assurance.

As he neared the doorway, the footman appeared and announced with unction: "The Right Honorable, the Earl of Avondale."

Ashton stopped short, and when the Englishman entered, met him with an effusive greeting: "_ Mon Dieu!_ Such a fortunate chance, your lordship! So glad to meet you again,--and here, of all places! Don't forget to look me up at my clubs."

"Hearts are trumps, Laffie--not clubs," called Dolores, as Lord James passed him by with a vague nod.

CHAPTER X

THE SHADOW OF DOUBT

Before the earl had reached them Mrs. Gantry was rising.

Genevieve rose to protest. "You're not going so soon, Aunt Amice? You'll stay for a cup of tea?"

"Not to-day, my dear. Ah, earl! you're just in time to relieve Genevieve from the ennui of a solitary afternoon. I regret so much that we cannot stay with you. Come, Dolores."

Dolores settled back comfortably on her chair. "Go right on, mamma. Don't wait for me. I'll stay and help Vievie entertain Lord Avondale."

"Come--at once."

"Oh, fudge! Well, start on. I'll catch you."

Mrs. Gantry stepped past Lord James. Genevieve met his eager glance, and hastened to overtake her aunt. "Really, won't you stay, Aunt Amice? I'll have tea brought in at once."

"So sorry, my dear," replied Mrs. Gantry, placidly sailing on towards the reception hall.

Dolores simulated a yawn. "O-o-ho! I'm so tired. Will nobody help me get up?"

With a boyish twinkle in his gray eyes but profound gravity in his manner, Lord James offered her his hand. She placed her fingers in his palm and sprang up beside him. The others were still moving up the room. She surprised him by meeting his amused gaze with an angry flash of her big black eyes.

"Shame!" she flung at him. "You, his friend, and would take her from him!"

He stared blankly. The girl whirled away from him with a swish of silken skirts and fled past her mother, all her anger lost in wild panic.

"Dolores! Whatever can--" cried Mrs. Gantry. But Dolores had vanished. "Really, Genevieve, that madcap girl--! About yourself, my dear. Promise me now, if you cannot say 'yes,' at least you'll not make it a final 'no.'"

"But, Aunt Amice, unless I feel--"

"Promise me! You must give yourself time to make sure. He will wait. I am certain he will wait until you have found out--"

"I cannot promise anything now," replied Genevieve.

Mrs. Gantry did not press the point. It was the second time during the call that her niece had proved herself less docile than she had expected. As she left the room, Genevieve returned to Lord James without any outward sign of hesitancy. She seated herself and smiled composedly at her caller, who still stood in the daze into which Dolores's outburst had thrown him.

"Won't you sit down?" she invited. "How is Mr. Blake?"

[Illustration: "Shame!" she flung at him. "You, his friend, and would take her from him!"]

With rather an abstracted air, Lord James sank down on the chair opposite her and began fiddling with the cord of his monocle.

"Haven't seen him since yesterday," he replied, "Left him at the office of a Mr. Griffith--engineer--old friend. Gave him work immediately--something big, I take it. Asked Tom to bunk with him."

"It's so good to hear he has work already--and to stay with a friend! You mean, live with him?"

"Yes."

"He--the friend--seems desirable?"

"Decidedly so, I should say. Engineer who first started him on his career, if I remember aright what Tom once told me of his early life."

"Oh, that is such good news! But have you seen him since--since this morning? He had that appointment with papa, you know."

"No, I regret to say I haven't; and I fear I cannot reassure you as to the outcome. You know Tom's way; and your father, I take it, is rather--It would seem that they had a disagreement before Tom went West the last time."

"Yes. He once referred to it. Some misunderstanding with regard to the payment of a railway survey. I asked papa about it last evening, and he told me that it had been made all right--that Tom would get his pay for his share in the survey."

"Little enough, in the circumstances," remarked Lord James.

"That was not all. Papa promised to give him a very good position. He had intended to offer money. But I explained to him that, of course, Tom would not accept money."

"Very true. I doubt if he would have accepted it even had it not been for his hope that--" Lord James paused and stared glumly at his finger-tips. "Bally mess, deuce take it! He and your father at outs, and he and I--"

"You have not quarrelled? You're still friends?" exclaimed Genevieve.

"Quarrelled? No, I assure you, no! Yet am I his friend? Permit me to be candid, Miss Leslie. I'm in a deuce of a quandary. On the trip up to Aden, you'll remember, I told you something of the way he and I had knocked about together."

"Yes. Frankly, it added not a little to my esteem for you that you had learned to value his sterling worth."

"I did not tell you how it started. It was in the Kootenay country--British Columbia, you know. Bunch of sharpers set about to rook me on a frame-up--a bunco game. Tom tipped me off, though I had snubbed him, like the egregious ass I was. I paid no heed; blundered into the trap. Wouldn't have minded losing the thousand pounds they wanted, but they

brought a woman into the affair--made it appear as if I were a cad--or worse."

"Surely not that, Lord James. No one could believe that of you."

"You don't know the beastly cleverness of those bunco chaps. They had me in a nasty hole, when Tom stepped in and showed them up. Seems he knew more about the woman and two of the men than they cared to have published. They decamped."

"That was so like Tom!" murmured Genevieve.

"Claimed he did it because of an old grudge against the parties. Had to force my thanks on him. Told you how we'd chummed together since. Deuce take it! why should it have been you on that steamer--with him?"

"Why?" echoed Genevieve, gazing down at her clasped hands, which still showed a trace of tropical tan.

"You know it--it puts me in rather a nasty box," went on Lord James.

"Had I not met you before he did, it is possible that I could have avoided--You see my predicament. He and I've been together so much, I can foresee the effect on him of--er--of a great disappointment."

Genevieve gazed up at him with startled eyes. "Lord James, you must explain that; you must be explicit."

"I--I did not intend to so much as mention it," stammered the young Englishman, bitterly chagrined at himself. "It was only--pray, do not ask me, Miss Leslie!"

"You referred, of course, to his drinking," said Genevieve, in a tone as tense as it was quiet. "Do not reproach yourself. When we were cast ashore together, he was--not himself. But when I remember all those weeks that followed--! You cannot imagine how brave and resolute, how truly courageous he was!--and under that outward roughness, how kind and gentle!"

"I too know him. That's what makes it so hard. The thought that I may possibly cause him a disappointment that may result in--" Lord James came to a stop, tugging at his mustache.

Genevieve was again staring at the slender little hands, from which the most expert manicuring had not yet entirely removed all traces of rough usage.

"He told me something of--of what he had to fight," she murmured in a troubled voice. "But I feel that--that if something came into his life--" She blushed, but went on bravely--"something to take him out of what he calls the grind--"

Lord James had instantly averted his gaze from her crimsoning face.

"That's the worst of it!" he burst out. "If only I could feel sure that he--I've seen him fight--Gad! how he has fought--time and again. Yet sooner or later, always the inevitable defeat!"

"I cannot believe it! I cannot!" insisted Genevieve. "With his strength, his courage! It's only been the circumstances; that he has had nobody to--I--I beg your pardon! Of course you--What I mean is somebody who--" She buried her face in her hands, blushing more vividly than before.

The Englishman's face lightened. "Then you've not let my deplorable blunder alter your attitude towards him?"

"Not in the slightest."

He leaned forward. "Then--I can wait no longer! You must know how greatly I--All those days coming up to Aden I could say nothing. Before coming aboard, he had told me why he could not permit you to--to commit yourself irrevocably."

He paused. Genevieve bent over lower. She did not speak.

He went on steadily: "It was then I realized fully his innate fineness. I own it astonished me, well as I thought I knew him. With his brains, his 'grit,' and _that_, I'd say he could become anything he wished--were it not for his--for the one weakness."

Genevieve flung up her head, to gaze at him in indignant protest. "Weakness! How can you say that? He is so strong--so strong!"

"In all else than that," insisted Lord James. "You must face the hard fact. Gad! this is far worse than I thought it would be. But I knew you before he did, and I've played fair with him. It was not easy to say nothing those days before we reached Aden, or to stay away from you after I reached home. Even he could not have found it so hard. He has all that stubborn power of endurance; while I--"

"You have no cause to reproach yourself. I cannot say how greatly it pleased me that you took him to Ruthby Castle."

"Could you but have been there, too! He and the pater hit it off out of hand. Jolly sensible chap, the pater--quiet, bookish--long head."

"He must be!"

"Not strange about Tom, though. It's odd how his bigness makes itself felt--to those who've any sense of judgment. And yet it's not so odd, when you come to think. My word! if only it were not for his--Forgive me, Miss Genevieve! I've the right to consider what it might mean to you. It gives me the right to speak for myself. He himself insisted that, in justice to you, I should not withdraw."

"Lord James!"

"Pray, do not misunderstand, Miss Genevieve. He knew what it meant to me. But our first thought was for you. He wished you to have the full contrast of your own proper environment, that you might regain your perspective--the point of view natural to one of your position."

"He could think I'd go back to the shams and conventions, after those weeks of _real_ life!"

"Sometimes life is a bit too real in the most conventional of surroundings," said his lordship, with a rueful smile. "No. He saw that you had no right to commit yourself then; that you should reconsider matters in the environment in which you belong and for which he is not now fitted--whatever may be the outcome of his efforts to make himself fit."

"He will succeed!"

"He may succeed. I should not have the slightest hesitancy in saying that success would be certain, were it not for that one flaw. It's not to be held against him--an inherited weakness."

"Do you not believe we can overcome heredity?"

"In some cases, I daresay. But with him--You must bear in mind I've seen the futility of his struggle. All his resolution and courage and endurance seem to count for nothing. But it's too painful! Can't we leave him out of this? You are aware that I missed my opportunity when Lady Bayrose changed her plans and rushed you off on the other ship. After that you may imagine how difficult I found it to say nothing, do nothing, coming up to Aden."

"Please, please say no more!" begged Genevieve, her eyes bright with tears of distress. "I regard you too highly. You have my utmost esteem, my respect and friendship, my--you see he has taught me to be sincere--you have my affection. Dear friend, I shall be perfectly candid. I was a silly girl. I had never sensed the realities of life. I had a young girl's covetousness of a coronet--of a title. Yet that was not all. I felt a warm regard for you. Had you spoken before I met him, before I learned to know him--"

"Before you knew him? Then you still--? The contrast of civilization--of your own environment--has made no difference?"

"I do not say that. Yet it is not in the manner you suppose." She looked away, with a piteous attempt to smile. "It's strange how much pain can be caused by the slightest shadow of a doubt."

"Miss Genevieve! I--I shall never be able to forgive myself! For me to have said a word--it was despicable!"

"No, do not say it. Can you think me capable of misunderstanding? Dear friend, I esteem you all the more for what I know it must have cost

you. But no; what I spoke of was something that was already in my own mind."

"Ah--then you, too--Miss Genevieve, it's been so good of you. Let me beg that you do not consider this as final."

"But I can promise you nothing. It would not be right to you."

"I ask only that you do not consider this final. You have admitted a shadow of a doubt. With your permission, I propose to wait until you have solved that doubt. You have given me cause to hope that, were it not for him--"

"It is not right for me to give you the slightest hope."

"But I take it. Meantime, no more annoyance to you. We'll be jolly good friends, no more. You take me?"

"I'll ring for tea. You deserve it."

"No objections, I assure you. I'll serve as stopgap till Tom turns up."

Genevieve rose quickly, her color deepening. "He is coming?--this afternoon!"

"I should not have been surprised had I found him here. And now--" He glanced at his watch. "It's already half after four."

"Oh, and papa said he'd be home early to-day!--though his custom is to come barely in time to dress for dinner."

"Hope Tom hit it off with him this morning--but--" Lord James shook his head dubiously--"I fear he was not in a conciliatory mood."

CHAPTER XI

REBELLION

Genevieve rang for tea, and changed the conversation to impersonal topics. A footman brought in a Russian samovar and a service of eggshell china. They sipped their tea and chatted lightly about English acquaintances, but with frequent glances towards the hall entrance. Each was wondering which one would be first to come, Blake or Mr. Leslie.

The conversation had languished to a mere pretext when Blake was announced. The engineer entered slowly, his face red and moist from the fierce drive of the sleet off the lake. He had come afoot.

Genevieve placed a trembling hand on the cover of her samovar, and called to him gayly: "Hurry here at once and have a good hot cup of tea. You must be frozen."

Blake came to them across the waxed floor with an ease and assurance of step in part due to his visit to Ruthby Castle and in part to his walk over the sleet-coated pavements.

"No tea for me, Miss Jenny," he replied with cheerful heartiness. "Thanks, just the same. But I'm warm as toast--look it, too, eh?"

"Then take it to cool you off," suggested Lord James. "That's the Russian plan. When you're cold, hot tea to warm you; when you're hot, hot tea to cool you."

"Not when water tastes good to me," replied Blake with a significance that did not escape his friend. "Well, Jimmy, so you beat me to it."

"Waited till after three," said Lord James.

"Thought you'd hang back to give me the start? Went you one better, eh?" replied Blake. He stared fixedly into the handsome high-bred face of his friend and then at Genevieve's down-bent head. "Well? What's the good word? Is it--congratulations?"

"Not this time, old man," answered the Englishman lightly. He rose. "Take my seat. Must be going."

Blake's eyes glowed. "You're the gamest ever, Jimmy boy."

"Don't crow till you're out of the woods," laughed his friend. "Can't wish you success, y'know. But it's to continue the same between us as it has been, if you're willing."

"That's like you, Jimmy!"

"To be sure. But I really must be going. Good-day, Miss Genevieve."

The girl looked up without attempting to conceal her affection and sympathy for him.

"Dear friend," she said, "before you go, I wish to tell you how highly I value and appreciate--"

"No more, no more, I beg of you," he protested, with genial insistence. "Tom, I'll be dropping in on you at your office."

He bowed to Genevieve, and still cloaking his hurt with a cheerful smile, started to leave them. At the same moment Mr. Leslie came hurrying into the room. The sight of Lord James brought him to a stand.

"H'm!" he coughed. "So it's you, Lord Avondale? Hodges said--" His keen eyes glanced past the Englishman to the big form across the corner of the table from Genevieve. "What! Right, was he?--Genevieve."

"Yes, papa?" replied the girl, looking at Blake with a startled gaze. She was very pale, but her delicately curved lips straightened with quiet determination. She did not rise.

"Er--glad to meet you again so soon, Mr. Leslie," said Lord James, deftly placing himself so that the other could not avoid his proffered hand without marked discourtesy. Mr. Leslie held out his flaccid fingers. They were caught fast and retained during a cordial and prolonged handshake.

"When we first met," went on his lordship suavely, "time was lacking for me to congratulate you on the fact that your daughter came through her terrible experience so well. She has assured me that she feels all the better for it. Only one, like myself, accustomed to knocking about the tropics, can fully realize the extraordinary resourcefulness and courage of the man who had the good fortune to bring her through it all safely and, as she says, bettered."

"Yes, yes, we all know that, and admit it," replied the captive, attempting to free his hand.

Lord James gave it a final wring. "To be sure! You, of all men, will bear in mind what he accomplished. Yet I must insist that my own appreciation is no less keen. It is the greatest satisfaction to me that I am privileged to call Thomas Blake my friend."

"Your friend has put me under obligations," answered Mr. Leslie. "I have acknowledged to him that I owe him a heavy debt for what he has done. I stand ready to pay him for his services, whenever he is ready to accept payment."

"Ah, indeed," murmured Lord James. "'Pon my word, now, that's what I call deuced generous."

"No; that's not the question at all. It's merely a matter of a business settlement for services rendered," replied Mr. Leslie.

"Yet one does not--er--value gratitude in pounds and dollars, y' know."

"No, no, of course you do not, papa!" exclaimed Genevieve. "Please remember--please try to consider--"

She would better have remained silent. Her evident concern alarmed her father to the point of exasperation.

"I am considering how this friend of Lord Avondale's bore himself towards me, in my office, this morning," he interrupted her. He turned again to Lord James. "I should not need to tell you, sir, that the

manner of expressing gratitude depends altogether on the circumstances. We are now, however, considering another matter. You were about to leave--You will always be welcome to my house, Lord Avondale, and so will be your friends, _when they come and go with you._"

"Father!" protested Genevieve, rising to face him.

"My mistake, Miss Jenny," said Blake, coolly drawing himself up beside her. "I thought it was _your_ house."

He swung about to Mr. Leslie, and said, with unexpected mildness: "Don't worry; I'm going. We don't want to fuss here, do we?--to make it any harder for her. But first, there's one thing. You're her father--I want to say I'm sorry I cut loose this morning."

"What! you apologize?"

"As to what I said about my bridge plans--yes. If you had left out about--If you hadn't rubbed it in so hard about me and--You know what I mean. It made me red-hot. I couldn't help cutting loose. But, just the same, I oughtn't to've said that about the plans, because--well, because, you see, I don't believe it."

"You don't? Then why--?"

"I did believe it before. I believed it this morning, when I was mad. But I've had time to cool off and think it over. Queer thing--all the evidence and probabilities are there, just the same; but somehow I can't believe it of you any longer--simply can't. You're her father."

"H'm--this puts a different face on the matter," admitted Mr. Leslie. "I begin to think that I may have been rather too hasty. Had you been more conciliatory, less--h'm--positive, I'm inclined to believe that we--"

"I don't care what _you_ believe," was Blake's brusque rejoinder. "I'm not trying to curry favor with you. Understand? Come on, Jimmy."

But Genevieve was at his elbow, between him and the door.

"You are not going now, Tom," she said.

"Genevieve," reproved her father. "This is most unlike you."

"Unlike my former frivolous, pampered self!" cried the girl. "I'm no longer a silly debutante, papa. I've lived the grim hard realities of life--there on that dreadful coast--with him. I'm a woman."

"You child! You're not even twenty-one."

"I am old--older than the centuries, papa--old enough to know my own mind." She turned to Blake. "You were right, Tom. This is my home--"

legally mine. You are welcome to stay."

"Mr. Leslie!" interposed Lord James, before her father could reply.

"One moment, if you please. I have told you that Mr. Blake and I are friends. More than that, we are intimate friends--chums. I wish to impress on you the very high esteem in which I hold him, the more than admiration--"

"Chuck it, Jimmy," put in Blake.

Lord James concluded in a tone of polite frigidity. "And since you place conditions on his welcome to your house, permit me to remark that I prefer his acquaintance to yours." He bowed with utmost formality.

"H'm!" rasped Mr. Leslie. "You should understand, sir. Had you not interrupted me--" He abruptly faced Blake. "You, at least, will understand my position--that I have some reason--It is not that I wish to appear discourteous, even after this morning. You've apologized; I cannot ask you to go--I do not ask you to go. Yet--"

"If you please, papa," said Genevieve with entrancing sweetness.

"Well?"

"Isn't it time for you to dress?"

"No--came home early," replied Mr. Leslie, jerking out his watch. He searched his daughter's face with an apprehensive glance, and again addressed Blake. "Too early. There's time for a run out to George Ashton's. Want to see him on a matter of business. Valuable acquaintance for you to make. Jump into the runabout with me, and I'll introduce you to him."

"Thanks," said Blake dryly. "Not to-day."

"Mr. Blake has just come, papa," said Genevieve. "You would not deprive us of the pleasure of a little visit."

"H'm. By cutting it close, I can wait a few minutes."

"You need not trouble to wait, papa. You can introduce him to Mr. Ashton some other time."

"May I offer myself as a substitute?" put in Lord James. "Mrs. Gantry has told me so much about the elder Mr. Ashton. Quite curious to meet him."

Blandly taking Mr. Leslie's assent as a matter of course, he started toward the door. "Good-day, Miss Leslie. Ah--do we go out this way? Can't tell you how I value the opportunity. Very good of you, very!"

"Wait," said Mr. Leslie. "Genevieve, haven't you an engagement out,

this afternoon?"

"If I had a dozen, papa, I should not deprive Mr. Blake of his call."

"Mr. Blake is welcome to his call. But--since you force me to say it-- I must expressly tell you, it is my wish that you should not see him alone."

"I'm very sorry, papa, that you should forbid me," said Genevieve with a quiet tensy that should have forewarned him.

"Sorry?"

"Yes, papa, because, if you insist, I shall have to disobey you."

"You will?"

He stared at her, astounded, and she sustained his gaze with a steadiness that he perceived could not be shaken.

Lord James again interposed. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Leslie, if I may seem to interfere. But as he is my friend, I, too, request you--"

"You?" exclaimed Mr. Leslie, with fresh astonishment. "You also side with him?--when my sister-in-law tells me--"

"That is all by-the-bye, I assure you, sir. The least I can do for the man who saved her life is to play fair. Permit me to say that you can do no less."

Mr. Leslie looked at Genevieve with a troubled frown.

"At least, my dear, I hope you'll remember who you are," he said.

She made no reply, but stood white-faced and resolute until he went from the room. Lord James followed close after him.

Blake and Genevieve were left alone.

CHAPTER XII

THE DEEPENING OF DOUBT

Blake stood as motionless as a carved figure, his eyes glowing upon the girl, blue and radiant with tenderness and compassion and profound love.

The clang of a heavy door told her that her father had left the house. On the instant all her firmness left her. She hid her face in her

hands and sank into the nearest chair, quivering and weeping, in silent anguish.

Blake came near and stood over her. He spoke to her in a voice that was deep and low and very soft: "There, there, little girl, don't you mind! Just cry it out. It'll do you good. You know I understand. Have a good cry!"

The sympathetic urging to give way freely to her weeping almost immediately soothed her grief and checked the flow of tears. She rose uncertainly, dabbing at her eyes.

"I--I couldn't help it, Tom. It's the fi-first time papa's ever been so cross with me!"

"My fault, I guess. Rubbed his fur the wrong way this morning pretty hard. But don't you fret, girlie. It'll be all right. Only we mustn't blame him. Think of what it means to him. You're all he has, and if he thinks you're--if he thinks he's going to lose you--"

"But it was so cruel!--so unjust!--the way he treated you!"

"Oh, that's all right, little woman. I don't mind that. We'll all forget it by to-morrow. He didn't mean half he said. It was just the thought that I--that somebody might take you away from him. Jenny!" His eyes glowed upon her blue as sapphires. "You're home now."

He held his arms open for her to come to him. She swayed forward as if to give herself into the clasp of those strong arms, but instantly checked the movement and shrank back a little way.

"Wait, Tom," she murmured hesitatingly. "We must first--"

"Wait longer, Jenny?" he exclaimed, his deep voice vibrant with the intensity of his feeling. "No, I must say it! I've waited all these weeks--good Lord!--when maybe you've thought it was because I didn't want to--to do as you asked!"

"It's not that, Tom, truly it's not that. I was hurt and--shamed. But even then I divined why you had done it and realized the nobility of your motive."

"Nobility? That's a good joke! You know I was only trying to do the square thing. Any man would have done the same."

"Any man would. I'm not so certain as to some who call themselves gentlemen."

"There're some who're real gentlemen--worse luck to me--Jimmy, for one. I can never catch up with him in that line, girlie, but I can make a stagger at it."

"You can become anything you will, Tom," she said with calm

conviction.

"Maybe," he replied. "But, Jenny, I can't wait for that. Wish I could. I'm still only--what you know. Same time, you're back home now, and you've been visiting with your titled friends. Also you've seen how your father looks at it, and how--"

"What does all that amount to--even papa's anger? If only that were all!"

"Jenny! then you still--?" His voice quivered with passion. "My little girl!--how I love you! God I how I love you! I never thought much of girls, but I loved you the first time I ever set eyes on you, there in the Transvaal. That's why I threw up the management of the mine. I knew who your father was; I knew I hadn't a ghost of a show. But I followed you to Cape Town--couldn't help it!"

"You--you old silly!" she murmured, half frightened by the greatness of his passion. "You should have known I was only a shallow society girl!"

"Shallow?--you? You're deep as blue water!"

"The ocean is fickle."

"You're not; you're true! You've lived! I've seen you face with a smile what many a man would have run from."

"Because with me was one who would have died sooner than that harm should come to me! Those weeks, those wonderful weeks that we lived, so close to primitive, savage Nature--bloody fanged Nature!--those weeks that I stood by your side and saw her paint for us her beautiful, terrible pictures of Life, pictures whose blue was the storm-wave and the sky veiled with fever-haze, whose white was the roaring surf and the glare of thunderbolts, whose red was fire and blood! And you saved me from all--all! I had never even dreamt that a man could be so courageous, so enduring, so strong!"

His face clouded, and he gave back before her radiant look.

"Strong?" he muttered. "That's the question. Am I?"

"Of course you are! I'm sure you are. You must be. It was that which compelled my--which made me--" She paused, and a swift blush swept over her face from forehead to throat--"made me propose to you, there on the cliff, when the steamer came."

"That a lady should have loved me like that!" he murmured. "I still can't believe it was true! My little girl, it's not possible--not possible!"

"You say 'loved,'" she whispered. Her eyelids fluttered and drooped before his ardent gaze; her scarlet face bent downward; she held out

her hands to him in timid surrender.

He caught them between his big palms, but not to draw her to him. A jagged mark on her round wrist caught his eye. It was the scar of a vicious thorn. The last time he had seen it was on the cliff top,-- that other time when she put out her arms to him. He bent over and kissed the red scar.

"Jenny," he replied in bitter self-reproach, "here's another time I've proved I'm not in your class--not a gentleman. You've raised a point--the real point. Am I what you think me? You think I'm at least a man. Am I?"

She looked up at him, her face suddenly gone white again. "Tom! You don't mean--?"

"About my being strong. All that you've seen so far are my leading suits. There's that other to be reckoned with yet. I told your father I hadn't touched a drop since the wreck. But you know how it was before."

"Yes, dear, but that was before!"

"I know. Things are different now. I've something at stake that'll help me fight. You can't guess, though, how that craving--Lucky I'll have Jimmy, as well, to back me up. He's great when it comes to jollying a fellow over the bumps. He'll help."

"It's little enough, after all you've done for him! He told me."

"Just like him. But let's not get sidetracked. What I wanted to make clear is that I'm not so everlastingly strong as you seem to think."

"Tom, you'll not give way! You'll fight!"

"Yes, I'll fight," he responded soberly.

"And you'll win!"

"I hope so, girlie. I've fought it before, and it has downed me, time and again. But now it's different--unless you've found you were mistaken. But if you still feel as when you--as you did there on the cliff that morning--Good God! how could I lose out, with you backing me up?"

She looked at him with a quick recurrence of doubt. "You ask help of me?"

"If you care enough, Jenny. It's not going to be a joke. I've tried before, and gone under so many times that some people would say I've no show left. But let me tell you, girlie, I'm going to fight this time for all I'm worth. I'm going to break this curse if I can. It is a curse, you'll remember. I told you about my mother."

"You should not think of that. What does heredity count as against environment!"

"Environment?--heredity? By all accounts, my father was the man you've thought me, and a lot more--railroad engineer; nerviest man ever ran an engine out of Chicago on the Pennsylvania Line; American stock from way back--Scotch-Irish; sober as a church, steady, strong as a bull. Never an accident all the years he pulled the fast express till the one that smashed him. Could have jumped and saved himself--stayed by his throttle, and saved the train. They brought him home--what was left of him. Papers headlined him; you know how they do it. That was my father."

"Oh, Tom! and with such a father!"

"Wait a minute. You spoke of heredity and environment. I'm giving you all sides, except anything more about my mother. Her father was a cranky inventor ... Well, inside six months we were living in a tenement. I was a little shaver of six. The younger of my sisters was a baby. Talk about environment! Wasn't many years before I was known as the toughest kid in Rat Alley."

"Don't dwell on that, Tom. Don't even speak of it," begged Genevieve.

He shook his head. "I want you to know just what I've been. It's your right to know. I wasn't one of the nasty kind and I wasn't a sneak. But I was the leader of my gang. Maybe you know what that means. Of course the police got it in for me. Finally they made it so hot I had to get out of Chicago. I took to the road--became a bum."

"Not that!--surely not that!"

"Well, no, only a kid hobo. But I'd have slid on down if I hadn't dropped into a camp of surveyors who were heading off into the mountains and had need of another man. Griffith, the engineer in charge, talked me into joining the party as axman. I took a fancy to him. He proved himself the first real friend I'd ever had--or was to have till I met Jimmy Scarbridge."

"A man's worth is measured by the friends he makes," she observed.

"Not always. Well, Griffith got me interested. I joined the party. _Whew!_--seven months in the mountains, and not a saloon within fifty miles any of the time. But I stuck it out. Nobody ever called me a quitter."

"And now, Tom, you'll not quit! You'll win!"

"I'll try--for you, girlie! You can't guess how that braces me--the thought that it's for you! You see, I'm beginning to count on things now. I'm not even afraid of your money now. Good old Grif--Griffith, you know--has given me a shy at a peach of a proposition--toughest

problem I was ever up against. It's a big irrigation dam that has feazed half a dozen good engineers."

"But you'll solve the problem! You can do anything!"

"I'm not so sure, Jenny. I've only begun to dig into the field books. Even if I do make a go of it in the end, chances are I'll have to work like--like blazes to get there. But that'll help me on this other fight--help choke down the craving when it comes. A whole lot turns on that dam. If I make good on it, I'm made myself. Tack up my ad. as consulting engineer, and I'll have all the work I want. Won't be ashamed to look your three millions in the face."

"My money! Can you still believe that counts with me? Money! It is what we are ourselves that counts. If you acquired all the money in the world, yes, and all the fame, but failed to master yourself, you'd not be the man I thought you--the man whom I--whom I said I loved."

"Jenny! Then it's gone--you no longer care?"

"You have no right to ask anything of me until you've--"

"I'm not, Jenny! Don't think it for a moment. I'm not asking anything now. I wanted to wait. It's only that I want you to know how I love you. I wouldn't dream of asking you to--to marry me now--no, not till I've won out, made good. Understand? All I want is for you to wait for me till I've made my name as an A-1 engineer and until I've downed that cursed craving for drink."

"You will, Tom--you _must!_"

"With you to back me, little woman! Yes, I guess I can make it this time, with you waiting for me!"

Genevieve met his smile and enthused gaze with a look of firm decision. Her doubt and hesitancy had at last crystallized into a set purpose. She replied in a tone that rang with a hardness new to him: "No. It must be more than that."

"More?" he asked, surprised.

"More, much more. That morning, after I so shamelessly forced you to listen to me, nothing could have altered my purpose had you come aboard the steamer with me."

"But I couldn't then. 'T wouldn't have been fair to you."

"Yet it might have been wise. Who knows? At the least, the question would have been settled 'for better or for worse.' It is easier to face the trouble which one cannot escape than deliberately to make choice of entering into the state that may or may not bring about the dreaded misfortune. Had you married me then, Tom, I would surely have been happy for a time. But now--you have made me believe that you were

right."

Blake drew back from her, his head downbent in sudden despondency. "So you've found out you don't feel the same?"

Her eyes dimmed with tears of compassion for him, but her voice was as firm as before. "I loved Tom Blake because he was so manly, so strong! I still love that Tom Blake. You are not sure that you are strong."

"But if I knew I had your love back of me, Jenny!"

"That's it--you wish to lean on me! It's weak; it's not like you. You won my love by your courage, your resolution, your strength! All my love for you is based on your strength. If that fails--if you prove weak--how am I to tell whether my love will endure?"

"I'll win out. I know I can win out if I have you to fight for."

"If you have me to lean on! No; you must prove yourself stronger than that. I had no doubts then. I urged you to marry me--flung myself at you. But now, after what I've been forced to realize since then--"

She stopped short, leaving him to infer the rest. He took it at the worst. He replied despairingly yet without a trace of bitterness:

"Yes, you'd better take Jimmy. He's your kind."

"Tom! How can you? I've a great esteem for Lord James, I like him very much, but--"

"He's the right sort. You could count on being happy with him," stated Blake, in seeming resignation. She looked at him, puzzled and hurt by his calmness. The look fired him to a passionate outburst. "Don't you think it, though! He's not going to have you! I can't give you up! I'm going to win you. My God! I love you so much I'd try to win you--I'd have to win you, even if I thought you'd be unhappy!"

Her voice softened with responsive tenderness. "Oh, Tom, if only I knew we would have--would have and keep that great love that covers all things! I'd rather be miserable with you than happy without you!"

"Jenny! you do love me!" he cried, advancing with outstretched arms.

She drew back from him. "Not now--not now, Tom!"

He smiled, only slightly dashed. "Not now, but when I've made good. You'll wait for me! I can count on that!"

"No," she answered with utmost firmness.

"Jenny!"

"I'll make no promise--not even a conditional one. You must make this fight without leaning on any one. I must know whether you are

strong, whether you are the real Tom Blake I love."

"But I'm not asking anything--only in case I make good."

"No; I'll not bind myself in any way. I'll not promise to marry you even if you should win. It was you who made me wait, and now I shall make sure. Unless I feel certain that we would be bound together for all time by the deepest, truest love, I know it would be a mistake. If I were certain, right now, that you lack the strength to conquer yourself for the sake of your own manhood, I would accept Lord James."

Whether or not the girl was capable of such an act, there could be no doubt that she meant what she said, and her tone carried conviction to Blake. He was silent for a long moment. When he replied, it was in a voice dull and heavy with despondency. "You don't realize what you're putting me up against."

"I realize that you must clear away all my doubt of your strength," she rejoined, with no lessening of her firmness. "You were strong there on that savage coast, in the primitive. But you must prove yourself strong enough to rise out of the primitive--to rise to your true, your higher self."

He bent as if he were being crushed under a ponderous weight. His voice dulled to a half articulate murmur. "You--won't--help--me?"

"I cannot--I dare not!" she insisted almost fiercely. "If I did I should doubt. This dreadful fear! You must prove you're strong! You must master yourself for the sake of your own manhood!"

At last he was forced to realize that it was necessity, not desire, that impelled her to thrust him from her. He must fight his hard battle alone--he must fight without even the thought that he had her sympathy.

He should have divined that she would be secretly hoping, perhaps praying for him, striving for him in spirit with all the might of her true love. But by her insistence she had at last compelled him to doubt her love.

He thought of the many times that he had gone down in disgraceful defeat, and black despair fell upon him. His broad shoulders stooped yet more.

"What's the use?" he muttered thickly.

But the question itself served as the goad to quicken all his immense reserve of endurance. He looked up at Genevieve, heavy-eyed but grim with determination.

"You don't know what you've put me up against," he said. "But I'll not lay down yet. Nobody ever called me a quitter. You've a right to ask me to make good. I'll make a stagger at it. Good-bye!"

He turned from her and walked up the room with the steady deliberation of one who bears a heavy burden.

It was almost more than she could endure. She started to dart after him, and her lips parted to utter an entreaty for him to come back to her. But her spirit had been tempered in that fierce struggle for life on the savage coast of Mozambique.

She checked herself, and waited until, without a backward glance, he had passed out through the curtained doorway. Then, and not until then, she sank down in her chair and gave way to the anguish of her love and doubt and dread.

CHAPTER XIII

PLANS AND OTHER PLANS

A quarter after nine the next morning found Griffith at the door of Mr. Leslie's sanctum. He stuffed his gauntlet gloves into a pocket of his old fur coat, and entered the office, his worn, dark eyes vague with habitual abstraction.

Mr. Leslie was in the midst of his phonographic dictation. He abruptly stopped the machine and whirled about in his swivel-chair to face the engineer.

"Sit down," he said. "How's the Zariba Dam?"

"No progress," answered Griffith with terse precision. He sat down with an air of complete absorption in the act, drew out an old knife and his pipe, and observed: "You didn't send for me for that."

"How's the bridge?"

"Same," croaked the engineer, beginning to scrape out the bowl of his pipe with the one unbroken blade of his knife.

"That young fool still running around town?"

"Can't say. It'd be a good thing to have him do it all the time if work was going on. Had a letter from McGraw, that man I put in as general foreman. He says everything is frozen up tight; may keep so for two weeks or more."

"You've laid off most the force?"

"No, not even the Slovaks."

Mr. Leslie frowned. "Two or three weeks at full pay, and no work? That's an item."

"Hard enough to hold together a competent force on such winter work as that," rejoined Griffith. "Almost impossible with your kid-glove Resident Engineer. I've said nothing all this time; but he's made some of my best men quit--bridge workers that've stayed by me for years. Said they couldn't stand for his damned swell-headedness, not even to oblige me."

"Well, well, I leave it to you. Do the best you can. It's a bad bargain, but we've got to go through with it. Only time the young fool ever showed a glimmer of sense was when he had his father's lawyers draw his contract with me. My lawyers can't find a flaw in it."

"Not even diamond cut diamond, eh?" cackled Griffith. He ceased scraping at his pipe to peer inquisitively into the bowl. "What I've never been able to figure out is how he happened to solve the problem of that central span. Don't think you've ever realized what a wonderful piece of work that was. It's something new. Must have been a happy accident--must have come to him in what I'd call a flash of intuition or genius. He sure hadn't it in him to work such a thing out in cold blood."

"Genius?--_pah!_" scoffed Mr. Leslie.

"Hey?" queried Griffith, glancing up sharply. "What else, then?"

"I've recently been given reason to suspect--" began Mr. Leslie. He paused, hesitated, and refrained. "But we'll talk of that later. First, my reason for sending for you. I understand that you know this man Blake, who, unfortunately, was the person that saved my daughter."

Griffith replied with rather more than his usual dryness. "If I've got a correct estimate of what Miss Leslie had to be pulled through, it's lucky that Tom Blake was the man."

"You've a higher opinion of him than I have."

"We've worked together."

"He's in your office now," snapped Mr. Leslie.

"Yes, and he stays there long as he wants," rejoined Griffith in a quiet matter-of-fact tone. "It's your privilege to hire another consulting engineer."

Mr. Leslie brought his shaggy eyebrows together in a perplexed frown. "Must say, I can't understand how the fellow makes such friends. Your case is hardly less puzzling than that of the Earl of Avondale."

"Hey? Oh, you mean young Scarbridge. He seems to be one of the right sort--even if he _is_ the son of a duke. But if Tommy hadn't

introduced him as a friend--"

"We're talking about Blake," interrupted Mr. Leslie. "I want your help."

"Well?" asked Griffith warily.

"He has put me under obligations, and refuses to accept any reward from me. It's intolerable!"

"Won't accept anything, eh? Well, if he says he won't, he won't. No use butting your head against a concrete wall."

"He's a fool!"

"I'd hardly agree as to that. He doesn't always do as people expect him to. Same time, he usually has a reason."

"But for him to refuse to take either cash or a position!"

"I notice, though, he drew his pay-check for the Q. T. survey. No; Tommy isn't altogether a fool--not altogether."

"Twenty-five-thousand-dollar position!" rasped Mr. Leslie.

"Hey?"

"Offered him that, and--"

"You offered him--?" echoed Griffith, his lean, creased face almost grotesque with astonishment.

"Think I don't value my daughter's life?" snapped Mr. Leslie. "I was ready to do that and far more for him. He refused--not only refused but insulted me."

Griffith peered intently into the angry face of his employer.

"Insulted you, eh? Guess you prodded him up first."

"I admit I had rather misjudged him in some respects."

"So you gave him the gaff, eh?--and got it back harder!" cackled Griffith.

"He shall be compelled to accept what I owe him, indirectly, if not directly. You have given him work?"

"Yes."

"You've, of course, told him that I'm the Coville Construction Company."

"Not yet."

"What! You're certain of that?"

Griffith nodded. "He sailed into me, first thing, for taking work from you. To ease him off, I said the Coville Company had taken over the bridge from you. The matter hasn't happened to come up again since."

"You're certain he doesn't know I'm interested in the company?"

"Not unless somebody else has told him." "Then--let's see--We'll appoint him Assistant Resident Engineer on the bridge."

"He'll not take it under young Ashton."

"Not if his salary is put at twenty-five thousand?"

"As Assistant Engineer?" said Griffith, incredulous.

"You'll be too busy with my other projects to keep up these visits to Michamac. Besides, you said the bridge is coming to the crucial point of construction."

"That central span," confirmed Griffith.

"If you consider Blake sufficiently reliable, you can give him detailed instructions and send him up to take charge."

"How about Ashton's contract?"

"He'll be satisfied with the glory. Reports will continue to name him as Resident Engineer. If he won't listen to reason, I'll ask his father to drop him a line. The young fool has had his allowance cut twice already. He'd consider his pay as engineer a bare pittance."

"Heir to the Ashton millions, eh?" croaked Griffith.

"If I know George Ashton, he has a good safe will drawn, providing that his fortune is to be held in trust. That fool boy won't have any chance to squander more than his allowance,--and he won't keep me now from paying off this obligation to Blake."

"Perhaps not. I'm not so sure, though, that Tom will--One thing's certain. He won't go up to Michamac right away."

"He won't? Why not? It's just the time for him to get the run of things, now while there's no work going on."

"He'd catch on quick enough. It's not that. Fact is, he's got hold of something a lot bigger, and I know he'll not quit till he has either won out or it has downed him. Never knew of but one thing that ever downed him."

Mr. Leslie glared at the engineer, his face reddening with rage.

"Something bigger!" he repeated. "So the fellow has bragged about it!"

Griffith stared back, perplexed by the other's sudden heat. "Guess we've got our wires crossed," he said. "I told him, of course. He didn't know anything about it."

"What you talking about?" demanded Mr. Leslie, puzzled in turn.

"The Zariba Dam."

"That!" exclaimed Mr. Leslie, and his face cleared. "H'm,--what about the dam?"

"I had about thrown it up. I'm giving Tom a go at it."

Mr. Leslie's eyebrows bristled in high curves.

"What! wasting time with a man like that? If _you've_ given it up, we'll try England or Europe."

"No use. Plenty of good men over there. They can give us pointers on some things. But if they've ever done anything just like this Zariba Dam, they've kept it out of print."

"But an unknown second-rate engineer!"

"That's what's said of every first-rater till he gets his chance."

"You're serious?"

"I don't guarantee he can do it. I do say, I won't be any too surprised if he pulls it off. It's a thing that calls for invention. He'll swear he hasn't an ounce of it in him--says he just happens to blunder on things, or applies what he has picked up. All gas! He once showed me some musty old drawings that made it look like one of his grandfathers ought to be credited with the basic inventions of a dozen machines that to-day are making the owners of the patent-rights rich. Guess some of that grandfather's bump can be located on Tom's head."

"Inventor--h'm--inventor!" muttered Mr. Leslie half to himself. "That puts rather a different face on that bridge matter."

"As how?" casually asked Griffith, beginning to scrape afresh at his pipe-bowl.

Mr. Leslie considered, and replied with another question: "At the time of the competition in plans for the bridge, did you know that Blake was to be a contestant?"

"He writes letters about as often as a hen gets a tooth pulled. But I got a letter the time you mention,--a dozen lines or so, with another added, saying that he was in for a whirl at the Michamac cantilever."

"You've shown him Ashton's bridge plans?"

"Not yet. He's been too busy on the Zariba field books."

"You've seen his own plans for the bridge?"

"No. They were lost."

"The originals, I mean--his preliminary copy. He must have kept something."

"Yes. But I guess they're pretty wet by now," replied Griffith, his face crackling with dry humor. "They're aboard that steamer, down on the African coast. If you want to see them, you might finance a wrecking expedition. But Tom says she went down mast-under, and there are plenty of sharks nosing along the coral reef."

Mr. Leslie winced at the word _sharks_, and reluctantly admitted:

"I've had a long talk with my daughter. He played the part of a man. I acknowledge that I've held a strong prejudice against him. It seems, however, that in part I've been mistaken."

"Now you're talking, Mr. Leslie!"

"Only in part, I say--about his lost bridge plans. I had thought he was trying to blackmail me."

"More apt to be a black eye, if you let him know you thought that," was Griffith's dry comment.

"He came near to resorting to violence. As I look at it now, I can't say I blame him. Those bridge plans, though--Knowing this about his inventiveness, has it not occurred to you that his plans may not have been lost, after all?"

"Look here, Mr. Leslie," said Griffith, rising with the angularity of a jumping-jack, "we've rubbed along pretty smooth since we got together last year; but Tom Blake is my friend."

"Sit down! _sit_ down!" insisted Mr. Leslie. "You ought to see by this time that I'm trying to prove myself anything but an enemy to him."

Griffith sat down and began mechanically to load his pipe with the formidable Durham. Mr. Leslie put the tips of his fingers together, coughed, and went on in a lowered tone. "Those plans disappeared. His charge was preposterous, ridiculous--_as against me_. Yet if the plans were not lost, what became of them? He told me yesterday that he himself handed them to the person who was at that time acting as my secretary. You catch the point?"

"Um-m," grunted Griffith, his face as emotionless as a piece of

crackled wood.

"Young Ashton was my secretary. He resigned the next day. Said he had been secretly working on plans for the Michamac cantilever; thought he had solved the problem of the central span; might go ahead and put in his plans if none of the competitors were awarded the bridge. Within a month he did put in plans."

"Well?" queried Griffith.

"Don't you make the connection?" demanded Mr. Leslie. "Blake handed his plans to Ashton, and took no receipt. The plans disappeared. Ashton leaves; comes back in a month with plans that he hasn't the skill to apply in the construction of the bridge--plans include an entirely new modification of bridge trusses--stroke of inventive genius, you called it."

Griffith's lean jaw dropped. "You--you don't mean to say he--the son of George Ashton--that he could--God A'mighty, he's heir to twenty millions!"

"You don't believe it? Suppose you knew he was about to be cut off without a cent? George had stood about all he could from the young fool. Those bridge plans came in just in time to prevent the drawing of a new will."

The hand in which Griffith held his pipe shook as if he had been seized with a fever chill, but his voice was dry and emotionless.

"That accounts for those queer slips and errors in the plans. He couldn't even make an accurate copy, and was too much afraid of being found out to take time to check Tom's drawings. Jammed them into his fireplace soon's he'd finished. The thief!--the infernal thief!--the--!" Griffith spat out a curse that made even Mr. Leslie start.

"Good Lord, Griffith," he remonstrated. "That's the first time I ever heard you swear."

"I keep it for _dirt_! ... Well, what you going to do about it?"

"I am going to have you show Ashton's plans to Blake. If he recognizes them as a copy of his own--"

"Better get ready to ship Laffie out of the country. Once saw Tom manhandle a brute who was beating his wife--one of those husky saloon bouncers. The wife had a month's nursing to do. Tom will pound that--that sneak to pulp."

"Show him the plans. If he recognizes them, I'll let the thief know he has been found out. He'll run, and we'll be rid of him without any scandal. We'll arrange for Blake to get the credit for the bridge, after a time. George Ashton and I are rather close together. I don't want him to be hit harder than's necessary."

"Say, Mr. Leslie, I don't mind admitting you _are_ square!" exclaimed Griffith. "You don't like Tom, and you know he hasn't a line of proof. It would be only his word against Laffie's. Unknown engineer trying to blackmail the son of George Ashton. You know what would be said."

"I told you, I owe him a debt. I intend to pay it in full."

"One thing though," cautioned Griffith. "Even a cornered rat will fight. There's the chance that Laffie may not run. He'd be a drivelling idiot if he did, with his father's millions at stake. Don't forget we've no proof. It won't look even possible to outsiders. Suppose I hold off showing Tom those plans till we see if he can make it on the Zariba Dam? If he pulls that off, no engineer in the U. S. will doubt his claims to the bridge."

"That means a delay," said Mr. Leslie irritably. "My first plan was to send Blake to Michamac at once."

"Lord! With one cantilever finished and the other out to the central span--if it's Tom's bridge, he'd recognize it as quick as his plans. And if he did--well, I'd not answer for what would happen to that damn thief."

"H'm--perhaps you're right," considered Mr. Leslie. He thought a moment, and added with quick decision, "Very well. Keep him on at the dam. What are you paying him?"

"Two hundred."

"Double it."

"No go. He'd suspect something."

"Suspect, would he? H'm--several expert engineers have failed on that dam. If it can be put through, the project will net me a half-million. Ten per cent of my profits might stimulate you engineers. I offer fifty thousand dollars as reward to the man who solves the problem of the Zariba Dam."

"Say, that's going some!" commented Griffith.

"Plain business proposition. If I can't get it done for wages, it is cheaper to pay a bonus than to have the project fail."

"Good way to put it," admitted Griffith. "Don't just know, though, what I'll do with all that money."

"You? Thought you said that Blake--"

"D'you suppose he'd take a cent of it? He's working for me."

"But if he does the work?"

"He might accept the credit. The cash would come to me, if he had to cram it down my throat. He won't touch your money."

"Crazy fool!" rasped Mr. Leslie. Again he paused to consider, and again he spoke with quick decision. "The Coville Company takes over the project. I don't believe the dam can be built; I'm tired of the whole thing. So I unload on the Coville Company. You see? The company offers the fifty thousand bonus as a last hope. It hires Blake direct on some of its routine work. You insist that he try for the dam, between times."

"That's the ticket!" said Griffith. "We'll try it on him."

"Then call by the Coville office. I'll phone over for them to have the transfer made and a letter waiting for you," said Mr. Leslie, and he jerked out his watch.

Griffith rose at the signal. He fumbled for a moment with his hat and gloves, and spoke with a queer catch in his voice. "I'd like to--let you know how I--appreciate--"

"No call for it! no call for it!" broke in Mr. Leslie. "Good-day!"

He whirled about to his desk and caught up the receiver of one of his private-line telephones.

CHAPTER XIV

BETWEEN FRIENDS

Lord James sauntered into the office of Griffiths, C.E., and inquired for Mr. Blake. The cleric stared in vague recognition, and answered that Mr. Blake was busy. Nothing daunted, the visitor crossed to the door toward which the clerk had glanced.

When he entered, he found Blake in his shirtsleeves, humped over a small desk. He was intently absorbed in comparing the figures of two field books and in making little pencil diagrams.

"Hello, old man. What's the good word?" sang out his lordship.

Blake nodded absently, and went on with his last diagram. When he had finished it, he looked up and perceived his friend standing graceful and debonair in the centre of the room.

"Why, hello, Jimmy," he said, as if only just aware of the other's presence. "Can't you find a chair?"

"How's the dam?"

"Dam 'fi 'no," punned Blake. He slapped his pencil down on the desk, and flung up his arms to stretch his cramped body.

"You need a breather," advised Lord James.

"Young Ashton came 'round to my hotel last evening. Wanted me to go to some bally musical comedy--little supper afterward with two of the show-girls--all that. I had another engagement. He then asked me to drop around this morning and take my pick of his stable. Wants me to ride one of his mounts while I'm here, you know. Suppose you come up-town with me and help me pick out a beast."

"No," said Blake. "Less I see of that papa's boy the better I'll like him."

"Oh, but as a fellow-engineer, y'know," minced Lord James.

"You love him 'bout as much as I do."

Lord James adjusted the pink carnation in his lapel, and casually remarked: "You'll be calling at the Leslies' this afternoon, I daresay."

"No," said Blake.

"Indeed?" exclaimed the younger man. He flushed and gazed confusedly at Blake, pleased on his own account, yet none the less distressed for his friend.

Blake explained the situation with sober friendliness. "It's all up in the air, Jimmy. I've got to make good, and she won't promise anything even if I succeed."

"Not even if you succeed?" Lord James was bewildered.

"Can't say I blame her, since I've had time to think it over," said Blake. "If it was you, for instance, she might have a show to get some happiness out of life, even with the whiskey. But think of her tied up to me, whiskey or no whiskey!"

"You'll down the habit this time, old man."

Blake smiled ironically. "That's what you've said every time. It's what I've said myself, every time since I woke up to what the cursed sprees meant. No; don't be afraid. You'll have your chance soon enough. She has cut me clean off from outside help. She wouldn't even give me so much as a 'good luck to you!'"

"She wouldn't? But of course you know that she wishes it."

"Does she? But that's not the point. She's made me believe she isn't sure of her--of her feelings toward me. Don't think I blame her. I

don't. She's right. If I can't stand up and fight it out and win, without being propped up by my friends, I ought to lose out. I'm not fit to marry any woman--much less her."

Lord James tugged and twisted at his mustache, and at last brought out his reply: "Now, I--I say, you look here, old chap, you've got to win this time. It means her, y'know. You must win."

"Jimmy," stated Blake, his eyes softening, "you're the limit!"

"You're not!" flashed back his friend. "There's no limit to you--to what you can do."

"Heap of good it does--your saying it," grumbled Blake.

"This--er--situation won't prevent your calling at the Leslies', I hope."

"I'm not so sure," considered Blake. "Leastways you won't see me there till I begin to think I see a way to figure out this dam."

Lord James swung a leg over the corner of the desk and proceeded to light a cigarette. Through the haze of the first two puffs he squinted across at the glum face of his friend, and said: "Don't be an ass. She hasn't told you not to call."

"No," admitted Blake. "Just the same, she said she wouldn't give me any help."

"That doesn't bar you from calling. The sight of her will keep you keen."

"I tell you, I'm not going near her house till I think I've a show to make good on this dam."

"Then you'll lunch with me and make an early call at the Gantrys'. Miss Dolores requested me to give you an urgent invitation."

"Excuse _me!_" said Blake. "No High Society in mine."

"You'll come," confidently rejoined his friend. "You owe it to Miss Genevieve."

Blake frowned and sat for some moments studying the point. Lord James had him fast.

"Guess you've nailed me for once," he at last admitted. "Rather have a tooth pulled, though."

"I say, now, you got along swimmingly at Ruthby."

"With your father. He wasn't a Chicago society dame."

"Oh, well, you must make allowances for the madam. Miss Dolores explained to me that 'Vieve has only to meet people in order to be received, but mamma has to keep butting in to arrive--that's why she cultivates her grand air."

"No sham about Miss Dolores!" approved Blake.

"Right-o! You'll come, I take it. What if the dragon does have rather a frosty stare for you? She said I might bring you to call. Seriously, Tom, you must learn to meet her without showing that her manner flecks you. Best kind of training for society. As I said just now, you owe it to Miss Genevieve."

"Well--long as you put it that way," muttered Blake.

"You'll get along famously with Miss Dolores, I'm sure," said Lord James. "She's quite a charming girl,--vivacious and all that, you know. She's taken quite a fancy to you. The mother is one of those silly climbers who never look below the surface. You have twice my moral stamina, but just because I happen to have a title and some polish--"

"Don't try to gloze it over," cut in Blake. "Let's have it straight. You're a thoroughbred. I'm a broncho."

"Mistaken metaphor," rejoined his friend. "I'm a well-bred nonentity. You're a diamond in the rough. When once you've been cut and polished--"

"Then the flaws will show up in great shape," gibed Blake.

"Never think it, old man! There is only one flaw, and that will disappear with the one cutting required to bring the stone to the best possible shape."

"Stow it!" ordered Blake. The rattling of the doorknob drew his gaze about. "Here's Grif, back at last. He's been to chin with Papa Leslie." He squinted aggressively at the older engineer, who entered with his usual air of seeming absorption in the performance of his most trivial actions. "Hello, you Injin! Gone into partnership with H. V.? You've been there all morning."

"Other way 'round, if anything," answered Griffith. He nodded cordially in response to the greeting of Lord James, and began rummaging in his pockets as he came over to the desk. "Now, where's that letter? Hey?--Oh, here it is." He drew out a long envelope, and started to open it in a precise, deliberate manner.

"So he fired you, eh?" rallied Blake.

"In a way," said Griffith, peering at the paper in his hand. "It seems he's unloaded the Zariba project onto the Coville Company."

"Thought it couldn't be put through, eh?" said Blake. "Bet he didn't let it go for nothing, though."

"It's not often he comes out at the little end of the horn," replied Griffith. "Didn't take the Coville people long to wake up to the situation. Look here."

Blake took the opened letter, which was headed with the name and officers of the Coville Construction Company. He read it through with care, whistled, and read it through the second time.

"Well, what you think of it?" impatiently demanded Griffith.

"_Whee!_ They sure must think H. V. has left them to hold the bag. Fifty thousand bonus to the engineer that shows 'em how the dam can be built!"

"Strict business," croaked Griffith. "The company is stuck if they quit. Fifty thousand is only ten per cent of their net profits if the project goes through. Wish I had a show at it."

"Well, haven't you? It says any engineer."

"I had quit before you came, only I didn't like to own up to H. V."

"You needn't yet a while. I'll keep digging away at it. If I put it through, we divvy up. I'm working for you. See?"

"Not on your life, Tommy! I don't smouge on another man's work."

"Well, then, we'll say I'm to split it because you put me next to the chance."

"No go. I've no use for three-fourths of what I'm making nowadays. It's just piling up on me. Look here. I happened to speak about you to the Coville people--looking ahead, you know. They want me to try you out on some work I'm too busy to do myself. It's not much, and they offer only one-fifty a month as a starter, but it may lead to something better than I can do for you."

"Yes, that's so," considered Blake.

"It is checking field work reports that come in slowly this time of year. That's the only trouble. You'll be sitting around doing nothing half the time--that is, unless you're fool enough to waste any more time on this dam' dam."

"Waste time?" cried Blake, his eyes flashing. "Watch me! Wait till you get your next bill for electric lights! You've given me my cue, Grif. I'm going to buck through this little proposition in one-two-three style, grab my fifty thousand, and plunge into the New York Four Hundred as Tommy Van Damdam. Clear out, you hobos. I'm going to work!"

"Don't forget I've got you on for lunch and Mrs. Gantry's," reminded Lord James.

Blake paused, pencil in hand. "Aw, say, Jimmy, you'll have to let me off now."

"Can't do it, old man, really."

"At least that infernal call."

"No, you've got to get used to it. Tell you what, I'll let you off on the lunch if you'll be at my hotel at four sharp. Don't squirm. That gives you as many hours to grind as are good for you at one stretch. If you try to funk it, I'll hold you for both lunch and call. Your social progress is on my conscience."

"Huh!" rejoined Blake. "Don't wish you any hard luck, but if you and your conscience were in--"

"Four sharp, remember!" put in Lord James, dodging from the room.

Griffith followed him closely and shut the door.

"I'm not so busy, Mr. Scarbridge. Step into my private office and have a cigar," he invited, and as Lord James hesitated, he added in a lower tone, "Want your idea about him."

Lord James at once went with the engineer into his office.

"You wish to speak about Tom?" he said.

"Yes. Did you notice that look about his eyes? It's the first sign."

"Oh, no! let us hope not, Mr. Griffith. I happen to know he has suffered a severe disappointment. It may be that."

"Well, maybe. I hope so," said Griffith dubiously. With innate delicacy, he refrained from any inquiry as to the nature of Blake's disappointment. As he handed out his box of cigars, he went on, "I don't quite like it, though. He's a glutton for field work, but this indoors figuring soon sets him on edge. He can't stand being cooped up." "Count on me to do all I can to get him out."

"Yes, I'm figuring on you, Mr. Scarbridge. He's told me all about you. Between the two of us, we might stave it off and keep him going for months. Wish I knew more about the girl--Miss Leslie. If she's the right sort, there's just a chance of something being done that I gave up as being impossible, last time he was with me--he might be straightened out for good."

"It's possible, quite possible! Others have been cured,--why not he?" exclaimed Lord James, his face aglow with boyish enthusiasm. But as suddenly it clouded. "Ah, though, most unfortunate--this stand of Miss

Leslie's!"

"What about her?" queried Griffith, as the other hesitated.

"She has told him that he must win out absolutely on his own strength, without her aid or sympathy."

"Well, I'll be--switched! Thought she loved him."

Lord James flushed, yet answered without hesitancy. "It is to be presumed she does, otherwise she would not have forced this test upon him."

"How d' you make that out?"

"Mere grateful interest in his welfare would have been satisfied by the assurance of his material success. On the other hand, her--ah--feeling toward him is at present held in restraint by her acute judgment. She had reason to esteem him in that savage environment. She now realizes that he must win her esteem in her own proper environment. She is not merely a young lady--she is a lady. Her rare good sense tells her that she must not accept him unless he proves himself fit."

"He's a lot fitter than all these lallapaloozer papa's boys and some of their fathers,--all those empty-headed swells that are called eligibles," rejoined Griffith.

"It's not a question of polish or culture, believe me. She is far too clever to doubt that he would acquire that quickly enough. My reference was to this one flaw, which may yet shatter him. The question is whether it penetrates too deep into his nature. If not--if he can rid himself of it--then even I admit that he would make her happy."

"Yet she won't lift a finger to help him fight it out?"

"Courage is the fundamental virtue in a man. It includes moral strength. If she cannot be sure of his strength, she will always doubt him and her love for him."

"Can't see it that way. If she helped him, and he won out, he'd be cured, wouldn't he?"

"I've been trying to guess at a woman's reason, but I'm not so rash as to attempt to argue the matter," said Lord James. He picked up his hat and held out a cordial hand to the engineer. "She may or may not be right. I'm not altogether certain as to the intuitive wisdom of women. However that may be, we at least shall do our best to pull him through."

"That's talking, Mr. Scarbridge!" exclaimed Griffith.

CHAPTER XV

BY-PLAY

Promptly at four that afternoon Blake was shown to the rooms of his friend at the hotel. He entered with a glum look not altogether assumed.

"Well, here I am," he grumbled. "Hope you're satisfied. You're robbing me of the best part of the day."

"I daresay," cheerfully assented Lord James. "Now look pleasant till I see if you're dressed."

"No, I haven't a thing on. Just clothed in sunshine and a sweet smile," growled Blake, throwing open his raincoat to show his suit of rough gray homespun. "You don't ever get me into that skirty coat again. I can stand full dress, but not that afternoon horror-gown. I'm no minister."

"Don't fash yourself, old man. At least you've been tailored in London, and that's something. You'll do--in Chicago."

"I'll do O.K. right here," said Blake. "What say? You've spoiled my afternoon. We'll call it quits if you settle down with me and put in the time chinning about things."

"Tammas, I'm shocked at you," reproved Lord James. "You cannot wish to disappoint Mrs. Gantry, really!"

"Mrs. Gantry be--"

"No, no! Do not say it, my deah Tammas! When one is in Society, y'know, one is privileged to think it, but it's bad form to express it so--ah--broadly--ah--I assure you."

He adjusted his monocle and stared with a vacuous blandness well calculated to madden his friend. Blake hurled a magazine, which his lordship deftly sidestepped. He reached for his hat, and faced Blake with boyish eagerness.

"Come on, Tom. Chuck the rotting. We're wasting time."

"Must have a taxicab waiting for you," bantered Blake.

"No, a young lady. Miss Dolores is really eager to become acquainted with you, and--er--she may have a friend or two--"

"Excuse _me!_"

"Tammias the quitter!"

Lord James started for the door, and Blake followed him, striving hard to maintain his surly look. At the street entrance he sought to postpone the coming ordeal by urging his need for exercise.

"Don't worry. I'll pay," said Lord James, pretending to misunderstand, and he raised his finger to the chauffeur of the nearest cab. "You can walk home, if you wish to save pennies. Now, you know, we desire to reach Mrs. Gantry's as soon as possible."

"Yes, we do!" growled Blake.

He seemed more than ever determined to remain in his glum mood, and the pleasant badinage of his friend during their run out to Lincoln Park Boulevard rather increased than lessened his surliness. When they entered through the old Colonial portal of the Gantry home, he jerked off his English topcoat unaided, contemptuously spurning the assistance of the buff-and-yellow liveried footman. But as they were announced, he assumed what Lord James termed his "poker face," and entered beside his friend, with head well up and shoulders squared.

"Good boy! Keep it up," murmured Lord James. "She'll take you for a distinguished personage."

Blake spoiled the effect by a grin, which, an instant later, was transformed into a radiant smile at sight of Genevieve beside Mrs. Gantry.

Dolores came darting to meet them, her black eyes sparkling and her lithe young body aquiver with animation.

"Oh, Lord Avondale!" she cried. "So you did make him come. Mr. Blake, why didn't you call at once?"

"Wasn't asked," answered Blake, his eyes twinkling.

"You are now. So please remember to come often. Never fear mamma. I'll protect you. Oh, I'm just on tiptoe to see you in those skin things you wore in Africa. I made Vievie put on her leopard-skin gown, and I think it's the most terrible romantic thing! And now I'm just dying to see your hyena-skin trousers and those awful poisoned arrows and--"

"Dolores!" admonished Mrs. Gantry.

"Oh, piffle!" complained the girl, drawing aside for the men to pass her.

Even Mrs. Gantry was not equal to the rudeness of snubbing a caller in her own house--when she had given an earl permission to bring him. But the contrast between her greetings of the two men was, to say the least, noticeable.

Blake met her supercilious bearing toward him with an impassiveness that was intended to mask his contemptuous resentment. But Genevieve saw and understood. She rose and quietly remarked: "You'll excuse us, Aunt Amice. I wish Mr. Blake to see the palm room. I fancy it will carry him back to Mozambique."

Mrs. Gantry's look said that she wished Mr. Blake could be carried back to Mozambique and kept there. Her tongue said: "As you please, my dear. Yet I should have thought you'd had quite enough of Africa for a lifetime."

"One never can tell," replied Genevieve with a coldness that chilled the glow in Blake's eyes.

They went out side by side yet perceptibly constrained in their bearing toward one another.

Dolores flung herself across the room and into a chair facing her mother and Lord James.

"Did you see that?" she demanded. "I do believe Vievie is the coldest blooded creature! When she knows he's just dying for love of her! Why, I never--"

"That will do!" interrupted Mrs. Gantry.

"I'll leave it to Lord Avondale. Isn't it the exact truth?"

"Er--he still looks rather robust," parried Lord James.

"You know what I mean. But I didn't think she'd behave in this dog-in-the-manger fashion. She might have at least given me a chance for a tete-a-tete with him, even if he is her hero."

"I am only too well aware what Lord Avondale will think of you, going on in this silly way," observed Mrs. Gantry.

"If Lord Avondale doesn't like me and my manners, he needn't. Need you, Mr. Scarbridge?"

"But how can I help liking you?" asked the young Englishman with such evident sincerity that the girl was disconcerted. She flashed a bewildered glance into his earnest face, and turned quickly away, her cheeks scarlet with confusion.

"Ah, Earl," purred her mother, "I fully appreciate your kindness. She is Genevieve's cousin. You are therefore pleased to disregard her gaucheries."

"Ho! so that's it?" retorted Dolores. "Lord Avondale needn't trouble to disregard anything about me."

"Believe me, I do not, Miss Gantry," replied Lord James. "I find you most charming."

"Because I'm Vievie's cousin! Well, if you wish to know what I think, I think all Englishmen are simply detestable!" cried the girl, and she sprang up and flounced away, her face crimson with anger.

"You had better go straight to your room," reproved her mother.

The girl promptly dodged the doorway for which she was headed, and veered around to a window, where she turned her back on them and perched herself on the arm of a chair.

Mrs. Gantry sighed profoundly. "_A-a-ah!_ Was ever a mother so tried! Such temper, such perversity! Her father, all over again!"

"If you'll permit me to offer a suggestion," ventured Lord James, "may it not be that you drive with rather too taut a rein?"

"Too taut! Can you not see? The slightest relaxation, and I should have a runaway."

"But a little freedom to canter? It's this chafing against the bit. So high spirited, you know. I must confess, it's that which I find most charming about her."

"Impossible! You cannot realize."

"Then, too, her candor--one of the rarest and most admirable traits in a woman."

"Simply terrible! That she should fling her--opinion of you in your face!"

"Better that than the usual insincerity in such cases of dislike. It gives me reason to hope that eventually I can win her friendship."

"Your kindness is more than I can ever repay!"

"You can by granting me a single favor."

"Indeed?" Mrs. Gantry raised her eyebrows in high arches.

"By receiving my friend as my friend."

"Ah! Had you not asked permission to bring him, he would not have been received at all."

"Not even as the man who saved your niece?"

"That is an obligation to be discharged by her father."

"I see. Very well, then. Regarding him simply as my friend, I ask you

to consider that he is undergoing a most difficult, I may say, cruel test. He must overcome something that he has vainly fought for years--something that has crushed many of the greatest intellects the world has known."

"The more reason for me to save Genevieve from ruin. From what you say, I imply that it is a hopeless case of degeneracy."

"Not hopeless; and degenerate in that respect alone--if you must insist on the term."

"I do insist."

"What if he should succeed in overcoming it?"

"He cannot. Even should he seem to, there will always be a weakness to be feared."

"Is that just?"

"It is just to Genevieve."

"Everything for Vievie, coronet included!" called Dolores over her shoulder.

Mrs. Gantry's English complexion deepened to the purple of mortification. The frank smile that told of his lordship's enjoyment of her discomfiture was the last straw. She rose in her stateliest manner.

"I shall leave you a few moments to be entertained by the dear child, since you find her so amusing," she said. "Genevieve must not be permitted to remain too long in the close hot air of the palm room."

"There's some hot air outside the conservatory, mamma," remarked Dolores.

But Mrs. Gantry sailed majestically from the room, without deigning to heed the pleasantries.

Lord James sauntered across to the window and perched himself on a chair arm close before the girl.

"When do you begin?" he asked. "Your mamma said you were to entertain me."

"Best possible reason why I shouldn't," she snapped, staring hard out of the window.

"What if I should try to entertain you?"

"You wouldn't succeed. I wanted to talk to a man. It's too bad! Simply because you asked me to, I was silly enough to tease Vievie into

coming over this afternoon--and the minute he comes, she rushes him off to the conservatory."

"Believe me, I regret quite as keenly that she did not take me instead."

"That's complimentary--to me!"

"Can you blame me for agreeing, when you express a preference for the man instead of the mere son of a duke?"

"Perhaps you're a man yourself. Who knows?"

"Quien sabe, Senorita Dolores?" he rallied her. "Tell me how to prove it."

She flashed him a glance of naive coquetry. "You ask how? If I were my great grandmother, you might try to kiss me, and chance a stiletto thrust in return."

"Your great grandmother was an Italian?"

The girl's red lips curled disdainfully. "No, she was Spanish. Though she lived in Mexico, her family were Castilian and related to the royal Valois family of France. So you see how far back it goes. We have the journal of her husband. She married Dr. Robinson, who accompanied Lieutenant Pike on his famous expedition."

"Pike? Leftenant Pike?"

"No, he wasn't 'left.' He came back and became the General Pike who died at the moment of his glorious victory over the English, in the War of 1812."

"Ah, come to think--Pike of Pike's Peak. Never heard of the battle you mention; but as an explorer--So one of his companions married your ancestress?"

"Yes. He must have been another such man as Mr. Blake."

"The kind to risk stiletto thrusts for kisses?"

"Yes. I know I must be exactly like her--that haughty Senorita Alisanda."

"Indeed, yes. I can almost see her dagger up your sleeve."

The girl's black eyes flashed fire. "If it was there, you'd get a good scratch!"

"Believe me," he apologized, "you quite failed to take me."

"It's no question of taking you. I prefer heroes."

"Can't say I blame you. You've all the fire and charm of a Spanish girl, and, permit me to add, the far greater charm of an American girl."

She looked to see if he was mocking her. Finding him unaffectedly sincere, she promptly melted into a most amiable and vivacious though unconventional debutante.

CHAPTER XVI

THE AMARYLLIS

The constraint between Blake and Genevieve had rather increased than lessened when they left the others. Neither spoke until they had passed through the outer conservatory into the tropical heat of the palm room. But there the first whiff of the odor from the moist warm mould brought with it a flood of pungent memories.

"The river jungle," muttered Blake, sniffing. "Air was drier out under the coconut palms."

"That first night, in the tree!" murmured Genevieve. "How easily you hauled us up with the vine rope! Ah, then--and now!"

Blake drew away from her, his face darkening. "Hope you don't think I expected to see you here? If Jimmy knew, he didn't tell me."

"How could he know? Dolores did not phone to me until mid-afternoon. But even had you been told, I see no reason why you shouldn't have come."

"You don't?" he asked, his face brightening. "I was afraid you might think I was trying to dodge your conditions. Besides, I had promised myself not to call on you till I thought I saw a way to work out a big piece of engineering that I'm on."

"Then you have a good position? I'm so glad!"

"Not a regular position. But I've been given work and a chance at one of the biggest things in hydraulics--the Zariba Dam, out in Arizona."

"You're not going away?" Calmly as she tried to speak, she could not entirely repress an under-note of apprehension. Slight as was the betrayal of feeling, it enheartened him immensely. He beamed up at the palm crests that brushed the glazed dome.

"Looks like they're going to raise the roof, doesn't it?" he said.

"Feel that way myself. Your father unloaded the Zariba project onto

the Coville Construction Company, and they've offered a cool fifty thousand dollars to the man that figures out a feasible way to construct the dam. I spoke about it before, you may remember; but this bonus wasn't up then. If I put it through, I'll be recognized as a first-class engineer."

"You will succeed, of course," said Genevieve with perfect confidence in his ability to overcome such a relatively easy difficulty.

"Hope so," responded Blake. "I'm still tunnelling in the dark, though. Not a glimmer of a hole out."

"That is of small concern."

"Isn't it, though? I'm counting on that to boost me along on the other thing. Nothing like a little good luck to keep a fellow braced up."

"But I'm sure you have some Dutch blood,--and you know the Dutch never fight harder than when the odds are against them."

"Then it's too bad I'm not Hans Van Amsterdam. He'd have the scrap of his life."

"Do you mean that the odds are so greatly against you?" asked Genevieve, with sudden gravity.

"What's the use of talking about it?" said Blake, almost brusquely. "If I win, I win; and I'm supposed to believe that is all it means. If I lose, you're rid of me for good."

Genevieve bit her lip and turned her head to hide her starting tears.

"I did not think you would be so bitter over it!" she half sobbed.

"Can't you take a joke?" he demanded. "Great joke!--me thinking I've a ghost of a show of winning you! No; the laugh's on me, all right. Idea of me dreaming I can down that damnable thirst!"

"Tom, you'll not give up--you'll not!" she cried with a fierceness that shook him out of his bitter despondency.

"Give up?" he rejoined. "What d' you take me for? I'll fight--course I'll fight, till I'm down and out. People don't much believe in hell nowadays, Jenny. I do. I've been there. I'm bound to go there again, I don't know how soon. Don't think I'm begging for help or whining. Nobody goes to hell that hasn't got hell in him. He always gets just what's coming to him."

"No, no! It's not fair. I can't bear to hear you blame yourself. There's no justice in it. Both heredity and environment have been against you."

"Justice?" he repeated. He shook his head, with rather a grim smile.

"Told you once I worked in a pottery. Supposing the clay of a piece wasn't mixed right, it wasn't the dish's fault if it cracked in the firing. Just the same, it got heaved on the scrap-heap."

Genevieve looked down at her clasped hands and whispered: "May not even a flawed piece prove so unique, so valuable in other respects, that it is cemented and kept?"

Blake laughed harshly. "Ever know a cracked dish to cement itself?"

"This is all wrong! The metaphor doesn't apply," protested the girl. "You're not a lifeless piece of clay; you're a man--you have a free, powerful will."

"That's the question. Have I? Has anybody? Some scientists argue that we're nothing but automatons--the creatures of heredity and environment."

"It's not true. We're morally responsible for all we do--that is, unless we're insane."

"And I'm only dippy, eh?" said Blake.

He moved ahead around the screening fronds of a young areca palm, and came to an abrupt halt, his eyes fixed on an object in the midst of the tropical undergrowth.

"Look here!" he called in a hushed tone.

Genevieve hesitated, and came to him with reluctant slowness. But when she reached his side and saw what it was he was looking at so intently, her cold face warmed with a tender glow, and, unable to restrain her emotion, she pressed her cheek against his arm. He quivered, yet made no attempt to take advantage of her weakness.

"Tom! oh, Tom!" she whispered. "It's exactly the color of the other one!"

"Wish this snake was as easy to smash!" he muttered.

"It will be!" she reassured him. He made no response. After a short silence, she said, "In memory of that, Tom, I wish you would kiss me."

He bent over and touched his lips to her forehead with reverent tenderness. That was all.

When Mrs. Gantry came in on them, they were still standing side by side, but apart, contemplating the great crimson amaryllis blossom. Their attitude and their silence were, however, sufficient to quicken her apprehensions.

"My dear child," she reproached Genevieve, "you should know that this damp mouldy air is not wholesome for you."

"She's right, Miss Jenny," agreed Blake. "It's too much like Mozambique--gets your thoughts muddled. You've failed to do as you said you would. I ought to've gone sooner. Good-day, Mrs. Gantry. Good-day, Miss Jenny."

He turned away with decisive quickness.

"Must you go?" asked Genevieve, with a trace of entreaty that did not escape her aunt.

"Yes," said Blake.

"You'll come to see me soon!"

"Not till I see daylight ahead on the dam. Don't know when that will be. Best I can say is Adios!"

"I trust it will be soon."

"Same here," he responded, and he left the palm room with head down-bent, as if he were already pondering the problem, the solving of which was to free him from the self-imposed taboo of her house.

"My dear Genevieve!" Mrs. Gantry hastened to exclaim. "Why must you encourage the man?"

The girl pointed to the gorgeous blossom of the amaryllis. "That is one reason, Aunt Amice."

"That? What do you mean?"

"Your amaryllis--not the flower itself, but what it stands for to me."

"Still, I do not--"

"Not when you recall what I told you about that frightful puff adder--that I was stooping to pick an amaryllis when the hideous creature struck at me?"

"You mentioned something about a snake, but there was so much else--"

"Yes, it was only once of the many, many times when he proved himself a man. Though the adder only struck the fold of my skirt, I stood paralyzed with horror. Winthrop, as usual, was ineffectual. Tom came running with his club--and then--" The girl paused until the vivid blush that had leaped into her cheeks had ebbed away. "It was not alone his courage but his resourcefulness. Most men would have turned away from the writhing monster, full of loathing. He saw the opportunity to convert what had been a most deadly peril into a source of safety. He sent me away, and extracted the poison for his arrow tips."

"My dear child, I freely admit that he is an admirable savage," conceded Mrs. Gantry.

"Say rather that he was fit to survive in a savage environment. We shall now see him adapt himself to the other extreme."

"Young girls always tend to idealize those whom they chance to fancy."

"Chance? Fancy? Dear Aunt Amice, you and papa do not, perhaps cannot, realize that for those many weeks I lived with storm and starvation, sun and fever, serpents and ferocious beasts all striving to destroy me. I saw the hard realities of life, and learned to think. Mentally I am no longer a young girl, but a woman, qualified to judge what her future should be."

The glowing face of her usually composed niece warned Mrs. Gantry to be discreet. She patted the coils of soft hair. "There, there, my dear. Pray do not misunderstand me. All I ask is that you make sure before you commit yourself,--a few months of delay, that you may compare him with the men of our own class."

Genevieve smiled. "I have gone quite beyond that already, Aunt Amice."

"Indeed?" murmured the elder woman. Too tactful to venture further, she placed a ring-crowded hand upon her ample bosom. "It is too close in here. I feel oppressed."

Genevieve readily accompanied her from the conservatory.

Blake had gone, alone, for they found Lord James in the midst of a lively tete-a-tete with Dolores.

At sight of the merry couple, Genevieve paused in the doorway to recall to her companion some previous conversation. "You see, Aunty. Confess now. They would make a perfect couple."

"Nonsense. He would never dream of such a thing, even were you out of his thoughts. What is more, though he seems to have caught her in one of her gay moods, I know that she simply abominates him. She told him as much, within a minute after you left us."

"I'm so sorry!" sighed Genevieve. "At least let us slip out without interrupting them. I must be going, anyway."

"My dear, I have you to consider before Dolores," replied Mrs. Gantry, and she advanced upon the unconscious couple. "Genevieve is going."

Lord James looked about, for the slightest fraction of a moment discomposed. Genevieve perceived the fleeting expression, and hastened to interpose. "Do not trouble. It is so short a distance."

But the Englishman was already bowing to Dolores. The girl turned her back upon him with deliberate rudeness.

"You see!" murmured Mrs. Gantry to Genevieve.

When Lord James and her niece had gone, the outraged dame wheeled upon her daughter. But at the first word, Dolores faced her with such an outblazing of rebellious anger that the mother thought best to defer her lecture.

CHAPTER XVII

ENTRAPPED

On a frosty Sunday morning, some ten days later, Blake came swinging out Lake Shore Drive at a space-devouring stride that soon brought him to the Leslie mansion. He turned in, and the footman, who had received orders regarding him, promptly bowed him in.

After a moment's hesitancy, Blake handed over a calling card. All his previous cards had been printed, with a "C. E." after his name and nothing before it. These social insignia had been ordered for him by Lord James. Blake wondered how the innovation would impress Genevieve.

She presently came down to him, dressed for church but without her hat. He was quick to note the fact. "You're going out. Didn't mean to call at the wrong time."

"No," she replied. "I am going to church, but not until Aunt Amice and Dolores call by for us. That may not be for half an hour. I am very glad to see you. I remember what you said about your next call. This means, does it not, that you believe you can solve the problem of the Zariba Dam?"

"Yes. I sidetracked the proposition four days ago. Had all the facts and factors in my head, but couldn't seem to get anywhere. Well, I hadn't tried to think about the dam since then, but this morning, all of a sudden, the idea came to me."

"You had set your subconscious mind to working," remarked Genevieve. "The ideas of many of the great inventions and discoveries have come that way."

"Don't know about any subconscious mind," said Blake. "But that idea flashed into my head when I wasn't thinking of the dam at all--just like I'd dreamed it."

"You mean 'as if' you'd dreamed it, not 'like,'" said Genevieve, with a look of playful reproof.

"How's that?" he queried. "Never thought that was wrong. But I like your telling me. Is that right?"

"Quite,--grammatically as well as otherwise," she answered, smiling at his soberness. But her tone was as earnest as his. "The speech of a great engineer should be as correct as his figures."

"That's a go!" agreed Blake. "I'll hire a grammar expert just as soon as I work out this dam idea--_um_--you know what I mean--this idea about the dam. Don't know how long that will take. But I'm pretty sure I've got the thing cinched--else I wouldn't have had the nerve to come here this morning. You'll believe that, Jenny?"

"Of course. Yet there was no reason why you should have remained away even had you not succeeded. I did not mean you to--to take it that way, Tom."

"All right, then. I'll drop around often if it's not against rules."

"You'll come to church with me this morning?"

"Church!" echoed Blake, in mock-tragic fright. "Haven't been inside a church since I don't know when."

"All the more reason why you should go with us now," she argued.

"Us?"

"Aunt Amice always calls by for papa. He is one of the vestrymen of the Cathedral, you know, but he'd never go if aunty did not come for him. We share the same pew. But it's a large one. There'll be room for you."

"Not in the same pew with your aunt and father," rejoined Blake. "It'd take a larger pew than was ever made, to hold them and me."

"Oh, but you must come, Tom. You'll enjoy the music. Here they are now."

"O-ho, Vievie, you in here?" called Dolores, and she darted in upon them. "Goodness! who's the man? Why, it's Mr. Blake. Hail to the hero!"

She pirouetted down to them and shook Blake's hand vigorously, chattering her fastest. "You can't imagine how glad I am to see you. I've had less than half of Jeems, with mamma butting in all the way over. Of course he'll sit between her and Vievie. If you'll come along as my own particular, I'll feed you on chocolates and keep you nudged during the sermon."

"Oh, but I say, Miss Gantry, those were to be my chocolates," protested Lord James from the doorway.

"Hello," said Blake. "So you're the man, are you? Better look out. First thing you know, you'll get roped."

"Roped? What's that?" demanded Dolores.

"Ask Jeems," laughed Blake.

"Er--seems to me I've heard the expression in relation to the term 'steer,'" observed Lord James.

"Oh, something to do with a ship," said the girl.

"Yes, with what the sailormen would call a trim craft. Eh, Jeems?" chuckled Blake.

"You're laughing at me!" accused the girl. "To make up for it, you'll have to come and hold my prayer-book for me. Just think!--a real hero to hold my prayer-book!"

"Excuse _me!_" objected Blake. "I don't know the places."

"Never mind. We can study the styles quite as well. Vievie, let's hurry on. Mamma has gone up to rout out Uncle Herbert. They'll be late--as usual."

"Well, then, I'll clear the track," said Blake. "Take good care of Jeems for me. Good-bye, Miss Jenny."

"Don't leave, Tom," replied Genevieve. "If you do not wish to go to the Cathedral--"

"We'll all stay home," cut in Dolores.

"What's this about staying home?" came the voice of Mrs. Gantry from the hall.

"Quick, Mr. Blake!" exclaimed Dolores in a stage whisper. "Hide behind me. I'm taller than Vievie."

Her mother came in upon them in time to catch Blake's broadest grin.

"Stay at home, indeed! Such a delightful day as--Ah!"

"It is Mr. Blake, Aunt Amice," said Genevieve in a tone that compelled the stiffening matron to bow.

"Well, good-bye," repeated Blake.

"Please wait," said Genevieve. "If you do not wish to go to church, you must stay to--Here's papa."

"Not late this time, am I?" demanded Mr. Leslie, bustling into the room. "All ready, my dear? No, you've not got on your hat. Hello!" He stopped short, staring at Blake. "Didn't know you were to be with us."

"I'm not," said Blake.

"You're not? H'm,--why not? Not afraid of church, are you? Better join us."

Blake stared in open astonishment. "Thanks, I--Not this time, I guess," he replied.

Mr. Leslie seemed about to press the point, but paused and glanced at his watch.

"Please do not wait for me," said Genevieve. "I have decided not to go."

If Blake expected an outburst over this, he had another surprise in store for him. Mrs. Gantry turned away, tight-lipped and high of chin, either too full for utterance or else aware that it was an instant when silence was the better part of diplomacy.

Mr. Leslie followed her, after a half-irritable, half-cordial word to Blake. "Very well, very well. Some other time, then."

As Lord James took his leave of Genevieve with apparent nonchalance, Blake noted an exultant sparkle in the black eyes of Dolores. Yet the look was flatly contradicted by her words as she flounced about toward the door: "You needn't say good-bye, Mr. Scarbridge. You may as well stay right here, since she's not going."

"You see how she rags me," complained Lord James, hastening out after her.

Blake watched them go, his eyes keen with eager observation. He was still staring at the doorway when Genevieve offered banteringly, "A penny for your thoughts, Mr. Blake."

"You'll have to bid higher. Make it a coronet--I mean, half a crown."

"Only half a crown? Why not a crown--the oak crown of the conqueror? You know the Bible verse: 'He that overcometh himself is greater than he that taketh a city.'"

"Can't say as to that; but I've taken in the town, after having failed to overcome," said Blake with bitter humor.

"Tom! You must not speak of your defeats. They are past and of the Past. You must not even think of them. Have you ever been baptized?"

"Baptized? Let's see... Yes, I remember the question was brought up when I came back from my first hoboing and my sisters got me going to the Episcopal Mission. They even persuaded me to join what's called a confirmation class. That's when it had to be proved I'd been baptized."

"Oh, Tom! then you've been confirmed--you're an Episcopalian!"

"I was confirmed. That's not saying I'm an Episcopalian now."

"Have you joined another denomination?"

"No. It was just that my religious streak pinched out, and some years after that I read Darwin and Spencer and Haeckel."

"But that's no reason. If only you had read Drummond first, you'd have seen that true science and true religion are not opposed but are complementary to each other."

"Drummond?" queried Blake. "Never heard of him, that I remember. Anyway, I guess I'm not one of the religious kind. It was only to please my sisters I started in that time."

"But you'll go to church with me now, Tom?"

Blake hesitated. "Thought you told them you'd decided not to go?"

"Not to the Cathedral. There's the little chapel down the street, in which I was confirmed. It's nearer. We could walk. The bishop officiates at the communion this morning, but he is ill; so Mr. Vincent, the vicar, will preach. He's a young clergyman and is said to be as popular with the men of his congregation as with the women. His text to-day for morning service is--No, I'll not tell it to you, but I'm sure you'll find the sermon helpful."

"If you're so anxious to have me go, Jenny, I'll go. But it's to be with you, not because I'm interested in that kind of religion. I don't believe in going to a church every week and whining about being full of sin and iniquity and all that. The people that do it are either hypocrites and don't believe what they are saying, or else it's true, and they ought to go to jail."

Genevieve smiled regretfully. "You and I live in such different worlds. Will you not try to at least look into mine?"

"Well, I'll not sleep during the sermon," promised Blake.

She shook her head at his levity, and left him, to fetch her hat and furs.

When they went out, Blake had no need to stop in the hall. He had brought no overcoat. The first breath of the clear frosty air outside caused her to draw her furs about her graceful throat. She glanced at Blake, and asked with almost maternal concern. "Where's your topcoat? You'll take cold."

"What, a day like this?" he replied. "On a good hustling job I'd call this shirtsleeve weather."

"You're so hardy! That is part of your strength."

"Um-m," muttered Blake. "That cousin of yours is a hummer, isn't she?"

"If you but knew how she envies me my Crusoe adventures!"

"I'm not surprised to hear it. What gets me is seeing her go to the same church as her mother."

"She doesn't usually. But how could she miss such a chance to tease aunty and Lord James? She's a dear contrary girl."

"Then she's not an Episcopalian?"

"Oh, yes. Isn't it nice that we all are?"

"We all?" queried Blake.

"If you've been confirmed, you are, too. That's why I'm so glad you're coming with me. We'll take the communion together."

Blake's face darkened, and he replied hesitatingly: "Why, you see, Jenny, I--I don't think I want to."

"But, Tom, when it will please me so much!"

"You know I'd like to please you--only, you see, I'm not--I don't believe in it."

"Do you positively disbelieve in it?"

"Well, I can't say just that."

"Then I'm sure it will be all right. You'll not be irreverent, and maybe it will reawaken your own true spiritual self."

"Sorry," said Blake uneasily. "I'm afraid I can't do it, even to please you."

"But why not? Surely, Tom, you'll not allow your hard cold science to stand in the way of a sacrament!"

"I don't know whether it is a sacrament or isn't."

"Is that your reason for refusing what I so greatly desire?"

He looked away from her, and asked in a tone that was meant to be casual, "Do they use regular wine, or the unfermented kind?"

"So that's your reason!" she exclaimed. "I did not think you'd be afraid."

"Anything that has alcohol in it--" he sought to explain. "It's the very devil to rouse that craving! There have been times when I've

taken a drink and fought it down--but not when--No, I can't risk it, Jenny."

"Not the communion wine? Surely no harm could come from that! You need take only the slightest sip."

"One taste might prove to be as bad as a glassful. You can't guess what it's like. I'm apt to go wild. Just the smell is bad enough."

"But it's the _communion_, Tom. You have been confirmed in the Church. You know what the consecrated bread and wine symbolize. You can recall to mind all the sacred associations."

"I'm mighty sorry," replied Blake. "If only that meant to me what it does to you, I might risk it. I'm no blatant atheist or anti-religionist. I'm simply agnostic; I don't believe. That's all. You have faith. I haven't. I didn't wish to get rid of my faith. It just went."

"It may come to you again, if you seek to partake of the spiritual communion," urged Genevieve.

"I'm willing enough to try that. But I'll not risk any wine."

"You'll not?" she cried. "Afraid to taste the consecrated wine? Then you _are_ weak!--you _are_ a coward! And I thought you strong, despite your own confession!"

The outburst of reproach forced Blake to flinch. He muttered in protest, "Good Lord, Jenny! you don't mean to say you make this a part of the test?"

"Does it mean nothing to you that I long to have you share the communion with me?" she rejoined. "What must I think of you if you dare not venture to partake of that holy symbol, in the communion of all that is highest within you with the Father?"

Blake quivered as though the frosty air had at last sent a chill through his powerful frame.

"You insist?" he asked huskily.

"You are strong. You will do it," she replied.

"You don't know what it means. But, since you insist--" he reluctantly acquiesced. He added almost inaudibly, "Up against it for sure! Still --there have been times--"

HOLY COMMUNION

They reached the chapel and entered during the last verse of the Processional Hymn. As Genevieve was known to the usher in charge of the centre aisle, they were shown to a pew farther forward than Blake would have chosen.

Genevieve produced a dainty hymnal and prayer-book, and gave her companion the pleasurable employment of helping her hold first one and then the other, throughout the service. If his spirit was quickened by a re-hearing of the prayers in which he had once believed, he did not show it. But he seemed pleased at the fact that Genevieve was too intent upon worship to gaze around at the hats and dresses of the other ladies.

The chapel choir could not boast of any exceptional voices. It was, however, very well trained. Throughout the anthem Blake sat tense, almost quivering, so keen was his delight. At the close he sank back into the corner of the pew, his gaze shifting uneasily from the infirm and aged bishop in the episcopal chair to the thin, eager-faced young vicar who had hastened around to mount up into the pulpit.

With a quick movement, the vicar opened the thick Bible to his text, the announcement of which caused Blake to start and fix his attention upon him:

"He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city.' Proverbs 16:32."

Genevieve glanced at Blake, who recalled how she had expressed her certainty that he would find the sermon helpful. The text was apt, to say the least. His hard-set face momentarily softened with a smile that caused her to settle back, in serene contentment. He assumed what Lord James would have termed his "poker face" and leaned up in the corner of the pew, to gaze at the preacher, as impassive as a wooden image.

The manner in which the Reverend Mr. Vincent elucidated his text soon won a stare of pleased surprise from Blake. He began by describing, no less vividly than briefly, the walled cities of the ancients and the enormous difficulty of capturing them, either by siege or assault. This was followed by a graphic summary of the life of Alexander the Great.

Blake listened with such intentness to this novel sermon that he did not perceive that Genevieve was no less intently studying him. It was evident he was deeply impressed by the obvious inference to be drawn from the life of the mighty young Macedonian,--the youth who conquered worlds, only to be himself conquered by his own vices.

But when, warming to his theme, the young vicar entered upon a eulogy of asceticism, Blake bent over and stared moodily at the printed

"Suggestions to Worshippers" pasted on the back of the next pew. His big body, to all appearances, was absolutely still and rigid, but the fingers of his right hand moved about restlessly, tapping his knee or clenching upon the broad palm.

In the midst of Mr. Vincent's explanations of what he considered the fundamental differences between the self-torture of the Hindu yogis and the mortifications of spirit and body practised by the mediaeval monks, Blake shook his head in an uneasy, annoyed gesture. Yet if he meant this as an indication of dissent, he gave no other sign that he was following the thread of the sermon.

Even the close of the eloquent peroration, in which Mr. Vincent besought his hearers to prepare for the fasting and prayer of the Lenten season, failed to rouse Blake from his moody abstraction. But at the end of the regular service, when the white-gowned choir-boys flocked out and the majority of the congregation began to crowd into the aisles with decorous murmurings and the soft rustling of silken skirts, Blake raised his head and followed their departure with a shifting, disquieted gaze.

At last all others than those who had remained for the communion had passed out into the vestibule, and the closing of the doors muffled the loud clear voices of those on the outer steps. Genevieve touched Blake's arm. He started, and glanced up into the chancel. As he caught sight of the bishop and Mr. Vincent behind the rail, his uneasiness became so pronounced that Genevieve was alarmed.

"What is it? Are you ill?" she whispered.

"No," he replied. He thrust his shaking hands into his coat pockets, forced himself to take a deep breath, and added in a thick, half-inarticulate mutter, "no--won't give in--not a quitter."

She could not catch the words, but the resolute tone reassured her.

"It's the air in here. It's stifling. But we shall not be long now," she murmured, and she lapsed into devotional concentration.

Blake, however, followed the service with increasing restlessness. His fingers twitched within the sheltering pockets, and the lines of his face drew tense. He glanced about two or three times as though half inclined to bolt.

A little more, and he might have broken under the strain and run away. But then the communicants began to leave their pews and drift forward into the chancel. At the touch of Genevieve's hand upon his arm he started more sharply than before.

"Tom, you really are ill!" she insisted.

"No," he mumbled, "I guess I--Wait, though. I've forgotten. Does he mean we're supposed to take it as real flesh and blood?"

"Only the Romanists hold to that. We take it symbolically."

"Then why doesn't he say so?"

"He did. Besides, every one understands. You are coming?"

"Wine--alcohol--and she still insists!" he muttered in a thick, almost inarticulate voice.

Intent upon the sacrament, she failed to heed either his tone or the despair in his tense face.

"Come. We are the last," she urged. "We'll soon be out in the open air."

With a heaviness that she mistook for solemnity, he stepped out into the aisle for her to leave the pew, and walked beside her up into the chancel.

She knelt near the extreme end of the altar rail, and bent over with her face in the little hand that she had bared to receive the communion bread. For a moment Blake stood beside her, staring dubiously at the venerable figure of the bishop. Mr. Vincent passed between. Blake took a step to the left and knelt down beside Genevieve.

The only sounds in the chancel were the intoned murmurings of the bishop and Mr. Vincent and the labored breathing of an asthmatic woman next to Genevieve. The less indistinct of the murmuring voices drew near. Genevieve thrust out her palm a little way. Blake, without looking up, did the same.

Mr. Vincent reiterated his intoned statement above them, as though in invocation, and placed tiny squares of bread in their palms. They were the last in the line of kneeling communicants. Blake waited until Genevieve raised her hand to her mouth. Mechanically he followed her example. He swallowed the little morsel of bread with perceptible effort. Again he pressed his forehead down upon the hand that gripped the brass rail.

The bishop's voice now murmured near them, feeble and broken, yet very solemn: "'The Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was shed for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Drink this in remembrance that Christ's Blood was shed for thee, and be thankful.'"

Both of Blake's hands now clutched the rail in a grip that whitened the knuckles. Persons from the other end and the centre of the line were rising and softly retiring to their pews. The asthmatic woman gasped and fell silent as the bishop held the communion cup to her lips.

The bishop shuffled quietly along another step and stood bowed over

the last two communicants. He was a very old man and he was ill. His voice sank to an inaudible murmur: "The Blood ... shed for thee, preserve ... life. Drink this ..."

Blake waited, tense and rigid, as one about to meet the shock of a deadly attack. The bishop drew the chalice back from Genevieve's lips in his trembling hands, and paused for Blake to reach out and take it.

Blake did not move. The bishop bent farther over. The fumes of the wine rose in the face of the kneeling man. He quivered and shrank back--then, almost violently, he flung up his head and caught the cup to his lips.

Genevieve was rising. Blake stood up abruptly and followed her down to their pew. She knelt at once; but he caught up his soft hat, and holding it before his face, bent down close to her ear. He spoke in a strained whisper: "Excuse me. I've got to go."

She half rose. "You're ill! I'll go with you and--"

"No. Sit still. I've a--a most important engagement with, a friend-- Mr. Griffith. Got to hurry!"

"Not so loud!" she cautioned him. "If you must go, Tom!"

"Yes, must! Sorry, but--" His hand sought and closed upon hers in a sudden caressing clasp, and his voice became husky. "Good-bye, girlie! May not see you for a--for a time!"

"Why, are you going out of town?" she asked.

But he was already turning away. Without pausing to answer her question, he started rapidly down the aisle, his head and shoulders bent forward in a peculiar crouch. A slight frown of perplexity and displeasure marred the serenity of Genevieve's face. But the benign voice of the bishop immediately soothed her back into her beatific abstraction.

When the service was ended, she walked home in a most devotional frame of mind, and after luncheon, spent the afternoon searching out scriptural verses that she thought would aid in the spiritual re-awakening of Blake. Later in the afternoon she accompanied her father to the Gantrys', her face aglow with reverent joy. It was as if she felt that she had already guided Blake into the straight and narrow way that leads up out of the primitive.

They found Dolores industriously shocking her mother by a persistent heckling of Lord James, who was smiling at her quips and sallies and twirling his little blond mustache as if he enjoyed the raillery.

"Oh, here's Vievie, at last!" cried the girl. "Vievie darling, your eyes positively shine! Have you and the heroic Thomas been talking about the sharks and crocodiles of your late paradise? That was so

cute of you, waiting this morning till we had gone, and then slipping off with him alone."

"We went to my little chapel. I knew the dear old bishop would be there. And the new vicar, Mr. Vincent, preached a splendid sermon."

"Which you talked about all the way home--I don't think," mocked Dolores.

"No, you never think," agreed Mrs. Gantry.

"Mr. Blake had to hasten away, just before the close of the communion service," explained Genevieve. "He remembered an important engagement with Mr. Griffith."

"About the Zariba Dam?" queried her father with alert eagerness.

"He did not say. I am not altogether sure that he--"

"Pardon me," interrupted Lord James. "Do you really believe that, in the circumstances, he would leave you for a business appointment?"

"Why shouldn't he?" said Mr. Leslie. "If he solves the problem of that dam, his fortune is as good as made. He'll have big positions thrust upon him. Did he seem excited, my dear--abstracted?"

"Oh, do you think it was that?" replied Genevieve. "I feared he was ill. The ventilation of the chapel is so wretched. He did look odd; yet he would not admit that he felt ill. I was half doubtful whether it was right to insist that he stay to communion."

"Communion!" gasped Mrs. Gantry. "You don't mean to say, my dear, that you've made a convert of him? Impossible!"

"I'm afraid not," sighed Genevieve. "I believe he took the communion merely to oblige me."

"Took the communion?" echoed Lord James, no less astonished than Mrs. Gantry. "Surely you do not--er--It seems quite impossible, you know."

"Is it so very amazing, when I asked him--urged him?" said Genevieve, flushing ever so slightly under his incredulous look.

"My word!" he murmured. "Tom did that!"

"I regret that he was not in a condition to receive the utmost good from it. But he was either ill or else rendered uneasy over his business with Mr. Griffith," remarked Genevieve.

"Of course, of course!" assented Lord James, bending over to brush a speck from his knee. "Quite a pity, indeed!" He straightened and turned to Mrs. Gantry, with a forced smile. "Er--it's deuced stupid of me--agreeing to dine, y'know--deuced stupid. Must beg pardon for

cutting it! I'd quite forgotten I was to meet Tom--er--and Griffith, at their offices. They may be waiting for me now."

"Why, of all things!" protested Dolores. "You don't mean to say you are going to run off, just when dinner is ready?"

"Lord Avondale has made his excuses," said her mother. "No doubt another time--"

"Very soon, I trust--very soon," assented Lord James, with a propitiatory glance at Dolores. "It's a keen disappointment, I assure you." He looked about at Genevieve. "If you ladies will be so kind-- It's a most pressing matter. Er--Griffith is not in the best of health. He may have to take a trip to Florida."

"No, he won't," broke in Mr. Leslie. "Not unless he leaves some one to manage Lafayette Ashton. The young cub isn't fit to be left alone with that bridge. Isn't that what this appointment is about? Griffith may have it in mind to put Blake in charge of the bridge."

"Er--must say it wouldn't surprise me if he takes a run up there with Griffith," said Lord James. "May go along myself."

"But you'll be back for the ball!" exclaimed Dolores.

"Right-o! Count on me for the ball. That's a fortnight off. Ample time."

"Then I promise you two waltzes. Bring back Laffie with you. He dances divinely."

Lord James smiled in rather an absent manner, and turned to Genevieve. "You take me? I expect to be away with Tom for a few days. He will probably lack opportunity to call on you before he leaves town. You may have a message for me to take to him."

"Give him my best wishes for the success--of his work."

"That is all?"

For a few moments Genevieve stood hesitating, too intent upon her own thoughts to heed the covert stare of Dolores and the open scrutiny of her aunt and father. Lord James waited, with his averted gaze fixed upon the anxious face of Mrs. Gantry.

"That is all," quietly answered the girl, at last.

Mrs. Gantry sighed with relief, but Dolores frowned, and Mr. Leslie stared in irritable perplexity. Lord James bowed and hastened out before any of the others had observed his expression.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FALL OF MAN

Griffith, C.E., sat in the inner room of the bare living apartments adjoining his office. His feet, clad in white socks and an ancient pair of carpet slippers, were perched upon the top of a clicking steam radiator. His lank body balanced itself perilously in a rickety cane-seated chair, which was tilted far back on the rear legs. His pipe, long since burnt out and cold, hung from his slack jaw, while his eyes, bright and excited, galloped through the last pages of a sensational society novel.

He reached the final climax of the series of climaxes, and sat for a moment tense; then, flinging the cheap thing into a corner, he drew down his feet and stood up, stretching and yawning. Having relieved his cramped muscles, he drew out a tobacco pouch. But while in the act of opening it, he glanced at the alarm-clock on the book-shelves, and ended by replacing the pouch, without loading his pipe.

"Nine," he croaked, and again he stretched and yawned.

A sharp knock sounded at the hall-door of the outer room. Before he could start in response, a second and far louder knock followed.

"H'm--must be a wire," he muttered, and he shuffled quickly over the faded carpet into the front room.

The door shook with a third knocking that sounded like fist blows. Griffith's eyes sharpened with the look of a man who has lived in rough places and scents danger. He turned the night-catch and stepped to one side as he flung the door open. Before him stood a tall young man in an English topcoat. The visitor's curly yellow hair was bare and his handsome face scarlet with embarrassment.

"I--er--I beg your pardon, Mr. Griffith. I--" he stammered.

A big hand swung up on his shoulder, and a deep voice, thick and jocular, cut short his apology. "Thash all ri', Cheems. Wash ri' in. Ish on'y ol' Grishsh. Wash ri' in, I shay."

Propelled by the hand on his shoulder, Lord James entered with a precipitancy that carried him half across the room. Blake followed with solemn deliberation, keeping a hand upon the door casing. Griffith stepped around and shut and bolted the door. Without a second glance at Blake, he shuffled close up to Lord James and demanded in a rasping, metallic voice, "What's the meaning of this, Mr. Scarbridge?"

"Thash all ri', Grish," interposed Blake, "thash all ri'. M'frensh Chimmy Ear' Albondash. Hish fa'er's Dush Rubby--y' shee?"

Without raising his voice, Griffith gave utterance to a volley of blasphemous expletives that crackled on the air like an electric discharge.

"If you will kindly permit me, sir--"

"Hell!" cut in the engineer. "You call yourself his friend. Good friend you are, to let him touch a drop!"

"This is no time for misunderstandings between his friends, Mr. Griffith," said Lord James, with a quiet insistence that checked the other's anger. "He was hard at it when, I found him--had been for hours."

"Ri' she are, Chi-Chimmy boy! Ching o' it, Grishsh!--thish ish a relish--relishush lushingsh--church shaloo--loon."

Griffith went over to the swaying figure, and stared close into the pallid face and glittering, bloodshot eyes.

"You damned fool!" he jerked out.

"Whash--whash 'at? Whash you shay, Grishsh?"

"You damned idiot!"

"Thash all ri'. Goo' frensh, Grishsh, youm me. Lesh hash a dro-drop."

"Come on in," said the engineer. "I'll give you several drops." He shot a glance at the Englishman. "Lend a hand, will you?"

Lord James stepped quickly to the other side of Blake, who clasped each about the neck in a maudlin but vice-like embrace. As they moved toward the bedroom, Griffith exclaimed with strategic enthusiasm: "That's it, boys, come right on in. It's so confounded dusty here, let's have a bath."

"All ri', Grishsh, en'ching you shay. Bu' you wanna wash ou' y' don' gi' wa'er insish. Wa'er insish a man'sh wor' ching--"

"That's all right, old man," cut in Lord James, "I'll see to that. Leave it to me."

By this time they had come in beside Blake's own cot, which extended out of the corner of the room, at the foot of Griffith's equally simple bed. Griffith opened the door of a tiny bathroom and turned on the hot water in the tub. Lord James fell to stripping Blake, regardless of his protests that he could undress himself.

"Chuck it!" ordered his lordship, as Blake sought to interfere. "You don't want to keep us waiting our turn, do you?"

Blake launched upon an elaborate and envolved disclaimer that he had

harbored the remotest idea of causing his friends the slightest trouble. In the midst Griffith came out of the bathroom. With his help, Blake was soon got ready, and the two led him in between them. In the corner of the bathroom was a small cabinet shower-bath with a wooden door. Blake turned toward it, but Griffith drew him about to the steaming tub.

"Hot room first, Tommy," he said. "Haven't forgotten how to take a Turkish, have you?"

Blake entered upon another profuse apology, meantime docily permitting the others to immerse him in the tub of hot water. Griffith promptly added still hotter water to the bath, while Lord James held the vapor curtains tight about the patient's neck. Before many minutes Blake began to grow restless, then to curse. But between them, Griffith and Lord James managed to keep him in the tub for more than a quarter of an hour.

"All right, Tommy. Now for the shower," said Griffith, at last.

Blake came out of the tub red and still wobbly. They rushed him over and shoved him into the cabinet. Lord James stepped clear, and Griffith slammed shut the door, latched it with an outside hook, and jerked open the lever of the shower-faucet, which was outside the cabinet.

"_Oof!_" grunted Blake, as the cold deluge poured down upon his bare head and body.

"Fine, hey?" called Griffith.

"_Wow!_ Lemme ou! _Oo-ou!_"

The cabinet shook with a bump that would have upset it had it not been screwed fast to the wall.

"Aw, now, don't do the baby-act, Tommy!" jeered Griffith. "Yowling like a bum, over a bath!"

"Be game, old man!" chimed in Lord James. "Take your medicine."

"Bu-but 'sh cole! _W-whew!_"

"Stay with it, old man--stay with it!" urged Lord James. "Don't lay down. Be a sport!"

"G-gosh! 'M free-freezin'! Lemme out!"

Griffith rubbed his hands together and cackled: "Stay with it, Tommy. It's doing the work. Stay with it."

"Damnation!" swore Blake. "O-open that door!"

"Time we were moving, Mr. Scarbridge," said Griffith.

He followed Lord James out of the bathroom, and closed the door. He led the way through into the front room, and closed that door. They stood waiting, silent and expectant.

The walls shook with a muffled crash.

"Repairs, five dollars," said Griffith. "Better stand farther over this way."

The bathroom door slammed open violently. The two men glanced into each other's eyes.

"You've played football?" croaked the engineer.

Lord James nodded.

"Tackle him low--fouler the better," advised Griffith.

There was a pause ... One of the cots in the bedroom creaked complainingly.

"Huh," muttered Griffith. "Sulking, eh? Good thing for us." He gazed full into the Englishman's face, and offered his hand. "I hope you'll overlook what I said, Mr. Scarbridge--Lord Scarbridge. Under the circumstances--"

"Don't mention it, Mr. Griffith! It's--it's the most positive proof of your friendship for him--that you should have been so angered. Deuce take it, I'd give anything if this hadn't happened!"

"How did it happen?" asked Griffith. "Sit down--No; no chance of his coming out now."

Lord James slipped off his heavy topcoat, and seated himself, his dress clothes and immaculate linen offering an odd contrast to the shabby room. But the engineer looked only at the face of his visitor.

"It's a beastly shame--when he was holding his own so well!" exclaimed the Englishman.

"That's what gets me," said Griffith. "He seemed to have staved it off indefinitely. I didn't notice a single one of the usual signs. And he has let out that the dam was almost a certainty. If he had fizzled on it, I could understand how that and the way he's been grinding indoors night and day--"

"No; he's stood that better than I had feared. What a shame! what a beastly shame! When Miss Leslie learns--"

"Miss Leslie?" cut in Griffith. "If she shakes him for this, she's not much account--after all he did for her. If she's worth anything, now's

the time for her to set to and help pull him up again. But you haven't said yet how it happened."

"That's the worst of it! To be sure, she was perfectly innocent. She must have thought it simply impossible that the communion wine--"

"Hey!--communion wine? That's what he meant by church saloons and religious lushing, then. She steered him up against that--knowing his one weakness?"

"My dear sir, how could she realize?"

"He told me she knew."

"But the communion wine!"

"Communion alcohol! Alcohol is alcohol, I don't care whether it's in a saloon or a church or pickling snakes in a museum. I tell you, Tommy's case has made a prohibition crank of me. Talk about it's being a man's lack of will and moral strength--_bah!_ I never knew a man who had more will power than he, or who was more on the square. You know it."

"I--to be sure--except, you know, when he gives way to these attacks."

"Gives way!--and you've seen him fight! It's a disease, I tell you--a monomania like any other monomania. Why don't they say to a crazy man in his lucid intervals, 'Trouble with you is your lack of will power and moral strength. Brace up. Go to church'?"

"But you'd surely not say that Tom's insane? He himself lays it to his own weakness."

"What else is insanity but a kind of weakness--a broken cog in the machine which slips and throws everything out of gear, no matter how big the dynamo? I tell you, a dipsomaniac is no more to be blamed for lack of will power or moral strength than is a kleptomaniac, or than an epileptic is to be blamed for having fits. It's a disease. I'm giving it to you straight what the doctors say."

All the hopefulness went out of the Englishman's boyish face.

"Gad!" he murmured. "Gad! Then he can't overcome it."

"I don't know. The doctors don't seem to know. They say that a few seem to outgrow it--they don't know how, though. But all agree that the thing to do is to keep the patient braced--keep him boosted up."

"Count on me for that!" exclaimed Lord James.

"It's where this girl--Miss Leslie--ought to come in, if she's worth anything," thrust Griffith.

"But--but, my dear sir, you quite fail to understand. It will never do

to so much as hint to her that he has failed."

"Failed!" retorted Griffith. "When she herself forced him to take the first drink--Don't cut in! If you know Tommy as well as you ought, you know he would never have taken that drink in the condition he was in--not a single drop of anything containing alcohol! No! the girl forced him--she must have. He's dead in love with her. He'd butt his head against a stone wall, if she told him to. Hell!--just when he had his chance at last!"

"His chance?"

"I've been figuring it as a chance. Supposing he had pulled off this big Zariba Dam, he'd have felt that he had made good. It might have brought around that change the doctors tell about. Don't you see? It might have fixed that broken cog--straightened him up somehow for good. But now--hell!"

Griffith bent over, with a groan.

"Gad!" murmured Lord James. After a long pause, he added slowly, "But, I assure you, regarding Miss Leslie, it will never do to tell her. If she hears of this, he will have no chance--none! That occurred to me immediately I inferred the deplorable truth. I told her we were thinking of going with you to the bridge--Michamac."

"You did? Say, I thought Britishers were slow, but you got your finger on the right button first shove. It's the very thing for him--change, open air, the bridge--Wait a minute, though! With the chances more than even that it's Tommy's own--Until he makes good on the dam, nobody would take his word against that lallapaloozer's."

"I--er--beg pardon. I fail to take you," said Lord James.

"Just the question of his finding out something that's apt to make him manhandle young Ashton."

"Ah--all the better, I say. Anything to divert his mind."

Griffith looked at the Englishman with an approving smile. "You sure are the goods, Mr. Scarbridge! It'll take two or three days for him to fight down the craving, even with all the help we can give him. Wait a minute till I phone to a drug-store."

He shuffled out through a side doorway that led into his private office. While he was telephoning, Lord James heard low moans from the bedroom. He clenched his hands, but he did not go in to his friend until Griffith returned and crossed to the inner door.

"Come in, Mr. Scarbridge," he said. "Next thing is to see if we can talk him into going to Michamac."

CHAPTER XX

DE PROFUNDIS

He opened the door and, seemingly heedless of all else, hastened through to the bathroom, to shut off the flow of the shower. Lord James followed him as far as the corner cot, where Blake, wet-haired and half dressed, sat bowed far over, his elbows on his knees and his face between his hands.

"Head ache, old man?"

Blake raised his head barely enough for his friend to catch a glimpse of his haggard face and miserable eyes.

"Come now, Tommy," snapped Griffith, shuffling back from the bathroom, "we all admit you've made a damned fool of yourself; but what's the use of grouching? Sit up now--look pleasant!" He swung around a chair for Lord James, and seated himself in an old rocker. "Come, sit up, Tommy. We're going to hold an inquest on the remains."

"They need it--that's no lie," mumbled Blake.

"_Bah!_ Cherk up, you rooster! It isn't the first time you've lost your feet. Maybe your feelings are jolted, but--the instrument is safe. Remember that time you fell down the fifty-foot bank and never even knocked your transit out of adjustment? You never let go of your grip on it! Come; you'll soon be streaking out again, same as ever."

"No, you're clean off this time, Grif." Instead of raising his head, Blake hunched over still lower. He went on in a dreary monotone, "No, I'm done for this trip--down for the count. I'm all in."

"Rot!" protested Lord James.

"All in, for keeps, this time. I'm not too big a fool to see that. Everything coming my way,--and to go and chuck it all like this. Needn't tell me she'll overlook it. Wouldn't ask her to. I'm not worth it."

"She's got to!" cried Griffith, with sudden heat. "She steered you up against this."

"What if she did? Only makes it all the worse. Didn't have sand enough to refuse. I'm no good, that's all--not fit to look at her--she's a lady. You needn't cut in with any hot air. I'm no more 'n a blackguard that got my chance to impose on her--and took it. That's the only name for it--young girl all alone!"

"No, no, old man, just the contrary, believe me!" exclaimed Lord

James. "I doubt if I myself could have done what you did when she--er--"

"'Cause there'd have been no need. You're in her class, while I--" He groaned, and burst out morosely: "You know I'm not, both of you. What's the use of lying?"

The two friends glanced across at each other and were silent. Blake went on again, in his hopeless, dreary monotone. "Down and out--down and out. Only son of his mother, and she a drunkard. Nothing like Scripture, Jimmy, for consoling texts."

He began to quote, with an added bitterness in his despair: "'Woe unto them that are mighty to drink, and men of strength to mingle strong drink ... their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust--' 'Awake, ye drunkards, and weep and howl, all ye drinkers of wine.' 'For while they are drunken as drunkards, they shall be devoured as stubble fully dry.'--Dry? Good Lord! Ring up a can of suds, Grif. I've got ten miles of alkali desert down my throat!"

"All right, Tommy," said Griffith. "We'll soon fix that. I've sent in an order already."

"You have not!" rejoined Blake, in an incredulous growl. "Well, suppose you ring 'em up again. If that can doesn't get here mighty sudden, I'll save the fellow the trouble of bringing it."

"Hold on, young man," ordered Griffith, as Blake started to heave himself to his feet. "I'm running this soiree."

He stood up and shuffled out into the front room. Blake shifted around restlessly, and was again about to rise, when there came a sharp rapping at the outer door.

"That's the man now," said Lord James. "Hold tight. It will now be only a moment."

Blake restrained himself. But it was a very long moment before Griffith came in with a pitcher and three glasses upon a battered tray. At the tinkle of the glasses Blake looked up, his face aflame. He made a clutch at the pitcher.

[Illustration: He went on in a dreary monotone, "No, I'm done for this trip--down for the count. I'm all in."]

Griffith gave him his shoulder, and cackled: "Don't play the hog, Tommy. I've been up in Canada enough to know that the nobility always get first helping. Eh, Lord Scarbridge?"

"You--you--" gasped Blake.

"But this time," went on Griffith, hastily pouring out a brimming glassful of liquid from the pitcher, "we'll make an exception."

He turned about quickly, and with his hand clasped over the top of the glass, reached it out to Blake. Half maddened by his thirst, the latter clutched the glass, and, without pausing to look at its contents, drained it at a gulp. An instant later the glass shattered to fragments on the floor, and Blake's fist flung out toward Griffith.

"Quassia!" he growled. "You dotty old idiot! Needn't think you're going to head me off this soon!"

Griffith set the tray on his bed, and crossing to the door, locked it and put the key in his pocket.

"Now, Tommy," he croaked, "you've got just two friends that I know of. They're here. Maybe you can take the key from us; but you know what you'll have to do to us first."

Blake stared at him with morose, bloodshot eyes.

"You're dotty!" he growled. "You know you can't stop me, once I'm under way. I don't want to roughhouse it, but I want something for this thirst, and I'm going to have it. Understand?" "H'm. If that's all," said Griffith.

"That's all, if you're reasonable," replied Blake less morosely. "They gave me all I wanted when I took the gold cure."

"Cured you, too," jeered Griffith.

"That's all right. The point now is, do I get something? If I do, I agree to stay here. If I don't, I'm going out."

"Try another glass of this while you're waiting," suggested Lord James, and he poured out a second glassful of the bitter decoction.

"No," answered Blake.

"You tossed down the other too fast. Sip it. You'll find that it will ease the dryness while you are waiting," insisted Lord James. "Try it, to oblige me."

"_Ugh!_" growled Blake. He hesitated, then reluctantly took the glass and began to sip the quassia. After the last swallow, he turned sullenly to Griffith. "Well, what you waiting for? Get a move on you."

"It does help, doesn't it?" interposed Lord James.

Blake muttered something behind his lips that the others chose to take for assent.

"Yes, it's the real thing," said Griffith. "Try another, Tommy, same way."

"Another? _Bah!_ You can't fool me. I'm on to your game."

"Sure you are," assented Griffith. "What's more, you're sober enough now to know that our game is your game. Own up. Don't lie."

Blake looked down morosely, and for a long quarter of a minute his friends waited in anxious suspense. At last, without looking up, he held out his empty glass for Lord James to refill it. The second battle was won.

As Lord James took the glass, Griffith interposed. "Hold on. We'll keep that for later. I've something else now."

"More dope!" growled Blake.

"No, good stuff to offset the effects of the poison you've been swilling since morning. Next course is bromide of potassium."

"Take your medicine, bo!" chimed in Lord James.

"_Ugh!_" groaned Blake. "Dish it out, then. Only don't forget. You know, well as I do, that if the craving comes on that bad again, I'm bound to have a drink. I tell you, I can't help myself. I've told you about it time and again. It's hell till I get enough aboard to make me forget. You know I don't like the stuff. I've hated the very smell of it since before my first real spree."

Griffith shot a significant glance at Lord James. "That's all right, Tommy,--we understand how it is. But we've got hold of it this time. You'll never quit if you can help it, and we know now you can help it, with this quassia to keep your throat from sizzling. Here's your bromide."

Blake gulped down the dose, but muttered despondently: "What's the use? You know you can't head me off for keeps, once I'm as far under way as I've got to-day. Think you're going to stop me now, do you?"

"That's what," rejoined Griffith. "You'll think the same in about ten minutes. I'm going to talk to you like a Dutch uncle."

"And I've got to sit here while you unwind your jaw! Cut it short. Don't see why you want to chin, anyway. All that's left is to haul me to the scrapheap. . . . You don't think I'd go near her after this, do you? I've got a little decency left. Only thing I can do is to open wide and cut loose. D.T. finish is the one for me. Won't take long for her to forget me. Any fool can see that."

"We're going up to Michamac, first thing tomorrow," remarked Griffith in a casual tone.

"You may be. I'm not."

"It's all arranged, Tammas," drawled Lord James. "I told Miss Leslie--"

"

"You told her! Mighty friendly of you! Good thing, though. Sooner she knows just what I am, the better. How soon do you figure on the wedding?"

"Chuck it, you duffer!" exclaimed the Englishman, flushing scarlet. "I didn't tell her this. She doesn't know."

Blake's haggard face lighted with a flash of hope, only to settle back into black despair.

"She'll learn soon enough. I'm done for, for good, this trip!" he groaned. He clenched his fist and bent forward to glare at them in sullen fury. "Damn you! Call yourselves my friends, and sit here yawping, you damned Job's comforters! Think I'm a mummy?--when I've lost her! God!--to sit here with my brains going--to know I've lost all--all! Give me some whiskey--anything! ... My girl--my girl!"

He bent over, writhing and panting, in an agony of remorse.

Griffith fetched a tablet and a glass of water, to which he added some of the quassia.

"Here's your dose of sulphonal," he said, in his driest, most matter-of-fact tone. "You've got to get to sleep. It's an early train."

"What's the use? Leave me alone!" groaned Blake.

"Gad, old man," put in Lord James. "Any one who didn't know you would think you were a quitter."

"What's the use? I've lost out. I'm smashed."

"All right. Let's call it a smashup," croaked Griffith. "Just the same, you don't go out of commission till you've squared accounts. You're not going to leave the Zariba Dam in the air."

"Guess I've got enough on paper for you to work out the solution, if it's workable."

"And if not?"

"I'm all in, I tell you. I'm smashed for good."

"No, you're not. Anyway, there's one thing you've got to do. You've got to settle about that bridge. You've been too busy over the dam to think of asking for a look at Ashton's plans, and I've said nothing. I've been waiting for you to make good on the dam. With that behind you, no engineer in the U.S. would doubt your word if you claimed the bridge."

"What of that? What do I care?" muttered Blake. "The game's up. What's

the use?"

"This!" snapped Griffith. "Either Laffie Ashton is a dirty sneak thief, or he's a man that deserves my apologies. It's a question of fair play to me as well as to him. You're square, Tom. You'll come up to Michamac with me and settle this matter."

"Lord! Why can't you let me alone?" groaned Blake. But he took the sulphonal and washed it down with the quassia-flavored water.

Lord James went out into the office to phone his man at the hotel to fetch over clothes for a short trip. When he reentered the bedroom Blake was stretched out in bed, and Griffith was spreading a blanket for himself on the floor.

"Should I not run over to my hotel for the night?" remarked the Englishman. "Don't want to put you out of your bed, y' know."

"No. I sleep as well, or better, on the floor. We want to be sure of an early start," said Griffith.

Blake rose on his elbow and blinked at them. His eyes were still bloodshot and his face haggard, but the change in his voice was unmistakably for the better. "Say, bos, it does pay to have friends--sometimes!"

"Forget it!" rejoined Griffith. "You go to snoozing. It's an early train, remember."

Blake sighed drowsily, and stretched out again on the flat of his back. Within a minute he was fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXI

THE BRIDGE

At dawn they roused him out of his drugged sleep and gave him a showerbath and rubdown that brought a healthy glow to his cold skin. He turned pale at the mere mention of food, but after a drink of quassia, Griffith induced him to take a cup of clear coffee and some thickly buttered toast. After that the three hastened in a cab to the station, stopping on the way to buy half a case each of grapefruit and oranges. Aboard the train Blake was at once set to eating grapefruit and chewing the bitter pith to allay the burning of his terrible thirst.

Throughout the trip, which lasted until mid-afternoon, one or the other of the two friends was ever at his side, ready to urge more of the acid fruit upon him and continually seeking to divert and

entertain him by cheerful talk. Until after the noon hour they were on the main line and had the benefit of the dining-car. Griffith ordered a hearty meal, more dinner than luncheon, and Blake was able to eat the greater part of a spring chicken.

The most trying and critical time during the trip was the short wait at the junction, where they transferred to the old daycoach that was attached to the train of structural steel for the Michamac Bridge. Blake caught sight of a saloon, and the associations roused by it quickened his craving to an almost irresistible fury. When, none too soon, the train pulled out of the little town, he sank back in his seat morose and almost exhausted by his struggle.

Though Lord James made every effort to rouse him to a more cheerful mood, his face was still sullen and heavy when the train clanked in over the switches of the material yards at the bridge. Before they left the car Griffith made certain that Blake was wrapped about in overcoat and muffler and had on the arctics that he had bought for him.

Having directed one of the trainmen to bring the boxes of fruit to the office, Griffith led the way up the path formed by the bridge-service track. The rails had been kept shovelled clear from the February snowdrifts and ran straight out through the midst of the bleak unlovely buildings grouped near the edge of Michamac Strait, at the southern terminus of the bridge.

Hardly had the three passengers stepped from the train, when Blake lifted his head for a clear view of the big electric derricks, the vast orderly piles of structural steel, floor beams, and planking, the sheds containing paint, machinery, and other stores, the gorged coal-bins, and all the other evidences of a vast work of engineering.

His gaze followed the bridge-service track past the cookhouse and bunkhouse and the storehouses, out across the completed shore span to the gigantic structure of the south cantilever. Far beyond, between its lofty skeleton towers and upsweeping side webs, appeared, in seemingly reduced proportions, the towers and webs of the north cantilever, across on the north edge of the channel of the strait.

Blake drew in a deep breath, and stared at the titanic structure, eager-eyed. There was no need for Lord James to nudge Griffith. The engineer had not missed a single shade of the great change in Blake's expression. He asked casually, "Well, how does the first sight strike you, Tommy?"

"You didn't say she was so far along," replied Blake.

"Didn't I? H. V., you know, has a pull with the Steel Trust. We've had our material delivered in short order, no matter who else waited. North cantilever is completed; ditto the south, except for part of the timbering and flooring. The central span is built out a third of the way from the north 'lever. But several miles of the feed track on that

side the strait have been put into such bad shape by the weather that we'll have the central span completed from this side before the road over there is open again."

"That so?" said Blake. "I want to see about that span."

"We'll go out for a look at once, soon as we dump our baggage in on Laffie," said Griffith.

"Is that thing here?" growled Blake.

"Now, just you keep on your shirt, Tommy," warned Griffith. "He may be here, or he mayn't. You are here to look at the Michamac Bridge and hold on to yourself. Understand?"

Blake scowled and stared menacingly toward a snow-embanked, snow-covered building, the verandahs of which distinguished it as the office and quarters of the Resident Engineer.

"I want your promise you'll do nothing or say nothing to him till after you've made good on the Zariba Dam," went on Griffith. "You don't want your blast to go off before you've tamped the hole."

Blake's scowl deepened, and he clenched his fist in its thick fur glove. But after a long moment he answered morosely, "Guess you're right. He holds the cards on me now and has the drop. But if I find he slipped the aces out of my hand, it won't be long before I get the drop on him."

"And then something will drop!" added Lord James.

"I'll smash him--the dirty sneak!" growled Blake.

"Now, now, Tommy; you're not sure yet," cautioned Griffith.

"That so?" replied Blake in a tone that brought a glint of excitement into the worn eyes of the older engineer.

But before he could speak, a silk-robed figure stepped out onto the verandah of the Resident Engineer's office, and called delightedly, "Ah, Lord Avondale!--welcome to Michamac! You escaped my hospitality in town, but you can't here!"

"Thanks. Very good of you, I'm sure," replied Lord James dryly.

"I see you've come with old Grif," Ashton gayly rattled on. "Hello, Griffith! Hurry in, all of you. It's cold as the South Pole. I'll have a punch brewed in two shakes. Who's the other gentleman?"

At the question, Blake, who had been staring fixedly at the bridge, turned his muffled face full to the effusive welcomer. Before his hard, impassive look Ashton shivered as if suddenly struck through to the marrow by the cold.

"Blake!" he gasped. "Here?"

"No objections, have you?" asked Blake in a noncommittal tone. "Just thought I'd run up with Mr. Griffith and take a look at your bridge. He says it's worth seeing. But of course, if you don't allow visitors--"

"Just the opposite, Tommy," put in Griffith, quick to catch his cue. "Mr. Ashton is always glad to have his bridge examined by those who know what's what. Isn't that so, Mr. Ashton?"

"Why, of--of course--I--" stammered Ashton, his teeth chattering.

"Sure," went on Griffith. "Any man who's invented such a modification of the truss as this bridge shows, ought to have all the fame he can get out of it. In England he'd be made a lord, I suppose. Eh, Mr. Scarbridge?"

"Er--we've knighted brewers and soap-boilers. But then, y'know, with us beer and soap are two of the necessities," drawled Lord James.

"W-won't you come in?" urged Ashton. "It's chi-illy out here! I'll have that punch brewed in half a s-second."

"My God!" gasped Blake, his jaws clenched and face black with the agony of his temptation.

All unintentionally Ashton had turned the tables on his tormentors.

Griffith scowled at him and demanded: "Where's McGraw?"

"B-bunkhouse," answered Ashton.

Griffith spoke to Lord James in a low tone. "Go in and keep him there, will you? Might stay with him all night. We'll stop at the bunkhouse."

"I'm on," said Lord James.

Griffith raised his voice. "Well, then, if you prefer it that way, Mr. Scarbridge. It's true Ashton can make you more comfortable, and I'll be busy half the night checking over reports and so forth with McGraw. Ashton, if you'll send over your report, it'll leave you free to entertain Mr. Scarbridge. And say, send over the boxes that'll be coming along in a little while. I'm trying a diet of grapefruit." He turned to Blake. "Come on. We don't want to keep Mr. Ashton out here, to shiver a screw loose."

Blake uttered an inarticulate growl, but turned away with Griffith as Lord James sprang up the verandah steps and blandly led the vacillating Resident Engineer into his quarters. The visiting engineers crossed over to the big ungainly bunkhouse, and entered the section divided off for the bosses and steel workers and the other

skilled men.

Within was babel. Kept indoors by the cold that enforced idleness on all the bridge force, the men were crowded thickly about their reading and card tables or outstretched in their bunks, talking, laughing, grumbling, singing, brooding--each according to his mood and disposition, but almost all smoking.

At sight of Griffith a half-hundred voices roared out a rough but hearty welcome that caused Blake's face to lighten with a flush of pleasure. The greeting ended in a cheer, started by one of the Irish foremen.

Griffith sniffed at the foul, smoke-reeking air, and looked doubtfully at Blake. He held up his hand. Across the hush that fell upon the room quavered a doleful wail from the Irish foreman: "Leave av hivin, Misther Griffith, can't ye broibe th' weather bur-r-reau? Me Schlovaks an' th' Eyetalians'll be afther a-knifin' wan another, give 'em wan wake more av this."

"There are indications that the cold snap will break within a week," replied Griffith. "You'll be at it, full blast, in two or three days. Where's McGraw?"

A big, fat, stolid-faced man ploughed forward between the crowded tables. As he came up, he held out a pudgy hand, and grunted: "Huh! Glad t' see you."

Griffith shook hands, and motioned toward Blake. "My friend Mr. Blake. Trying to get him to take charge here--nominally as Assistant Engineer--in case I have to go to Florida."

McGraw's deep-set little eyes lingered for a moment on the stranger's mouth and jaw. "Good thing," he grunted.

"The company is offering him double what Mr. Ashton gets; but he's not anxious to take it as Assistant."

The big general foreman was moved out of his phlegmatic stolidity. "Huh? He's not?"

"Not under that thing," put in Blake grimly.

"Must know him."

"He may change his mind," said Griffith. "The company has authorized me to make it a standing offer. So if he turns up any time--"

McGraw nodded, and offered his hand to Blake. "Hope you'll come. C'n do m' own work. Bridge needs an engineer, though--resident one." "H'm,--Mr. Ashton might call that a slap on the wrist," remarked Griffith. "Get on your coat. We're going out to the bridge."

McGraw headed across for his separate room. While waiting for him, Griffith introduced Blake to the engine-driver of the bridge-service train, two or three foremen, and several of the bridge workers. But the moment McGraw reappeared in arctics and Mackinaw coat, Griffith hurriedly led the way out of the smother of smoke and foul air.

As the three started bridgeward along the clean-shovelled service-track Blake fell in behind his companions. Seeing that he did not wish to talk, Griffith walked on in the lead with McGraw.

They were soon swinging out across the shore, or approach, span of the bridge. This extended from the high ground on the south side of the strait to an inner pier at the edge of the water, where it joined on to the anchor arm of the south cantilever. Almost all the area of the bridge flooring, which had been completed to beyond the centre of the cantilever, was covered with stacked lumber and piles of structural steel and rails, and kegs of nails, rivets, and bolts.

Here every chink and crevice was packed with snow and ice. But all the titanic steel structure above and the unfloored bottom-chords and girders of the outer, or extension, arm of the cantilever had been swept bare of snow by the winter gales and left glistening with the glaze of the last shower of sleet.

Blake swung steadily along after the others, his face impassive. But his eyes scrutinized with fierce eagerness the immense webs of steel posts and diagonals that ran up on either side, under the grand vertical curves of the top-chords, almost to the peaks of the cantilever towers. He had to tilt back his head to see the tops of those huge steel columns, which reared their peaks two hundred and fifty feet above the bridge-floor level and a round four hundred feet above the water of the strait.

Presently the three were passing the centre of the cantilever, between the gigantic towers, whose iron heels were socketed far below in the top-plates of the massive concrete piers, built on the very edge of deep water. From this point the outer arm of the cantilever extended far out over the broad chasm of the strait, where, a hundred and fifty feet beneath its unfloored level, the broken ice from the upper lake crashed and thundered on its wild passage of the strait.

Blake looked down carelessly into the abyss of grinding, hurtling ice cakes. The drop from that dizzy height would of itself have meant certain death. Yet without a second glance at the ice-covered waters, he followed his companions along the narrow walk of sleeted planks that ran out alongside the service-track. Though his gaze frequently shifted downward as well as upward, it went no farther than the ponderous chords and girders and posts of the bridge's framework.

Striding along the narrow runway of ice-glazed planks with the assurance of goats, the three at last passed under the main traveller, a huge structure of eleven hundred tons' weight that straddled the bridge's sides and rose higher than the towers. Its electromagnetic

cranes were folded together and cemented in place by the ice.

A few yards beyond they came to the end of the extension arm of the cantilever and out upon the uncompleted first section of the central, or suspension, span. It was poised high in space, far out over the dizzy abyss. Many yards away, across a yawning gap, the completed north third of the suspension span reached out, above the gulf, from the tip of the north cantilever, like the arm of a Titan straining to clasp hands with his brother of the south shore.

Yet the mid-air companionship of this outreaching skeleton-arm served only to heighten the giddiness and seeming instability of the south-side overhang. From across the broad gap, the eye followed the curve of the bottom-chords of the north cantilever away down into the abyss toward the far shore of the strait, where the lofty towers upreared upon their massive piers.

From this viewpoint there was no relieving glimpse of the shoreward curving anchor-arm that balanced the outer half of the north cantilever alike in line and weight. There was only the vast upcurve of the top-chords and the stupendous down-curve of the bottom-chords and the line between that stood for the foreshortened sixteen hundred feet of bridge-floor level extending from the north shore to the swaying tip of that unanchored north third of the central span.

Few even among men accustomed to great heights could have stood anywhere upon the outer reach of the overhang without a feeling of nausea and vertigo. Not only did the gigantic structure on the far side of the gap seem continually on the verge of toppling forward into the abyss, but the end of the south cantilever likewise quivered and swayed, and the mad flow of the roaring, ice-covered waters beneath added to the giddiness of height the terrifying illusion that the immense steel skeleton had torn loose from its anchorage to earth and was hurtling up the strait through mid-air, ready to crash down to destruction the instant its winged driving-force failed.

Yet Griffith and Blake followed McGraw out to the extreme end of the icy walk and poised themselves, shoulder to wind, on narrow sleet-glazed steel beams, as unconcerned as sailors on a yardarm. Griffith and McGraw were absorbed in a minute inspection of the bridge's condition and in estimating the time it would take to throw forward the remaining sections of the central, or suspension, span, upon the termination of the irksome spell of extreme frosty weather.

Blake looked, as they looked, at post and diagonal, eyebolt and bottom-chord, and across the gap at the swaying tip of the north cantilever. But his face showed clearly that his thoughts were not the same as their thoughts. His eyes shone like polished steel, and there was a glow in his haggard face that told of an exultance beyond his power of repression.

At last Griffith roused from his absorption. He immediately noticed Blake's expression, and dryly demanded: "Well?"

"Well your own self!" rejoined Blake, striving to speak in an indifferent tone.

"Something of a bridge, eh?"

"It's not so bad," admitted Blake. He glanced at McGraw, who had paused in his ox-like ruminating.

Griffith addressed the general foreman. "Mr. Blake is a bit off his feed. A friend that came with us will occupy my room in Mr. Ashton's quarters. I'd like a room in the bunkhouse for Mr. Blake and myself, with a good stove and a window that'll let in lots of fresh air."

"C'n have mine," grunted McGraw. "Extra bunk in yardmaster's room,"

"It'll be a favor," said Griffith. "You might get it ready, if you will. Mr. Blake must have clean air when he goes inside. He and I will take our time going back. There are two or three things I want another look at."

McGraw at once started shoreward, without making any verbal response, yet betraying under his dull manner his eagerness to oblige the Consulting Engineer. When he had gone well beyond earshot, Griffith turned upon Blake with a quizzical look.

"So!" he croaked. "It's a certainty."

"Knew that soon's I got the first look," said Blake.

Griffith's forehead creased with an anxious frown. "You promise not to mix it with him."

"Don't fash yourself," reassured Blake. "I've waited too long for this, to go off at half-cock now."

"That's talking! You'll wait till you're sure you can settle him--the skunk! Come on, now. We'll start inshore before you get chilled."

"How about yourself?" chuckled Blake, as he led back along the runway.

"Won't take the frost two shakes to reach the centre of your circumference, once it gets through that old wolfskin coat."

"Huh! I can still go you one better, young man. I'll soon be thawing out in Florida, while you'll be trotting back here to boss the completion of T. Blake's cantilever--largest suspension span cantilever in the world."

"God!" whispered Blake, staring incredulously at the titanic structure born of his brain. "But it's mine--it is mine!... I sweat blood over those plans!"

"Doggone you, Tommy, you're no engineer--you're an inventor, Class A-1!"

exulted Griffith. "First this; then the Zariba Dam. After that, the Lord only knows what! Trouble with you, you're a genius."

"And a whiskey soak!" added Blake, with a sudden upwelling of bitterness.

"Hey! what!--after this?" demanded Griffith, his voice sharp with apprehension. He could not see the face of his companion, but the manner in which Blake's head bent forward between his hunching shoulders was more than enough to confirm his alarm.

"Come, now, Tommy!" he reproached. "Don't be a fool--just when things are coming your way."

"Think so?" muttered Blake. "What d'you suppose I care for what I'd get out of this or the dam? Good God! You can't see it--yet you had Mollie!"

For a moment the older man was forced to a worried silence. It ended in an outflashing of hope. "I told you what she said about you--almost her last words. You'll win out--she said it!"

Blake halted and turned about to his friend, his face convulsed with doubt and a despondency that verged on despair. They were still half way out on the overhang of the extension arm. He pointed down to the crashing, tumbling ice far beneath his feet.

"Do you know what I'd do if I had any nerve?" he cried. "I'd step over ... end it! ... You could tell her I slipped. There wouldn't be any need to tell her about--yesterday. She would remember me as she knew me there in Mozambique. After a time she'd make Jimmy happy--and be happy herself. Trouble is, I'm what she suspected. I haven't the nerve, when it comes to the real showdown."

"Damnation!" swore Griffith. "Have you gone clean dotty? You're not the kind to quit, Tom!--to slide out from under because you haven't the grit to hang on!"

"That's it. I'm booked for the D. T. route," muttered Blake. "Wasn't born for a watery end. Whiskey for mine!"

"Rats! You're over the worst of this bump already. You're going back to-morrow and dig in to make good on the dam."

"The dam! What's it to me now?"

"Fifty thousand dollars, the credit for your bridge, and a place among the top-notchers."

"Much that amounts to--when I've lost her!" retorted Blake.

He turned about again and plodded heavily shoreward, his chin on his breast and his big shoulders bowed forward.

CHAPTER XXII

CONDEMNED

Though he sank into a taciturn and morose mood from which no efforts of his friends could rouse him, Blake sullenly accepted the continued treatment that Griffith thrust upon him. In the morning he muttered a confirmation of the statement of Lord James that he was looking better and that the attack must be well over.

Ashton, forced probably by an irresistible impulse to learn the worst, followed Lord James to the room occupied by the engineers. Blake cut short his vacillating in the doorway with a curt invitation to come in and sit down. Having satisfied what he considered the requirements of hospitality, Blake paid no further attention to the Resident Engineer. As nothing was said about the bridge, Ashton soon regained all his usual assurance, and even went so far as to comment upon Blake's attack of biliousness.

When, beside the car step, an hour later, Ashton held out his hand, Blake seemingly failed to perceive it. Ashton's look of relief indicated that he mistook the other's profound contempt for stupid carelessness. To one of his nature, the fact that Blake had not at once denounced him as a thief seemed proof positive that the sick man had failed to recognize in the bridge structure the embodiment of his stolen plans.

He turned from Blake to Lord James. "Ah, my dear earl, this has been such a pleasure--such a delight! You cannot imagine how intolerable it is to be cut off from the world in this dreary hole--deprived of all society and compelled to associate, if at all, with, these common brutes!"

"Really," murmured Lord James. "For my part, y' know, I rather enjoy the company of intelligent men who have their part in the world's work. Though one of the drones myself, I value the 'Sons of Martha' at their full worth."

"Oh, they have their place. The trouble is to make them keep it."

"Pon my word, I scarcely thought you'd say that--so clever an engineer as yourself!"

Ashton glanced up to be certain that both Griffith and Blake had passed on into the car.

"Your lordship hasn't quite caught the point," he said. "One may have the brains--the intellect--necessary to create such a bridge as this,

without having to lower himself into the herd of common workers."

"Ah, really," drawled the Englishman, swinging up the car steps.

Ashton raised his hat and bowed. "_Au revoir_", Earl. Your visit has been both a delight and an honor. I shall hope soon to have the pleasure of seeing you in town."

"Yes?" murmured Lord James with a rising inflection. "Good-day."

He nodded in response to Ashton's final bow, and hastened in to where Blake and Griffith were making themselves comfortable in the middle of the car. The three were the only passengers for the down trip.

"So he didn't get you to stay over for the winter?" remarked Griffith as the Englishman began to shed his topcoat.

"Gad, no! He couldn't afford it. Tried to show me how to play poker last night. I've his check for two thousand. He insisted upon teaching me the fine points of the game."

"Crickey!--when you've travelled with T. Blake!" cackled Griffith.

"Hey, Tommy? Any one who's watched you play even once ought to be able to clean out a dub like Lallapaloozer Laf. Say, though, I didn't think even you could keep on your poker face as you have this morning. It's dollars to doughnuts, he sized it up that you had failed to get next."

"Told you I wasn't going to show him my cards," muttered Blake.

Lord James looked at him inquiringly, but he lapsed into his morose silence, while Griffith commenced to write his report on the bridge, without volunteering an explanation. Lord James repressed his curiosity, and instead of asking questions, quietly prepared for his friend one of the last of the grapefruit.

An hour or so later Blake growled out a monosyllabic assurance that he was now safely over his attack. Yet all the efforts of Lord James to jolly him into a cheerful mood utterly failed. Throughout the trip he continued to brood, and did not rouse out of his sullen taciturnity until the train was backing into the depot.

"Here we are," remarked Lord James. "Get ready to make your break for cover, old man. What d' you say, Mr. Griffith? Will it be all right for him to keep close to his work for a while--to lie low?"

"What's that?" growled Blake.

"Young Ashton's a bally ass," explained Lord James. "He bolted down whole what I said about your attack of bile. Others, however, may not be so credulous or blind. You'd better keep close till you look a bit less knocked-up. There's no need that what's happened should come to Miss Leslie."

"Think so, do you?" said Blake. "Well, I don't."

"What's that?" put in Griffith.

"There's not going to be any frame-up over this, that's what," rejoined Blake, reaching for his hat and suitcase. "Soon 's I get a shave I'm going out to tell her."

"Gad, old man!" protested Lord James. "But you can't do that--it's impossible! You surely do not realize--"

"I don't, eh?" broke in Blake bitterly. "I'm up against it. I know it, and you know it. You don't think I'm going to do the baby act, do you? I've failed to make good. Think I'm going to lie to her about it? No! --nor you neither!"

His friends exchanged a look of helplessness. They knew that tone only too well. Yet Lord James sought to avert the worst.

"Might have known you'd be an ass over it," he commented. "Best I can do, I presume, is to go along and explain to her my view of what started you off."

"Best nothing. You'll keep out of this. It's none of your funeral."

"There's more than one opinion as to that."

"I tell you, this is between her and me. You'll keep out of it," said Blake, with a forcefulness that the other could not withstand. "Don't worry. You'll have your turn later on."

"Deuce take it!" cried the Englishman. "You can't fancy I'm dwelling on that! You can't think me such a cad as to be waiting for an opportunity derived from an injustice to you!"

"Injustice, _bah!_" gibed Blake. "I'll get what's coming to me. It's of her I'm thinking, not you. She was right. I'm going to tell her so. That's all."

"But, in view of what she herself did--"

"I'll tell her the facts. That's enough," said Blake, and he led the way from the car.

He hastened out of the depot and would have started off afoot, had not Lord James hailed a taxicab and taken him and Griffith home. He went in with them, and when Blake had shaved and dressed, proposed that they should go on together as far as the hotel. To this Blake gave a sullen acquiescence, and they whirred away to the North Side. But instead of stopping at the hotel, their cab sped on out to the Lake Shore Drive.

Lord James coolly explained that he intended to take his friend to the

door of the Leslies. Blake would have objected, but acquiesced as soon as he understood that Lord James intended to remain in the cab.

During the day the cold had moderated, and when Blake swung out of the cab he was wrapped about in the chilly embrace of a dripping wet fog from off the lake. He shivered as he hurried across and up the steps and into the stately portico of the Leslie house.

At the touch of his finger on the electric button, the heavy door swung open. He was bowed in and divested of hat and raincoat by an overzealous footman before he could protest. Silent and frowning, he was ushered to a door that he had not before entered. The footman announced him and drew the curtains together behind him.

Still frowning, Blake stepped forward and stopped short to stare about him at the resplendent room of gold and ivory enamel that he had entered. Only at the second glance did he perceive the graceful figure that had risen from the window-seat at the far end of the room and stood in a startled attitude, gazing fixedly at him.

Before he could speak, Genevieve came toward him with impetuous swiftness, her hands outstretched in more than cordial welcome.

"Tom! Is it really you?" she exclaimed. "I had not looked for you back so soon."

"It's somewhat sooner than I expected myself," he replied, with a bitter humor that should have forewarned her.

But she was too relieved and delighted to heed either his tone or his failure to clasp her hands, "Yes. You know, I've been so worried. You really looked ill Sunday, and I thought Lord James' manner that evening was rather odd--I mean when I spoke to him about you."

"Shouldn't wonder," said Blake in a harsh voice. "Jimmy had been there before. He knew."

"Knew? You mean--?" The girl stepped back a little way and gazed up into his face, startled and anxious. "Tom, you have been sick--very sick! How could I have been so blind as not to have seen it at once? You've been suffering terribly!"

Again she held out her hands to him, and again he failed to take them.

"Don't touch me," he replied. "I'm not fit. It's true I've suffered. Do you wonder? I've been in hell again--where I belong."

"Tom! oh, Tom!--no, no!" she whispered, and she averted her face, unable to endure the black despair that she saw in his unflinching eyes.

"Jimmy and old Grif, between them, managed to catch me when I was under full headway," he explained. "They stopped me and took me up to

the Michamac Bridge. I'm on my feet again now. Just the same, I went under, and if it hadn't been for them, I'd be beastly, roaring drunk this minute."

"No, Tom! It's impossible--impossible! I can't believe it!"

"Think I'd lie about a little thing like that?" he asked with the terrible levity of utter despair.

"But it's--it's so awful!"

"I've known funnier jokes. God! D'you think I've done much laughing over being smashed for good? It's rid you of a drunken degenerate. It's you who ought to laugh. How about me? I've lost _you!_ God!"

He bent over, with his chin on his breast and his big fists clenched down at his sides.

She stared at him, dazed, almost stunned by the shock. Only after what seemed an age of waiting could she find words for the stress of bitter disappointment and mortified love that drove the blood to her heart and left her white and dizzy.

"Then--you have--failed. You _are_--weak!" she at last managed to say.

Simple as were the words, the tone in which they were spoken was enough for Blake.

"Yes," he answered, and he swung about toward the door.

"Have you no excuses--no defence?" she demanded.

"I might lay it to that wine at the church--and prove myself still weaker," said Blake.

"The holy communion!" she reproached.

"I never made fun even of a Chinaman's religion," he said. "Just the same, if I don't believe a thing, I don't lie and let on I do. I told you that wine meant nothing to me in a religious way. But even if it had, I don't think it would have made any difference. Drop nitric acid on the altar rail, and it will eat the brass just the same as if it was in a brass foundry. Put alcohol inside me, and the craving starts up full blast."

"Then you believe I should excuse--"

"No," he interrupted with grim firmness. "I might have thought it then--but not now. I've had two days to think it over. It all comes down to this: If, knowing how you felt about it, I could not kneel there beside you and take that taste of wine without going under, I'm just what you suspected--weak, unfit."

She clasped her hands on her bosom. "You--admit it?"

"What's the use of lying about it?" he said. "If it hadn't come about that way, you can see now it was bound to happen some other way."

"I--suppose--yes. Oh! but it's horrible!--horrible! I thought you so strong!"

"I won't bother you any more," he muttered. "Good-bye."

He went out without venturing a glance at her white face. She waited, motionless, looking toward the spot where he had stood. Several moments passed before she seemed to realize that he had gone.

CHAPTER XXIII

A REPRIEVE

Lord James did not call upon Genevieve until late afternoon of the next day, and then he did not come alone. He had called first upon Mrs. Gantry and Dolores, who brought him on in their coupe.

Genevieve came down to them noticeably pale and with dark shadows under her fine eyes, but her manner was, if anything, rather more composed than usual. She even had a smile to exchange for the gay greeting of Dolores. Mrs. Gantry met her with a kiss a full degree more fervent than was consistent with strict decorum.

"My dear child!" she exclaimed. "I have hastened over to see you. Lord Avondale has told me all about that fellow."

"Yes?" asked Genevieve, looking at Lord James calmly but with a slight lift of her eyebrows that betrayed her astonishment.

"Hasn't your father told you?" replied Mrs. Gantry, reposing herself in the most comfortable seat. "It seems that he has arranged--"

"Beg pardon," said Lord James. "It was the Coville Construction Company that made the offer."

"Very true. An arrangement has been made, my dear, that will take that person to the bridge and keep him there."

"Provided he accepts the offer," added Lord James.

"How can it be otherwise? The salary is simply stupendous for a man of his class and standing."

"Laffie gets only twelve thousand a year, yet he designed the bridge,"

remarked Dolores. "He told me it wasn't even enough for pin-money."

"I fancy he must contrive to make it go farther since his last trip to town," said Mrs. Gantry. "The little visit proved rather expensive. His father made another reduction in his allowance."

"Goodness!" exclaimed Dolores. "Poor dear Laffie boy! If I conclude to marry him, I shall insist that Papa Ashton is to give me a separate allowance."

"My word, Miss Dolores!" expostulated Lord James. "You're not encouraging that fellow?"

"Oh, it's as well to have more than one hook on the line. Ask mamma if it isn't. Besides, Laffie would be a gilt-edged investment--provided his papa made the right kind of a will. Anyway, I could get Uncle Herbert's lawyers to fix up an agreement as to that--a kind of pre-nuptial alimony contract between me and Laffie's papa's millions."

Mrs. Gantry held up her hands. "Could you have believed it, Genevieve! She was frivolous enough before I went over for you. But now!"

Dolores coolly disregarded her mother, to turn a meaning look on Lord James. "If I have frivolved enough, it's about time you said something."

The young Englishman put an uneasy hand to his mustache. "Er--I should have preferred a--a rather more favorable time, Miss Dolores."

"Yes, and have mamma slam him before you put in the buffer," rejoined the girl. "See here, Vievie. It's too bad, but you must have tattled something to Uncle Herbert, and he--"

"Tattled!" repeated Genevieve. "I have always been candid with papa, if that is what you mean, Dolores."

"All right, then, Miss Candid. Though we called it tattling ten years ago. Anyway, Uncle Herbert wrote about it to mamma. He sent the letter out this noon. Next thing, it'll be all over Chicago--and England."

"Dolores! I must insist!" admonished Mrs. Gantry.

"So must I, mamma! If it's wrong to destroy the property of others, it's no less wrong to destroy their reputations."

Her mother expanded with self-righteous indignation. "Well, I never!--indeed! When the fellow has neither character nor reputation!"

"Dear auntie," soothed Genevieve, "I know you too well to believe you could intentionally harm any one."

"I would do anything to save you from ruining your life!" exclaimed Mrs. Gantry, moved almost to tears.

"I shall not ruin my life," replied Genevieve, with a quiet firmness that brought a profound sigh of relief from her aunt.

"_A-a-h!_--My dear child! Then you at last realize what sort of a man he is."

"Vieve knows he _is_ a man--which is more than can be said of some of them," thrust Dolores, with a mocking glance at Lord James.

"My dear," urged Mrs. Gantry, "give no heed to that silly chit. I wish to commend your stand against the fatal attraction of mere brute efficiency."

"Oh, I say!" put in Lord James. "It's this I must protest against, Miss Leslie--this talk of his brute qualities--when it's only the lack of polish. You should know that. He's a thistle, prickly without, but within soft as silk."

"Do I not know?" exclaimed Genevieve, for the moment unable to maintain her perfect composure.

"The metaphor was very touching and most loyal, my dear earl," said Mrs. Gantry. "Yet you must pardon me if I suggest that your opinion of him may be somewhat biased by friendship."

"But of course mamma's opinion isn't biased," remarked Dolores. She shot an angry glance at her mother, and added--"by friendship."

"It would relieve me very much if no more were said about Mr. Blake," said Genevieve.

"We can't--now," snapped Dolores, frowning at the footman who had appeared in the doorway. "Some one must have sighted the right honorable earl in our coupe."

Her irony was justified by the actions of the three young matrons who fluttered in on the breeze of the footman's announcement. They immediately fell into raptures over his lordship, who was forced in self-defence to tug and twist at his mustache and toy with his monocle. At this last Dolores flung herself out of the room in ill-concealed disdain.

She was not to be found when, all too soon, her mother tore the "charming Earl Avondale" away from his chattering adorers. After the worshipful one had been borne off, the dejected trio did not linger long. Their departure was followed by the prompt reappearance of Dolores.

She came at her cousin with eyes flashing. "Now you're all alone, Vieve! I've been waiting for this. Do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to give you a piece of my mind."

"Please, dear!" begged Genevieve.

"No. I'll not please! You deserve a good beating, and I'm going to give it to you. That poor Mr. Blake! Aren't you 'shamed of yourself? Breaking his big noble heart!"

"Dolores! I must ask you--"

"No, you mustn't! You've got to listen to me, you know you have. To think that you, who've always pretended to be so kind and considerate, should be a regular cat!"

"You foolish dear!" murmured Genevieve. "Do you imagine that anything that you can say can hurt me, after--after--" She turned away to hide her starting tears.

"That's it!" jeered her cousin. "Be a snivelly little hypocrite. Pretend to be so sorry--when you're not sorry at all. _Pah!_"

Genevieve recovered her dignity with her composure. "That is quite enough, my dear. I can overlook what you have already said. You know absolutely nothing about love and the bitter grief it brings."

"You don't say!" retorted Dolores, her nostrils quivering. "Much you know about me. But you!--the idea of pretending you love him--that you ever so much as dreamed of loving him!"

Genevieve shrank back as if she had been struck. "Oh! for any one to say that to me!"

"It's true--it must be true!" insisted Dolores, half frightened yet still too surcharged with anger to contain herself. "If it isn't true, how could you break his heart?--the man who saved you from that terrible savage wilderness!"

"I--I cannot explain to you. It's something that--"

"I know! You needn't tell me. It's mamma."

"She's been knocking him. I'll bet she started knocking him when she first cabled to you--at least she would have, had she known anything about him. Think I don't know mamma and her methods? If only he'd been his lordship--Owh, deah! what a difference, don't y' know! She'd never have let you get out of England unmarried!"

"Dolores! this is quite enough!"

"The Countess of Avondale, future Duchess of Ruthby! Think I don't see through mamma's little game? And you'd shillyshally around, and throw over the true, noble hero to whom you owe everything--whom you've pretended you loved--to run after a title, an Englishman, when you could have that big-hearted American!"

Genevieve's lips straightened. "What a patriot!" she rejoined with

quiet irony. "You, of course, would never dream of marrying an Englishman."

"That's none of your business," snapped Dolores, not a little taken aback by the counter attack.

"You spoke about pretence and hypocrisy," went on Genevieve. "How about the way you tease and make sport of Lord Avondale?"

For a moment the younger girl stood quivering, transfixed by the dart. Suddenly she put her hands before her eyes and rushed from the room in a storm of tears.

Genevieve started up as if to hasten after her, but checked herself and sank back into her chair. For a long time she sat motionless, in the blank dreary silence of profound grief, her eyes fixed upon vacancy, dry and lustreless.

When, a few minutes before their dinner hour, her father hurried into the room, expectant of his usual affectionate welcome, she did not spring up to greet him. The sound of his brisk step failed to penetrate to her consciousness. He came over to her and put a fond hand on her shoulder.

"H'm--how's this, my dear?" he asked. "Not asleep? Brown study, eh?"

She looked up at him dully; but at sight of the loving concern in his eyes, the unendurable hardness of her grief suddenly melted to tears. She flung herself into his arms, to weep and sob with a violence of which he had never imagined his quiet high-bred daughter capable. Bewildered and alarmed by the storm of emotion, he knew not what to do, and so instinctively did what was right. He patted her on the back and murmured inarticulate sounds of love and pity.

His sympathy and the blessed relief of tears soon restored her quiet self-control. She ceased sobbing and drew away from him, mortified at her outburst.

"There now," he ventured. "You feel better, don't you?"

"I've been very silly!" she exclaimed, drying her tear-wet cheeks.

"You're never silly--that is, since you came home this time," he qualified.

"Because--because--" She stopped with an odd catch in her voice, and seemed again about to burst into tears.

"Because he taught you to be sensible,--you'd say."

"Ye--yes," she sobbed. "Oh, papa, I can't bear it--I can't! To think that after he'd shown himself so brave and strong--! But for that, I should never have--have come to this!"

"H'm,--from the way you talked last night, I took it that the matter was settled. You said then that you could no longer--h'm--love him."

"I can't!--I mustn't! Don't you see? He's proved himself weak. How, then, can I keep on loving him? But they--they infer that it is my fault. I believe they think I tempted him."

"How's that?"

"Because I urged him to take the communion with me. I told you what he himself said about alcohol. But he did not blame me. He pointed out that if he was too weak to resist then, he would have yielded to the next temptation."

"H'm,--no doubt. Yet I've been considering that point--the fact that you did force him against his will."

"Surely, papa, you cannot say it was my fault, when he himself admits that his own weakness--"

"Wait," broke in her father. "What do you know about the curse of drink? It's possible that he might be able to resist the craving if not roused by the taste."

"Yet if he is so weak that a few drops of the holy communion wine could cause him to give way so shamelessly--"

"Holy?--h'm!" commented Mr. Leslie. "Alcohol is a poison. Suppose the Church used a decoction containing arsenic. Would that make arsenic holy?"

"Oh, papa! But it's so very different!"

"Yes. Alcohol and arsenic are different poisons. But they're similar in at least one respect. The effects of each are cumulative. To one who has been over-drugged with arsenic a slight amount more may prove a fatal dose. So of a person whose will has been undermined and almost paralyzed with alcohol--"

"That's it, papa. Don't you see? If he lacks the will, the strength, the self-control to resist!"

"No, that isn't the point. It's your part in this most unfortunate occurrence that I'm now considering."

"My part?"

"You told him that he must not look to you for help or even sympathy. I can understand your position as to that. At the same time, should you not have been as neutral on the other side? Was it quite fair for you to add to his temptations?"

"Yet the fact of his weakness--"

"I'm not talking about him, my dear. It's what you've done--the question whether you do not owe him reparation for your part in his-- misfortune."

"My part?"

"Had you not forced him into what I cannot but consider an unfair test of his strength, he would not have fallen. Griffith tells me that he was well along toward a solution of the Zariba Dam. Had you not caused this unfortunate interruption in his work, he might soon have proved himself a master engineer. That would have strengthened him in his fight against this hereditary curse."

"He was to fight it on his own strength."

"What else would this engineering triumph have been but a proof to himself of his strength? You have deprived him of that. Griffith tells me that, hard as he is striving to work out the idea which he was certain would meet the difficulties of the dam, he now seems unable to make any progress."

"So Mr. Griffith and you blame all upon me?"

"You mistake me, my dear. What I wish to make clear to you is that, however hopeless Blake's condition may be, you are responsible for his failure upon this occasion."

"And if so?"

"Premising that in one respect my attitude toward him is unalterable, I wish to say that he has risen very much in my esteem. I have had confidential talks with Griffith and Lord Avondale regarding him. I have been forced to the conclusion that you were justified in considering him, aside from this one great fault, a man essentially sound and reliable. He has brains, integrity, courage, and endurance. Given sufficient inducement, those qualities would soon enable him to acquire all that he lacks,--manners and culture."

"Oh, papa, do not speak of it! It was because I saw all that in him that I felt so certain. If only it were not for the one thing!"

"H'm," considered Mr. Leslie, scrutinizing her tense face. "Then I gather it's not true what yesterday you said and no doubt believed. You still regard him with the same feelings as before this occurrence."

"No! no! He has destroyed all my faith in him. I--I can pity him. But anything more than that is--it must be--dead."

"Can't say I regret it. But--this is another question. You've lost him one chance. I believe you should give him another."

"Another chance?--you say that?" she asked incredulously.

"You should cancel this record--this occurrence. Blot it out. Start anew."

"How can I? It is impossible to forget that he has failed so utterly."

"Thanks to the poison you put into his mouth."

"Father! I did not think that you--"

"I was unjust to him. You also have done him a wrong. I am seeking to make reparation. In part payment, I wish to make clear to you what you should do to offset your fault. In view of the development of your character (which, by the way, you claim was brought about by your African experience), I feel that I should have no need to urge this matter. You are not a thoughtless child. Think it over. Here's Hodges."

She went in with him to dinner, perfectly composed in the presence of the grave-faced old butler. But after the meal, when her father left for his customary cigar in the conservatory, she sought the seclusion of the library, and attempted to fight down the growing doubt of her justice toward Blake that had been roused by her father's suggestions.

It was easy for her to maintain the resolute stand she had taken so long as she kept her thoughts fixed on his fall from manhood. But presently she began to recall incidents that had occurred during those terrible weeks on the savage coast of Mozambique.

She remembered, most vividly of all, a day on the southern headland--the eventful day before the arrival of the steamer--when he had spoken freely of the faults of his past life.... He had never lied to her or sought to gloze over his weakness.

And he could have concealed this present failure. She divined that both Griffith and Lord James would never have betrayed him. Yet he had come direct to her and confessed, knowing that she would condemn him.

The thought was more than she could withstand. She crossed over to her desk, and wrote swiftly:--

Dear Friend:

You are to consider that all which has taken place since Sunday is as if it had never happened.

Come to me to-morrow, at ten.

Jenny.

Enclosing the note in an envelope addressed to Blake, she gave it to a

servant for immediate delivery. As soon as the man left the room, she went to the telephone and arranged for a private consultation with one of the most eminent physicians in the city.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE WAY OF A WOMAN

Blake was humped over his desk, his fingers deep in his hair, and his forehead furrowed with the knotted wrinkles of utter weariness and perplexity, as his eyes pored over the complex diagrams and figures jotted down on the plan before him.

Griffith came shuffling into the room in his old carpet slippers. He looked anxiously at the bent form across the desk from him, and said: "See here, Tommy, what's the use of wasting electricity?"

Blake stared up at him, blear-eyed with overstudy and loss of sleep.

"Told you 'm going to keep going long as the wheels go 'round," he mumbled.

"They'd keep going a heap longer if you laid off Sundays," advised Griffith. "I'm no fanatic; but no man can keep at it day and night, this way, without breaking."

"Sooner the better!" growled Blake. "You go tuck yourself into your cradle."

Griffith shook his head dubiously and was shuffling out when he heard a knock at the hall door of the living-room. He hastened to respond, and soon returned with a dainty envelope. Blake was again poring over his plans and figures. The older man tossed the missive upon the desk.

"Hey, wake up," he cackled. "Letter from one of your High Society lady friends. Flunkey in livery for messenger."

"Livery?" echoed Blake. "Brown and yellow, eh?--as if his clothes had malaria."

"No. Dark green and black."

Blake started to his feet, his face contorted with the conflict of his emotions. "Don't joke!--for God's sake! That's hers!"

Griffith ripped the note from its envelope and held it out. Blake clutched it from him, and opened up the sheet with trembling fingers, to find the signature. For a moment he stood staring at it as if unable to believe his own eyes. Then he turned to the heading of the

note and began to read.

"Well?" queried Griffith, as the other reached the end and again stood staring at the signature.

Instead of replying, Blake dropped into his chair and buried his face in his arms. Griffith hovered over him, gazing worriedly at the big heaving shoulders.

"Must say you're mighty talkative," he at last remarked, and he started toward the door. "Good-night."

"Wait!" panted Blake. "Read it!"

Griffith took the note, which was thrust out to him, and read it through twice.

"Huh," he commented. "She wasn't so awfully sudden over it. 'Bout time, I'd say."

"Shut up!" cried Blake, flinging himself erect in the chair, to beam upon his friend. "You've no license to kick, you old grouch. I'm coming to bed. But wait till to-morrow afternoon. Maybe the fur won't fly on old Zariba!"

"Come on, then. I'll get your sulphonal."

"You will--not! No more dope in mine, Grif. I've got something a thousand per cent better."

"She ought to've come through with it at the start-off," grumbled Griffith. But he gladly accompanied his friend to the bedroom.

In the morning Blake awoke from a profound natural sleep, clear-eyed and clear-brained. His first act was to telephone to a florist's to send their largest crimson amaryllis to Miss Genevieve Leslie.

Though he forced himself to walk, he reached the Leslie mansion a full half-hour before ten. To kill time, he swung on out the Drive into Lincoln Park. He went a good mile, yet was back again five minutes before the hour. Unable to wait a moment longer, he hastened up into the stately portico and rang.

As on the previous day, he was at once bowed in and ushered to the beautiful room of gold and ivory enamel. He entered eagerly, and was not a little dashed to find himself alone. His spirits rebounded at the remembrance that he was early. He stopped in the centre of the room and stood waiting, tense with expectancy.

Very soon Genevieve came in at one of the side doorways. He started toward her the instant he heard her light step. But her look and bearing checked his eager advance. She was very pale, and her eyelids were swollen from hours of weeping.

"Jenny!" he stammered. "What is it? Your note--I thought that--that--"

"You poor boy! you poor boy!" she murmured, her eyes brimming over with tears of compassion.

"What is it?" he muttered, and he drew nearer to her.

She put out her hands and grasped his coat, and looked up at him, her forehead creased with deep lines of grief, and the corners of her sweet mouth drooping piteously.

"Oh, Tom! Tom!" she sobbed, "I know the worst now! I know how greatly I wronged you by forcing you into temptation. I have been to one who knows--one of the great physicians."

"About me?" asked Blake, greatly surprised.

"I used no names. He does not know who I am. But I told him the facts, as you have told them to me, dear. He said--Oh, I cannot--I cannot repeat it!"

She bent forward and pressed her face against his breast, sobbing with an uncontrollable outburst of grief. He raised his arms to draw her to him, but dropped them heavily.

"Well?" he asked in a harsh voice. "What of it?"

She drew herself away from him, still quivering, but striving hard to control her emotion.

"I--I must tell you!" she forced herself to answer. "I have no right to keep it from you. He said that it is a--a disease; that it is a matter of pathology, not of moral courage."

"Disease?" repeated Blake. "Well, what if it is? I don't see what difference that makes. If I fight it down--all well and good. If I lose out, I lose out--that's all."

"But don't you see the difference it makes to me?" she insisted. "I blamed you--when it wasn't your fault at all. But I did not realize, dear. I've been under a frightful strain ever since we reached home. Just because I do not weep and cry out, every one imagines I'm cold and unfeeling. I've been reproached for treating you cruelly. But you see now--"

"Of course!" he declared. "Don't you suppose I know? It's your grit. Needn't tell me how you've felt. You're the truest, kindest little woman that ever was!"

"Oh, Tom! that's so like you!--and after I have treated you so cruelly!"

"You? What on earth put that into your head? Maybe you mean, because you didn't give me the second chance at once when I owned up to failing. But it was no more than right for you to send me off. Didn't I deserve it? I had given you cause enough to despise me--to send me off for good."

"No, no, not despise you, Tom! You know that never could be, when there in that terrible wilderness you proved yourself so true and kind--such a man! And not that alone! I know all now--how you, to save me--" She paused and looked away, her face scarlet. Yet she went on bravely: "how, in order that I might be compelled to make certain, you endured the frightful heat and smother of that foul fore-castle, all those days to Aden!"

"That wasn't anything," disclaimed Blake. "I slept on deck every night. Just a picnic. I knew you were safe--no more danger of that damnable fever--and with Jimmy to entertain you."

"While you had to hide from me all day! James said that it was frightful in the fore-castle."

"Much he knows about such places! It wasn't anything to a glass-factory or steelworks. If it had been the stokehole, instead--I did try stoking, one day, just to pass the time. Stood it two hours. Those Lascars are born under the equator. I don't see how any white man can stoke in the tropics."

"You did that?--to pass the time! While we were aft, under double awnings, up where we could catch every breath of air! Had I known that you did not land at Port Mozambique, I should have--should have--"

"Course you would have!" he replied. "But now you see how well it was you didn't know."

"Perhaps--Yet I'm not so sure--I--I--"

She clasped her hands over her eyes, as all her grief and anguish came back upon her in full flood.

"Oh, Tom! what shall we do? My dear, my poor dear! That doctor, with his cold, hard science! I have learned the meaning of that fearful verse of the Bible: 'Unto the third and fourth generation.' You may succeed; you may win your great fight for self-mastery. But your children--the curse would hang over them. One and all, they too might suffer. Though you should hold to your self-mastery, there would still be a chance,--epilepsy, insanity, your own form of the curse! And should you again fall back into the pit--"

She stopped, overcome.

He drew back a little way, and stood regarding her with a look of utter despair.

"So that is why you sent for me," he said. "I came here thinking you might be going to give me another chance. Now you tell me it's a lot worse than even I thought."

"No, no!" she protested. "I learned what I've told you afterward--after I had sent you the note. You must not think--"

He broke in upon her explanation with a laugh as mirthless as were his hard-set face and despairing eyes. She shrank back from him.

"Stop it!--stop it!" she cried. "I can't bear it!"

He fell silent, and began aimlessly fumbling through his pockets. His gaze was fixed on the wall above and beyond her in a vacant stare.

"Tom!" she whispered, alarmed at his abstraction.

He looked down at her as if mildly surprised that she was still in the room.

"Excuse me," he muttered. "I was just wondering what it all amounts to, anyway. A fellow squirms and flounders, or else drifts with the current. Maybe he helps others to keep afloat, and maybe he doesn't. Maybe some one else helps him hold up. But, sooner or later, he goes down for good. It will all be the same a hundred years from now."

"No!" she denied. "You know that's not true. You don't believe it."

He straightened, and raised his half-clenched fist.

"You're right, Jenny. It's the facts, but not the truth. It's up to a man to pound away for all he's worth; not whine around about what's going to happen to him to-morrow or next year or when he dies. Only time I ever was a floater was when I was a kid and didn't know the real meaning of work. Since then I've lived. I can at least say I haven't been a parasite. And I've had the fun of the fight."

He flung out his hand, and his dulled eyes flashed with the fire of battle.

"Lord!--what if I have lost you! That's no reason for me to quit. You did love me there--and I'll love you always, little woman! You've given me a thousand times more than I deserve. I've got that to remember, to keep me up to the fighting pitch. I'm going to keep on fighting this curse, anyway. Idea of a man lying down, long as he can stagger! Even if the curse downs me in the end, there're lots of things I can do before I go under. There're lots of things to be done in the world--big things! Pound away! What if a man is to be laid on the shelf to-morrow? Pound away! Keep doing--that's life! Do your best--that's living!"

"I know of one who has lived!" whispered Genevieve. "Jenny! Then it's not true? You'll give me another chance? You still love me?"

"Wait! No, you must not!" she replied, shrinking back again. "I cannot--I will not give way! I must think of the future--not mine, but _theirs!_ I must do what is right. I tell you, there is one supreme duty in a woman's lot--she should choose rightly the man who is to be the father of her children! It is a crime to bring into the world children who are cursed!"

A flame of color leaped into her face, but she stood with upraised head, regarding him with clear and candid eyes that glowed with the ecstasy of self-sacrifice.

Before her look, his gaze softened to deepest tenderness and reverence. When he spoke, his voice was hushed, almost awed.

"Now I understand, Jenny. It's--it's a holy thing you've done--telling me! I'll never forget it, night or day, so long as I live. Good-bye!"

He turned to go; but in an instant she was before him with hands outflung to stop him.

"Wait! You do not understand. Listen! I did not mean what you think--only--only if you fail! Can you imagine I could be so unjust? If you do not fail--if you win--Oh, can't you see?"

He stared at her, dazed by the sudden glimmering of hope through the blackness of his despair.

"But you said that, even if I should win--" he muttered.

"Yes, yes; he told me there would still be a risk. But I cannot believe it. At least it would not be so grave a risk. Oh, if you can but win, Tom!"

"I'll try," he answered soberly.

"You will win--you shall win! I will help you."

"You?"

"Yes. Don't you understand? That is why I sent for you--to tell you that."

"But you said--"

"I don't care what I said. It's all different now. I see what I should do. I have failed far worse than you. There on that savage coast you required me to do my share; but always you stood ready to advise and help me. Yet after all that--How ungrateful you must think me!"

"No, never!" he cried. "You sha'n't say that. I can't stand it. You're the truest, kindest--"

"It's like you to say it!" she broke in. "But look at the facts. Did you ever set me a task that called for the very utmost of my strength --perhaps more; and then turn coldly away, with the cruel word that I must win alone or perish?"

"It's not the same case at all," he remonstrated. "You're not fair to yourself. I'm a man."

"And I've called myself a woman," she replied. "After those weeks with you I thought myself no longer a shallow, unthinking girl. A woman! Now I see, Tom--I know! I have failed in the woman's part. But now I shall stand by you in your fight. I shall do my part, and you will win!"

Blake's eyes shone soft and blue, and he again held out his arms to her. But in the same moment the glow faded and his arms fell to his side.

"I almost forgot," he murmured. "You said that I must win by my own strength--that you must be sure of my strength."

"That was before I learned the truth," she replied. "I no longer ask so much. I shall--I must help you, as you helped me. I owe you life and more than life. You know that. You cannot think me so ungrateful as not to do all I can."

"No," he replied, with sudden resolve. "You are to do as you first said--as we agreed."

"You mean, not help you? But I must, Tom, now that I realize."

"All I want is another chance," he said. "It's more than I deserve. I can't accept still more."

"You'll not let me help you? Yet what the doctor said makes it all so different."

"Not to me," replied Blake, setting his jaw. "I've started in on this fight, and I'm going through with it the way I began. It'll be a big help to know how you feel now; but, just the same, I'm going to fight it out alone. The doctors may say what they please,--if I haven't will power enough to win, without being propped up, I'm not fit to marry any woman, much less you!"

"Tom!" she cried. "You are the man I thought you. You will win!"

She held out her hands to him. He took them in his big palms, and bent over to kiss her on the forehead.

"There!" he said, stepping away. "That's a lot more than I'm entitled to now, Jenny. It's time I left, to go and try to earn it."

"You won't allow me to help?" she begged.

"No," he answered, with a quiet firmness that she knew could not be shaken.

"At least you cannot keep me from praying for you," she said.

"That's true; and it will be a help to know how you feel about it now," he admitted.

"You will come again--soon?"

"No, not until I begin to see my way out on the Zariba Dam."

"Oh, that will be soon, I'm sure."

"I hope so. Good-bye!"

He turned and hurried from the room with an abruptness that in other circumstances she might have thought rude. But she understood. He was so determined in his purpose that he would not take the slightest risk that might be incurred by lingering.

She went to a front window, and watched him down the Drive. His step was quick but firm, and his head and shoulders were bent slightly forward, as if to meet and push through all obstacles.

CHAPTER XXV

HEAVY ODDS

For a few days Lord James was able to bring Genevieve encouraging reports of a vast improvement in Blake's spirits. But still the engineer-inventor failed to make the headway he had expected toward the solution of the complex and intricate problem of the dam. In consequence, he re-doubled his efforts and worked overtime, permitting himself less than four hours of sleep a night. His meals he either went without or took at his desk.

All the urgings of Griffith and Lord James could not induce him to cease driving himself to the very limit of endurance. Day by day he fell off, growing steadily thinner and more haggard and more feverish; yet still he toiled on, figuring and planning, planning and figuring.

But on the morning of the day set for Genevieve's ball, the weary, haggard worker tossed his pencil into the air, and uttered a shout that brought his two friends on a run from Griffith's office.

"I've got it! I've got it!" he flung at them, as they rushed in. He thrust a tablet across the table. "There's the proof. Check those

totals, Grif."

Lord James leaned over the table to grasp Blake's hand.

"Gad, old man!" he said. "Just in time for you to go to the ball."

Griffith paused in his swift checking of Blake's final computations.

"Ball? Not on your sweet life! He's going to bed."

"You promised to go, Tom," said Lord James.

"Did I?" replied Blake. "Well, then, of course I'm going."

"Of course!" jeered Griffith. "It's no use arguing against a mule.

Can't help but wish you hadn't reminded him, Mr. Scarbridge."

"The change will do him good," argued Lord James.

"I'm in for it, anyway," said Blake. "Only thing, I wish I could get some sleep, in between. Well, here's for a good hot bath and a square meal. That'll set me up."

Griffith shook his head. "I'm not so sure. What you need is twelve hours on your back."

That he was right the Englishman had to admit himself with no little contrition before the ball was half over.

Blake presented a good figure, and though he talked little and danced less, yet on the whole he produced a very good impression. As Lord James had once observed, with regard to his visit at Ruthby Castle, Blake's bigness of mind seemed to be instinctively sensed by nearly all those with whom he came in contact on favorable terms.

But, from the first, he avoided Genevieve with a persistence so marked as almost to disarm Mrs. Gantry.

Most of his few dances were with Dolores, who discovered that, notwithstanding his evident weariness, he was astonishingly light on his feet and by no means a poor waltzer. But after midnight she found it increasingly difficult to lure him out on the floor whenever she was seized with the whim to favor him by scratching the name--and feelings--of some other partner.

More than once Lord James urged him to go home and turn in. Blake's reply was that he knew he ought not to have come to the ball, but since he had come, he proposed to stick it out,--he would not be a quitter. So he stayed on, hour after hour, weary-eyed and taciturn, but by no means ill-humored. Many of the wall-flowers and elderly guests poured their chatter into his unhearing ear, and thought him a most sympathetic listener.

Genevieve, however, with each glimpse that she caught of him,

perceived how his fatigue was constantly verging toward exhaustion. At last, between three and four in the morning, she cut short a dance with young Ashton and asked Lord James to take her into the library for a few minutes' rest. He was with Dolores, but immediately relinquished her to Ashton, and went off with Genevieve.

They soon passed out of the chatter and whirl of the crowd into the seclusion of the library. Genevieve led the way to her father's favorite table, but avoided the big high-backed armchair. Lord James placed a smaller chair for her at the other side of the table, facing the door of the cardroom, and as she sank into it he took the chair at the corner.

"Ah!" sighed Genevieve. "It's so restful to get away from them all for a few moments."

"I wonder you're not still more fatigued. Awful crush," replied Lord James. "I daresay you haven't had any chance all evening for a nibble of anything. Directed that something be brought to us here."

"That was very thoughtful of you. I do need something. I'm depressed-- It's about Tom. I brought you in here to ask your opinion. He has looked so haggard and worn to-night."

"Overwork," explained Lord James. "He's been hard at it, day and night, in that stuffy office. He could stand any amount of work out in the open. But this being cooped up indoors and grinding all the time at those bally figures!"

"If only it's nothing worse! I'm so afraid!"

"No. It hasn't come on again; though that may happen any time when he's so nearly pegged. Must confess, I blame myself for urging him to come to-night. But he said he had solved the big problem, and I thought the change would do him good--relax his mind, you know. Egregious mistake, I fear. I've urged him to go; but he insists upon sticking it out."

"But you're certain that he--has--done nothing as yet?"

"No, indeed, I assure you! This over-fatigue--I'm not even certain whether the craving is on him or not.... You'll pardon me, Miss Genevieve--but do you realize how hard you have made it for him, cutting him off from all help in his desperate struggle?"

"Then he is fighting all alone?" she exclaimed.

"Yes. He won't allow even me to jolly him up now. He's given me the cold shoulder. Said the inference to be drawn from your conditions was that he should have no help whatever."

"Isn't that brave!--isn't that just like him!" cried the girl, her eyes sparkling and cheeks aglow. "He will win! I feel sure he'll

win!"

Lord James looked down at the table, and asked in rather an odd and hesitating tone: "We must hope it. But--if he does win--what then?"

Blake came slowly into the room through the doorway behind them, his head downbent as if he were pondering a problem.

Unaware of the newcomer, Genevieve looked regretfully into the troubled face of her companion, and answered him with absolute candor. "Dear friend, need I repeat? I am very fond of you, and I esteem you very highly. Yet if he succeeds, I must say 'no' to you."

As the young Englishman bent over, without replying, Blake roused from his abstraction and perceived that he was not alone in the room.

"Hello--'scuse me!" he mumbled. Half startled, they turned to look at him. He met them with a rare smile. "So it's you, Jeems--and Miss Jenny. Didn't mean to cut in on your 'tates-an'-tay, as the Irishman put it."

He started to turn back. Genevieve sought to stop him. "Won't you join us, Tom?"

"Thanks, no. It's Jimmy's sit-out. I just stepped in here to see if I could find a book on the differential calculus. Been figuring a problem in my head all evening, and there's a formula I need to get my final solution. I know that formula well as I know you, but somehow my memory seems to've stopped working."

"Those bally figures! Can't you ever chop off?" remonstrated Lord James. "You're pegged. Come and join us. Miss Genevieve will be interested to hear about the dam."

"I'm interested, indeed I am, Tom. Papa says you are working out a piece of wonderful engineering."

Blake stared. "What does he know about it?"

"I suppose his consulting engineer told him--your friend Mr. Griffith."

"Grif's not working for him now."

"Indeed? Then I misunderstood. Anyway, you must come and explain all about the dam."

"Well, if you insist," said Blake. He went around to the big armchair, across from Genevieve, and sat down wearily while explaining: "But the dam is a long way from being built. It's all on paper yet, and I've had to rely on the reports sent in by the field engineers."

A footman came in and set food and wine before Genevieve and Lord

James. Blake went on, with quick-mounting enthusiasm, heedless of the coming and going of the soft-footed, unobtrusive servant.

"That's the only thing I'm afraid of. Would have liked to've gone over the ground myself first. But they had two surveys, and the field notes check fairly well. Barring mistakes in them, I've got the proposition worked out to a T. It's all done except some figuring of details that any good engineer could do. Just as well, for I'm about all in. Stiffest proposition I ever went up against."

He sank back into the depths of the big chair, with a sudden giving way of enthusiasm to fatigue. Lord James reached out his plate to him.

"You are pegged, old man," he said. "Have a sandwich."

"No," replied Blake. "I'm too played out to eat. Just want to rest."

Genevieve had been scrutinizing his face, and her deepening concern lent a note of sharpness to her reproach: "You're exhausted! You should not have come to-night!"

"Couldn't pass up a dance at your house, could I?" he smilingly rejoined. "Don't you worry about me. It's all right, long's I've got that whole damn irrigation system worked out."

"Ha! ha! old man!" chuckled Lord James. "That expresses it to a T, as you put it. But wouldn't it be better form to say, 'the whole irrigation dam system'?"

Blake smiled shamefacedly. "Did I make a break like--such as that? 'Scuse me, Miss Jenny. I'm sort of--I'm rather muddled to-night."

"No wonder, after all you've done," said Genevieve. She added, with a radiant smile, "But isn't it glorious that you've finished such a great work! Papa says that you've actually invented a new kind of dam."

The silent footman had reappeared with another plate and glass of wine. He glided around behind Blake, who had leaned forward again with the right arm upon the edge of the table. Unconscious of the servant, who placed the plate and wine glass near him on his left and quietly glided from the room, the engineer responded to Genevieve's remark with an animation that might have been likened to the last flare of a dying candle.

"No," he said, "it's not exactly a new kind of dam--not an invention. I did work out once a modification of bridge trusses which some might call an invention,--new principle in the application of trusses to bridge structure. Allows for a longer suspension span on cantilever bridges."

"But this Zariba Dam," remarked Lord James; "I've yet to learn, myself, just how you worked it out."

"Well, it wasn't any invention; just a sort of discovery how to combine a lot of well-known principles of construction to fit the particular case. You see, it's this way. There was only one available site for the dam, and the mid-section of that was bottomless bog; yet provision had to be made for a sixty-five foot head of water."

"You take him, Miss Genevieve," said Lord James. "They have no solid ground to build on, and the water above the dam is to be sixty-five feet deep."

"I should think the dam would sink into the bog," remarked Genevieve.

"That was one factor in the problem," said Blake. "Solved it by putting the steel reinforcement of the concrete in the form of my bridge-truss span. The whole central section could hang in midair and not buckle or drop. That was simple enough, long's I had my truss already invented. The main difficulty was that deep bog. If you studied hydrostatics, you'd soon learn that a sixty-five foot head of water puts an enormous pressure on the bed of a reservoir."

Absorbed in his explanation, Blake unconsciously grasped the wine glass in his left hand, as he went on:

"That pressure would be enough to make the water boil down through the bog and clear out under the deepest foundation any of the other engineers had been able to figure out. Well, I figured and figured, but somehow I couldn't make anything in the books go. At last, when I had almost given up--"

"No! you couldn't do that," put in Lord James.

Blake smiled at him, and paused to grasp again his broken thread of thought. In the fatal moment when his wakeful consciousness was diverted, and before Lord James could interpose to avert the act, his subconsciousness automatically caused his left hand to raise the glass which it held to his lips.

Before he was aware of what he was doing, he had taken a sip of the wine. An instant afterward the glass shattered on the floor beside his chair, and he clutched at the edge of the table, his face convulsed and his eyes glaring with the horror of what he had done.

"Hell!" he gasped.

Genevieve rose and started back from the table, shocked and frightened by what she mistook for an outburst of rage or madness. Lord James rose almost as quickly, no less shocked and quite as uncertain as to what his friend would do.

[Illustration: His jaw closed fast,--and in the same instant his outstretched hand smashed down upon the wine glass]

"Tom!" he called warningly, and he laid his hand on Blake's shoulder.

Almost beside himself in the paroxysm of fear and craving that had stricken his face white and half choked him with seeming rage, Blake shook off the restraining hand, and gasped hoarsely at Genevieve:

"Wine!--here--in your house! God! Shoved into my hand! Smell wasn't enough--must taste it! God! Tough deal!"

"Lord Avondale!" cried Genevieve, and she turned to leave the room, furiously indignant.

"Gad! old man!" murmured Lord James, staring uncertainly from Blake to the angry girl, for once in his life utterly disconcerted and bewildered. He was unable to think, and the impulse of his breeding urged him to accompany Genevieve. After a moment's vacillation, he sprang about and hastened with her from the room.

Blake sat writhing in dumb anguish, his distended eyes fixed upon the doorway for many moments after they had gone. Then slowly yet as though drawn by an irresistible force, his gaze sank until it rested upon the half-filled wine glass left by Lord James. He glared at it in fearful fascination. Suddenly his hand shot out to clutch at it,--and as suddenly was drawn back.

There followed a grim and silent struggle, which ended in a second clutch at the glass. This time the shaking fingers closed on the slender stem. The wine was almost wetting his lips when, with a convulsive jerk, he flung it out upon the rug beside his chair.

Shuddering and quivering, Blake sank back in the chair, with his left arm upraised across his face as if he were expectant of a crushing blow or sought to shut out some horrible sight. His right arm slipped limply down outside the chair-arm, and the empty glass dropped to the floor out of his relaxing fingers.

Yet the lull in the contest was only momentary. As his protecting arm sank down again, his bloodshot eyes caught sight of the wine in Genevieve's glass. Instantly he started up rigid in his chair and clutched the edge of the table, as if to spring up and escape. But he could not tear his gaze away from the crimson wine.

Again there came the grim and silent struggle, and again the fierce craving for drink compelled his hand to go out to grasp the glass. But his will was not yet totally benumbed. As his fingers crooked to clutch the glass-stem, he made a last desperate effort to withstand the all but irresistible impulse that was forcing him over the brink of the pit. Beads of cold sweat started out on his forehead. His face creased with furrows of unbearable agony. His mouth gaped. The serpent had him by the throat.

The struggling man realized that he was on the verge of defeat. He was almost overcome. In a flash he perceived the one way to escape. For a single instant his slack jaw closed fast,--and in the same instant his

outstretched hand clenched together and upraised and smashed down upon the wine glass.

Utterly exhausted, the victor collapsed forward, with head and arms upon the table, in a half swoon that quickly passed into the sleep-stupor of outspent strength.

CHAPTER XXVI

TURNING THE ODD TRICK

Thus it was Lord James found his friend when he came hurrying back into the library. He did not rouse Blake to ask questions. One glance at the shattered glass and Blake's bleeding hand was enough to tell him what had happened. There could be no doubt that Blake had won. It was no less certain, however, that the struggle had cost him the last ounce of his strength. What he now needed was absolute rest.

With utmost gentleness, Lord James examined the cut hand for fragments of glass and bound it up with his own handkerchief. As quietly, he gathered up the broken glass and the dishes, and wiped the blood and wine from the table. Another hour would see the end of the ball. Many of the guests already had gone, and it was not probable that any of those who remained would leave the ballroom or the cardroom to wander into the secluded library. Yet he thought it as well to remove the traces of Blake's struggle. He placed the bandaged hand of his unconscious friend down on the chair-arm, in the shadow of the edge of the table, and went out with the plates and glass, closing the door behind him.

He had been gone only a few minutes when the door of the cardroom swung open before a sharp thrust, and Mr. Leslie stepped into the library, followed by Mrs. Gantry. Mr. Leslie closed the door, and each took advantage of the seclusion to blink and yawn and stretch luxuriously. They had just risen from the card table, and were both cramped and sleepy. Also neither perceived Blake, who was hidden from them by the back of the big chair.

"Ho-ho-hum!" yawned Mr. Leslie, in a last relaxing stretch. "That ends it for this time." He wagged his head at his sister-in-law, and rubbed his hands together exultantly. "For once you'll have to admit I can play bridge."

"For once," she conceded, as she moved toward the table. "You're still nothing more than a whist-player, yet had it not been for the honor score, you'd have beaten us disgracefully. One is fortunate when one has the honor score in one's favor."

"H'm! h'm!" he rallied. "I'll admit you women can score honor, but

the question is, do you know what honor is?"

"Most certainly--when the score is in our favor. One would fancy you'd been reading Ibsen. Of all the _bad_ taste--" Mrs. Gantry stopped short, to raise her lorgnette and stare at the flaccid form of Blake.

"Hoity-toity! What have we here?"

"Hey?" queried Mr. Leslie, peering around her shoulder. "Asleep? Who is he?"

Mrs. Gantry turned to him and answered in a lowered voice: "It's that fellow, Blake. I do believe he's intoxicated."

"Intoxicated?" exclaimed Mr. Leslie. He went quickly around and bent over Blake. He came back to her on tiptoe and led her away from the table.

"You're mistaken," he whispered. "I'm certain he hasn't touched a drop."

"Certain?"

"Yes. Some one has spilled wine on the table; but his breath proves that he hasn't had any. It's merely that he's worn out--fallen asleep. Poor boy!"

"'Poor boy'?" repeated Mrs. Gantry, quizzing her brother-in-law through her lorgnette.

"H'm. Why not?" he demanded. "I was most unjust to him. I've been compelled to reverse my judgment of him on every point that was against him. As you know, he refused everything I offered in the way of money or position. He has proved that his intentions are absolutely honorable,--and now he has proved himself a great engineer. By his solution of the Zariba Dam problem, he has virtually put half a million, dollars into my pocket."

"I understood that you turned that project over to some company."

"The Coville Company--of which I own over ninety-five per cent of the stock. He would quit if he knew it, and I can't afford to lose him. The solution of the dam is a wonderful feat of engineering. That's what's the matter with him now. He worked at it to the point of exhaustion--and then for him to come here, already worn out!"

"I'm sure he was quite welcome to stay away," put in the lady.

Mr. Leslie frowned, and went on: "Griffith tells me that he can stand any amount of outdoor work, but that office work runs him down fast. But I'll soon fix that. We arranged to put him in charge of the Michamac Bridge."

"In charge? How will you get rid of Lafayette? You've grumbled so

often about his having a contract to remain there as chief builder, because he drew the bridge plans."

"Copied them, you should say."

"Ah, is that the term?"

"For what he did, yes--unless one uses the stronger term."

"I quite fail to take you."

"You'll understand--later on. Griffith and I are figuring that Tom will take the bridge and keep it."

"He has my heartfelt wish that he will take it soon, and remain in personal possession for all time!"

"H'm. I presume Genevieve could come down to visit us occasionally."

"Herbert! You surely cannot mean--?"

"Griffith has told me something in connection with this bridge that proves Thomas Blake to be one of the greatest engineers, if not the greatest, in America. I'd be proud to have him for a son-in-law."

"Impossible! _impossible!_ It can't be you'll withdraw your opposition!"

"Not only that; I'll back him to win. I like your earl. He's a fine young fellow. But, after all, Blake is an _American_."

"He's a brute! Herbert, it is impossible!"

"They said that dam was impossible. He has mastered it. He's big; he's got brains. He'll be a gentleman within six months. He's a genius!"

"_Poof!_ He's a degenerate!"

"You'll see," rejoined Mr. Leslie. He went back to the table and tapped the sleeper sharply on the shoulder.

Blake stirred, and mumbled drowsily: "Huh! what--whatcha want?"

"Wake up," answered Mr. Leslie. "I wish to congratulate you."

Blake slowly heaved himself up and blinked at his disturber with haggard, bloodshot eyes. He was still very weary and only half roused from his stupor.

"Huh!" he muttered. "Must 'uv dropped 'sleep--Dog tired." His bleared gaze swung around and took in Mrs. Gantry. He started and tried to sit more erect. "Excuse me! Didn't know there was a lady here."

"Don't apologize. That's for me to do," interposed Mr. Leslie, offering his hand. "My--that is, the Coville Company officers tell me you've worked out a wonderful piece of engineering for them."

Blake stared hard at the bookcase behind Mrs. Gantry and answered curtly, oblivious of the older man's hand. "That remains to be seen. It's only on paper, so far."

"But I--h'm--it seems they are sufficiently satisfied to wish to put you in charge of the Michamac Bridge."

"In charge?"

"Yes."

"How about Ashton--their contract with him?"

"That's to be settled later. I wish--h'm--I understand that you are to be sent nominally as Assistant Engineer."

"I am, eh? Excuse _me_!"

"At double the salary of Ashton, and--"

"Not at ten times the salary as _his_ assistant!"

"But you must know that Griffith's doctor has ordered him to Florida, and with the work rushing on the bridge--He tells me it has reached the most critical stage of construction--that suspension span--"

"You seem mighty interested in a project you got rid of," remarked Blake, vaguely conscious of the other's repressed eagerness.

"Yes. I was the first to consider the possibility of bridging the strait."

"Your idea, was it?" said Blake, with reluctant admiration. "It was a big one, all right."

"Nothing as compared to the invention of that bridge," returned Mr. Leslie.

"Your young friend Ashton sure is a great one," countered Blake.

"The man who planned that bridge is a genius," stated Mr. Leslie with enthusiasm. "That's one fact. Another is that Laffie Ashton is unfit to supervise the construction of the suspension span. I'll see to it myself that the matter is so arranged that you--"

"Thanks, no. You'll do nothing of the kind," broke in Blake. He spoke without brusqueness yet with stubborn determination. "I don't want any favors from you, and you know why. I can appreciate your congratulations, long as you seem to want to be friendly. But you

needn't say anything to the company."

"Very well, very well, sir!" snapped Mr. Leslie, irritated at the rebuff. He jerked himself about to Mrs. Gantry. "There's time yet. What do you say to another rubber?"

"You should have spoken before we rose," replied the lady. "There'll be others who wish to go. You'll be able to take over some one's hand. I prefer to remain in here for a _tete-a tete_ with Mr. Blake."

Blake and Mr. Leslie stared at her, alike surprised. The younger man muttered in far other than a cordial tone: "Thanks. But I'm not fit company. Ought to've been abed and asleep hours ago."

"Yet if you'll pardon me for insisting, I wish to have a little chat with you," replied Mrs. Gantry.

At her expectant glance, Mr. Leslie started for the door of the cardroom. As he went out and closed the door, Mrs. Gantry took the chair on the other side of the table from Blake, and explained in a confidential tone: "It is about this unfortunate situation."

Blake stared at her, with a puzzled frown. "Unfortunate what?"

"Unfortunate situation," she replied, making an effort to moderate her superciliousness to mere condescension. "I assure you, I too have learned that first impressions may err. I cannot now believe that you are torturing my niece purposely."

Blake roused up on the instant, for the first time wide awake.

"What!" he demanded. "I--torturing--her?"

"Most unfortunately, that is, at least, the effect of the situation."

"But I--I don't understand! What is it, anyhow? I'd do anything to save her the slightest suffering!"

"Ah!" said Mrs. Gantry, and she averted her gaze.

"Don't you believe me?" he demanded.

"To be sure--to be sure!" she hastened to respond. "Had I not thought you capable of that, I should not have troubled to speak to you."

"But what is it? What do you mean?" he asked, with swift-growing uneasiness.

"I do not say that I blame you for failing to see and understand," she evaded. "No doubt you, too, have suffered."

"Yes, I've--But that's nothing. It's Jenny!" he exclaimed, fast on the barbed hook. "Good God! if it's true I've made her suffer--But how?"

Why? I don't understand."

Mrs. Gantry studied him with a gravity that seemed to include a trace of sympathy. There was an almost imperceptible tremor in her voice.

"Need I tell you, Mr. Blake, how a girl of her high ideals, her high conception of noblesse oblige, of duty (you saved her life as heroically as--er--as a fireman)--need I point out how grateful she must always feel toward you, and how easily she might mistake her gratitude for something else?"

"You mean that she--that she--" He could not complete the sentence.

Mrs. Gantry went on almost blandly. "A girl of her fine and generous nature is apt to mistake so strong a feeling of gratitude for what you no doubt thought it was."

"Yet that morning--on the cliffs--when the steamer came--"

"Even then. Can you believe that if she really loved you then, she could doubt it now?"

"You say she--does--doubt it? I thought that--maybe--" The heavy words dragged until they failed to pass Blake's tense lips.

"Doubt it!" repeated Mrs. Gantry. "Has she accepted you?"

"No. I--"

"Has she promised you anything?"

"No. She said that, unless she was sure--"

"What more do you need to realize that she is not sure? Can you fancy for a moment that she would hesitate if she really loved you--if she did not intuitively realize that her feeling is no more than gratitude? That is why she is suffering so. She realizes the truth, yet will not admit it even to herself."

"Blake forced himself to face the worst. "Then what--what do you--?"

"Ah! so you really are generous!" exclaimed Mrs. Gantry, beaming upon him, with unfeigned suavity. "Need I tell you that she is extremely fond of Lord Avondale? With him there could be no doubts, no uncertainties."

"Jimmy is all right," loyally assented Blake. "Yes, he's all right. Just the same, unless she--" He stopped, unable to speak the word.

"In accepting him she would attain to--" The tactful dame paused, considered, and altered her remark. "With him she would be happy."

"I'm not saying 'no' to that," admitted Blake. "That is, provided--"

"Ah! And you say you love her!" broke in Mrs. Gantry. "What love is it that would stand between her and happiness--that would compel her to sacrifice her life, out of gratitude to you?"

Blake bent over and asked in a dull murmur: "You are sure it's that?"

"Indeed, yes! How can it be otherwise?--a girl of her breeding; and you--what you are!"

Blake bent over still lower, and all his fortitude could not repress the groan that rose to his lips. Mrs. Gantry watched him closely, her face set in its suave smile, but her eyes hard and cold. She went on, without a sign of compunction: "But I now believe you are possessed of sterling qualities, else I should not have troubled to speak the truth to you."

She paused to emphasize what was to follow. "There is only one way for you to save her. She is too generous to save herself. I believe that you really love her. You can prove it by--" again she paused--"going away."

Blake bent over on the table and buried his face in his arms. His smothered groan would have won him the compassion of a savage. It was the cry of a strong man crushed under an unbearable burden. Mrs. Gantry was not a savage. Her eyes sparkled coldly.

"You will go away. You will prove your love for her," she said.

Certain that she had accomplished what she had set out to do, she returned to the cardroom, and left her victim to his misery and despair.

CHAPTER XXVII

A PACKING CASE

Already exhausted by the stress of the fierce fight that he had so hardly won, Blake could no longer sustain such acute grief. Nature mercifully dulled his consciousness. He sank into a stupor that outwardly was not unlike heavy slumber.

Mrs. Gantry had been gone several minutes when the other door swung open. Dolores skipped in, closely followed by Lafayette Ashton. The young man's face was flushed, and there was a slight uncertainty in his step; but as he closed the door and followed the girl across the room, he spoke with rather more distinctness than usual.

"Here we are, _ma cher_. I knew we'd find a place where you could

show me how kind you feel toward your fond Fayette."

"So that's the way you cross the line?" criticised Dolores. "What a get-away for a fast pacer who has gone the pace!"

"Now, Dodie, don't hang back. You know as well as I do--"

"Hush! Don't whisper it aloud!" cautioned the girl, pointing dramatically to Blake. "Betray no secrets. We are not alone!"

Ashton muttered a French curse, and went over to the table.

"It's that fellow, Blake," he whispered, over his shoulder.

"Mr. Blake?" exclaimed Dolores, tiptoeing to the table. "He's gone to sleep. Poor man! I know he must be awfully tired, else he would have waltzed with me again the last time I scratched your name."

"What you and Genevieve can see in him gets me!" muttered Ashton, with a shrug. "Look at him now. Needn't tell me he's asleep. He's intoxicated. That's what's the matter with him."

Dolores leaned far over the table toward Blake, sniffed, and drew back, with a judicial shake of her head. "Can't detect it. But, then, I couldn't expect to, with you in the room."

"Now, Dodie!"

She again leaned over the table. "See," she whispered. "His hand is tied up. It's hurt."

"Told you he's intoxicated," insisted Ashton.

The girl moved toward a davenport in the corner farthest from Blake.

"Come over here," she ordered. "It's a nuisance to sit it out with you, when it's one of the last waltzes. At least I won't let you disturb Mr. Blake."

"Mr. T. Blake, our heroic cave-man!" replied Ashton, as he followed her across the room.

"How you love him!" she rallied. "What's the cause of your jealousy?"

"Who says I'm jealous?"

"Of course there's no reason for you to be. He's not interested in me, and you're not in Genevieve--just now."

"My dear Dodie! You know you've always been the only one."

"Since the last!" she added. "But if it's not jealousy, what is it?--professional envy? You've been knocking him all the evening. You began

it the day he came. What have you against him, anyway? He has never wronged you."

Ashton's eyes narrowed, and one corner of his mouth drew up.

"Hasn't he, though!" he retorted. "The big brute! I can't imagine how your mother can allow you and Genevieve to speak to him, when she knows what he is. And your uncle--the low fellow tried to blackmail him--accused him of stealing his bridge plans. First thing I know, he'll be saying _I_ did it!"

"Did you?" teased the girl, as she seated herself on the heap of pillows at the head of the davenport.

Ashton's flushed face turned a sickly yellow. He fell, rather than seated himself, in the centre of the davenport.

"What--what--" he babbled; "you don't mean--No! I didn't!--I tell you, I didn't! They're my plans; I drew them all myself!"

"Why, Laffie! what is the matter with you?" she demanded, half startled out of her mockery. "Can it be you've mixed them too freely? Or is it the lobster? You've a regular heavy-seas-the-first-day-out look."

He managed to pull himself together and mutter in assent: "Yes, it must be the lobster. But the sight of that brute is enough to--to--"

"Then perhaps you had better leave the room," sweetly advised Dolores. "Mr. Blake happens to be one of my friends."

"No, he isn't," corrected Ashton.

"Really!"

"No. I won't have it. You needn't expect me to have anything to do with you unless you cut him."

"Oh, Laffie! how could you be so cruel?" she mocked.

He was so far intoxicated that he mistook her sarcasm for entreaty. He responded with maudlin fervor. "Don't weep, Dodiekins! I'll be as easy on you as I can. You see, I must inform you on such things, if you're to be my _fiancee_."

She was quick to note his mistake, and sobbed realistically: "_Fi-fiancee!_ Oh! Oh, Laffie! Bu-but you haven't asked me yet!"

He moved along the davenport nearer to her, and attempted to clasp her hand.

"You're a coy one, Dodiekins!" he replied. "Of course I'm asking you, you know that. You can't think I don't mean it. You know I mean it."

"Really?"

"Of course! Haven't I been trying to get a chance to tell you, all the evening? Of course I mean it! You're the fair maiden of my choice, Dodiekins, even if you aren't so rich as some."

"Fair?--but I'm a brunette," she corrected. "It's Genevieve you're thinking of. Confess now, it is, isn't it?"

"No, indeed, no!" he protested. "I prefer brunettes--always have! You're a perfect brunette, Dodiekins. I've always liked you more than Genevieve. You're the perfect brunette type, and you have all that _verve_--you're so _spirituelle_. Just say 'yes' now, and let's have it over with. To-morrow I'll buy you the biggest solitaire in town."

"Oh, Laffie!--the biggest? You're too kind! I couldn't think of it!" she mocked.

"But I mean it, Dodie, every word, indeed I do!" he insisted, ardently thrusting out an arm to embrace her.

She slipped clear, and sprang up, to stand just beyond his reach.

"So great an honor!" she murmured. "How can I deprive all the other girls of the greatest catch in town?"

"They've tried hard enough to catch me," he replied. "But I'd rather have you than all the blondes put together. I mean it, every word. I don't mind at all that you're not so rich as Genevieve. I'll have enough for two, as soon as the old man shuffles off this mortal coil. You'll bring him dead to rights on the will question. He likes you almost as well as he likes Genevieve. You're second choice with him."

"Second!--not the third?--nor the fourth? You're sure?"

"No, second; and you can count on it, he'll do the handsome thing by Mrs. Lafayette, even if he keeps me on an allowance. So now, say the word, and come and cuddle up."

"Oh, Laffie!--in here? We might disturb Mr. Blake."

"Blake!" he muttered, and he looked angrily at the big inert form half prostrate on the table. "He's intoxicated, I tell you--or if he's not, he ought to be. The insolence of him, hanging around Genevieve! I hope he is drunk! That would settle it all. We'd be rid of him then."

"We'?" queried Dolores.

He caught her curious glance, and hastened to disclaim: "No, not we--Genevieve--I meant Genevieve, of course!"

Dolores affected a coquettish air. "Oh, Mr. Brice-Ashton! I do believe

you want to get him out of the way."

"I? No, no!" he protested, with an uneasy, furtive glance at Blake.

"Don't try to fool me," she insisted. "I know your scheme. But it's of no use. If she doesn't take the hero, she'll accept the earl. Ah, me! To think you're still scheming to get Vievie, when all the evening you've pretended it was I!"

In the reaction from his fright, he sprang up and advanced on her ardently. "It is you, Dodie! you know it is. Own up, now--we're just suited to each other. It's a case of soul-mates!"

"Oh, is it, really?" she gushed. He sought to kiss her, but she eluded him coquettishly. "Wait, please. We must first settle the question. If it's a case of soul-mates, who's to be the captain?"

"See here, Dodie," he admonished; "we've fooled long enough. I'm in earnest. You don't seem to realize this is a serious proposal."

"Really?" she mocked. "A formal declaration of your most honorable intentions to make me Mrs. L. Brice-Ashton?"

"Of course! You don't take it for a joke, do you?"

She smiled upon him with tantalizing sweetness. "Isn't it? Well, it may not be. But how about yourself?"

"Dolores," he warned, "unless you wish me to withdraw my--"

"Your solemn suit!" she cut in. "With that and the case you mentioned, the matter is complete. A suit and a case make a suitcase. You have my permission to pack."

"Dodie! You can't mean it!"

"Can't I? You may pack yourself off and get a tailor to press your suit. He can do it better. Run along now. I'm going to make up to Mr. Blake for that waltz of yours that he wouldn't let me give to him."

"You flirt!" cried Ashton, flushing crimson. "I believe your heart is made of petrified wood."

"Then don't ask me to throw it at you. It might hurt your soft head."

"Dolores!" he warned her.

"Yes," she went on, pretending to misunderstand him. "Wouldn't it be awful?--a chunk of petrified wood plunking into a can of woodpulp!"

"I wish you to remember, Miss Gantry--" he began,

"Don't fret," she impatiently interrupted. "I'll not forget 'Miss

Gantry,' and I wish you wouldn't so often. 'Dodie,' 'Dodie,' 'Dodie,' all the evening. It's monotonous."

"Indeed. Am I to infer, Miss Gantry, that you are foolish enough to play fast and loose with me?"

"You're so fast, how could I loose you?" she punned.

He muttered a French oath.

"Naughty! Naughty!" she mocked. "Swearing in French, when you know I don't speak it! Why not say, 'damn it' right out? That would sound better,"

"See here, Dodie," he warned. "I've stood enough of this. You know you're just dying to say 'yes.' But let me tell you, if you permit this chance to slip by--"

"Oh, run along, do!" she exclaimed. "I want to think, and it's impossible with you around."

"Think?" he retorted. "I know better. What you want is a chance to coquet with him."

He looked about at Blake, with a wry twist in his lower lip.

"One enjoys conversing with a man once in a while," she replied, and she turned from him a glance of supreme contempt and loathing that pierced the thickness of his conceit. Disconcerted and confused, he beat a flurried retreat, jerking shut the door with a violent slam.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SHORTEST WAY

The noise of the door jarred Blake from his lethargy. He groaned and sluggishly raised his head. His face was bloodless and haggard, his bloodshot eyes were dull and bleared. He had the look of a man at the close of a drunken debauch.

Dolores hastened to him, exclaiming, "Mr. Blake, you are ill! I shall phone for a doctor!"

"No," he mumbled apologetically. "Don't bother yourself, Miss Dolores. It's not a doctor I need. I'm only--"

"You are ill! I'll call Genevieve." She started toward the door.

"Don't!" he cried. "Not her--for God's sake, not her!" He rose to his

feet heavily but steadily. "I'm going--away."

"Going away? Where?" asked Dolores, puzzled and concerned.

"Alaska--Panama--anywhere! You're the right sort, Miss Dolores. You'll explain to her why I had to go without stopping to say good-bye."

"Of course, Mr. Blake--anything I can do. But why are you leaving?"

"Your mother--she told me."

"Told you what? I do believe you're dreaming."

Blake quivered. "Wish it was a nightmare!" he groaned. He steadied himself with an effort. "No use, though. She told me the truth about--your cousin. Said her feeling for me is only gratitude."

"What! Vievie's?--only gratitude? Don't you believe it! Mamma is rooting for Jeems. She may believe it; she probably does. She wants to believe it. She wants a countess in the family."

"She couldn't do better in that line, nor in any other," replied Blake with loyal friendship. "Jimmy is all right; he's the real thing."

"Yes, twenty-four carats fine!"

"Don't joke, Miss Dolores. I know you don't like him, but it's true, just the same. I knocked around a whole lot with Jimmy, in all sorts of places. I give it to you straight,--he's square, he's white, and he's what all kinds of people would call a gentleman."

"But as for being a man?" she scoffed.

Blake's dull eyes brightened with a fond glow.

"Man?" he repeated. "D' you think I'd fool around with one of these swell dudes? No; Jimmy is the real thing, and he's a thoroughbred."

"Such a cute little mustache!" mocked the girl.

"It's one of the few things I couldn't cure him of--that and his monocle." Forgetful of self, Blake smiled at her regretfully and shook his head. "It's too bad, Miss Dolores. No use talking when it's too late; but couldn't you have liked him enough to forget the English part? You and he would sure have made a team."

"Yes, isn't it too bad? A coronet would fit my head just as well as Vievie's. But mamma is so silly. She never thought of that."

Blake stared in surprise. "You don't mean--?"

"Mamma has been so busy saving Vievie from you, she's not had time to consider me."

"Say," exclaimed Blake, "I've half a notion you do like him. That would account for the way you keep at him with your nagging and teasing."

"You don't say!"

"Yes. That's the way one of my sisters used to treat me."

"How smart you are!" cried the girl, and she faced away from him petulantly, that he might not see her flaming cheeks. "Oh, yes, of course I like him! I'm head over heels in love with him! How could I help but be?"

"Some day you'll know such things aren't joking matters," he gravely reproved her.

She turned to him, unable longer to sustain her pretence. Her voice quavered and broke: "But it's--it's true! I do!"

She bent over with her face in her hands, and her slender form shook with silent sobs. He came quickly around to her, his eyes soft with commiseration. "You poor little girl! So you lose out, too!"

She looked up at him with her tearful dark eyes, and clutched eagerly at the lapel of his coat.

"Mr. Blake! He has told me how resolute you are. You must not give up! I'm certain Vievie likes you. If only mamma hadn't meddled! She's always messing things. It's just because she can't realize I'm in long frocks. If--if only she had seen how much grander it would be to make herself the mother-in-law of an earl, instead of a mere aunt-in-law!"

Blake's face darkened morosely. "That's the way things are--misdeal all around. Your mother is right. You've lost out; I've lost out. What's the use?"

"Surely you're not going to give up?" she demanded.

"I've never before been called a quitter; but--sooner I get out from between her and Jimmy, the better," he rejoined, and turning on his heel, he started toward the door by which Ashton had left.

"But, Mr. Blake," she urged, "wait. I wish to tell you--"

"No use," he broke in, without turning or stopping.

She was about to dart after him, when the door opened, and Ashton entered, carrying a bottle of champagne and a glass. He nodded familiarly to Blake and approached him with an air of easy good-fellowship.

Blake saw only the glass and the bottle. He glared at them, his face

convulsed with fierce craving. Then he forced himself to avert his gaze. But as he started to turn aside, his jaw clenched and his eyes burned with a sudden desperate resolve. He stopped and waited, his face as hard as a granite mask. Dolores did not see his expression. She was eying Ashton, whom she sought to crush with her scorn.

"Ho!" she jeered. "So you're going to drown your sorrows in the flowing bowl. You ought to've remembered that absence makes the heart grow fonder."

To better show her contempt, she turned her back on him.

He instantly stepped forward beside Blake and began pouring out a glass of the champagne. He smiled suavely, but his eyes narrowed, and his full lower lip twisted askew.

"Look here, Blake," he began, "I know you're on the water-wagon; but you have it in for me for some reason, and I want to make it up with you. Take a glass of fizz with me."

Dolores whirled about and saw him with the glass of sparkling wine outreached to Blake, who was eying it with a peculiar oblique gaze.

"Lafayette Ashton!" she cried. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?--aren't you ashamed?"

Ashton shrugged cynically, and urged the wine on Blake. "Come on! One glass wouldn't hurt a fly. I've heard of your wonderful success with the Zariba Dam. I want to congratulate you."

"Congratulate--that's it!" replied Blake, in a harsh, strained voice. "Best man wins. Loser gets out of the way. All right. I'll take the short-cut."

He reached out his bandaged right hand to take the glass. Dolores darted toward him, crying out shrilly in horrified protest: "Stop! stop! Mr. Blake! Think what you're doing!"

"I know what I'm doing," he said taking the glass and facing her with a smile that brought tears of pity to her eyes. "Your mother is right. I'm in your cousin's way. I'm going to get out of her way, and I'm going to do it in a fashion that'll rid her of me for keeps. Hell is nearer than Alaska."

"Wait! wait!" she cried, as he raised the glass to his lips. "For her sake, don't. Wait!"

"For her sake!" he rejoined, still with that heart-rending smile. "Here's to her and to him--congratulations!"

He tossed down the wine at a swallow before she could clutch his upraised arm.

She turned upon Ashton, in a fury of scorn and anger. "You--you beast!"

"Why, what's the matter?" he protested, feigning innocence. "What's the harm in a glass of fizz?"

"You knew!" she cried, pressing upon him so fiercely that he gave back. "You knew what it means for him to drink anything--a single drop! You scoundrel!"

"There, now, Miss Dolores!" soothed Blake, patting her on the shoulder. "What's the use of telling him what he is? He knows it as well as we do. Anyhow, I didn't have to take the drink. I'm the only one to blame."

"Oh, Mr. Blake! how could you? How could you?" she cried.

"It was easy enough--doing it for her," he answered.

"For her! How can you say it?"

"Well, it's done now. Good-bye. I'm not likely to see you again soon. It's a long trip from hell to heaven," he explained with grim humor.

Great as was his fortitude, she caught a glimpse of the anguish behind his mask. But his tone, as he swung Ashton around, repulsed her. "Come on, Mephistopheles. You've turned the trick. We've less than three hours before daylight. It's whiskey straight we're after."

CHAPTER XXIX

LIGHT AND DARKNESS

Not unnaturally Dolores failed to realize at once the utter ruin that Blake had brought upon himself by overthrowing the pillars of his temple. She was too intent upon her own tragedy. With Blake out of the way, Lord James would of course have no difficulty in winning Genevieve. There was now no hope for her.

She flung herself down in a chair, with a childlike wail. "Why did he do it? Oh! why did he do it? Oh, Jimmy! you'll never look at me now! If only I could _hurt_ mamma!"

She bent over, weeping with bitter grief and anger.

She was still sobbing and crying when, sometime later, Lord James slipped hastily in from the cardroom. He closed the door swiftly and hurried toward the table, his eyes widening with his attempt to see clearly in the half light of the library.

"Tom, old man!" he called eagerly. "I'm now free to see you home. We'll slip out the side entrance--" He stopped short, perceiving that the big chair was empty, and that the figure in the chair across was not a man's.

"Er--beg pardon!" he stammered. "I--er--expected to find my friend here. Believe me, I would not have intruded--"

"So you d--don't consider me a friend!" retorted Dolores, vainly striving to hide her grief under a scornful tone.

"Miss Gantry!" he exclaimed. "Is it you?"

"It's not Vievie, that's certain. The sooner you run along and mind your business, the better."

"Miss Dolores, I--I really can't see why you hold such a dislike to me. I'll go immediately. I hadn't the remotest idea of intruding. You'll believe that? Only, y'know, I left Tom--Mr. Blake--in here. I came to go home with him. He was quite knocked-up. He should not have come to-night."

"You knew it!--you knew it, and left him in here alone!"

"Why, what do you mean, Miss Dolores? You alarm me! I left him asleep --fancied he'd not be disturbed in here--that an hour or so of sleep would freshen him up for the drive home."

"So you left him--alone--for mamma and that despicable creature to do their worst!"

"Miss Dolores, I--I beg your pardon, but I quite fail to take you. If anything has happened to Tom--"

"Regrets! What's the good of them, when it's too late?"

"Too late? Surely you cannot mean that he--?"

"Yes, the worst, the very worst,--and that miserable, detestable creature knew it when he offered him the wine. I believe he brought it in deliberately to tempt him."

"Wine? He drank! How long ago? Where is he now? I must try to check him."

"If only you could! But it's too late. He went off with Laffie."

"Not too late! The craving has been checked once--I've seen it done."

"But this time it's not the craving."

"How's that?"

"It's because he was driven desperate. He took it deliberately--intentionally."

"Impossible! Tom would never--"

"He would! He did! I saw him. But don't you blame him. She's the one. How could he know better, in his condition?--utterly tired out! She drove him to it, I tell you."

"She--Genevieve? I assure you--"

"No, no! mamma, of course! She told him a pack of lies--took away all his hope. She made him think that Vievie had never really loved him."

"Impossible!--unless your mother herself believes it."

"Oh, she believes it--or thinks she does. She's so anxious--so anxious!" The girl sprang up and stamped her foot. "Oh! I wish she and her meddling were in Hades!"

"My dear Miss Dolores!" protested Lord James, tugging nervously at his mustache.

She whirled upon him in hysterical fury. "Don't you call me that! Don't you dare call me that! I won't have it! I won't! I'm not your dear! I tell you--"

His look of blank astonishment checked her in the midst.

"I--I--I didn't mean--" she gasped. "Oh! what must you think of me!"

She turned from him, her face scarlet with shame. But in the same instant she remembered Blake, and forgot herself in the disaster to him.

"How selfish of me, when he--Poor Mr. Blake! What can be done? We must do something--at once!"

"If anything can be done!" said Lord James in a hopeless tone. "You say he took it deliberately?"

"Yes. Can't you see? Mamma had stuffed him with a lot of rot about gratitude--about Vievie sacrificing herself to him on account of gratitude. It's easy enough to guess mamma's little game. Oh! it's simply terrible! Of course he believed it, and of course he planned at once to go away--that's the kind of man he is! He planned to go away--run off--so that Vievie couldn't sacrifice herself."

"My word!"

"And just then Laffie Ashton came back with the wine. I believe he did it a-purpose--that he wanted to get Mr. Blake intoxicated!"

"The unmitigated cad! Yet why should he? It seems impossible that any man--"

"How should I know? He's vicious enough to do _anything_. But what does that matter? It's Mr. Blake. Can't you see why he took it? He was getting himself out of the way. I didn't understand then what he said--about the bad place being nearer than Alaska--but now I do. What he was determined to do was to get himself out of Vievie's way for good. The quickest that he could do it was to start drinking--go on a spree."

"Gad!"

"And now you stand here like a dummy, when there's a way to save him."

"Yes, yes! I'll go after him!" He started alertly toward the door.

She sprang before him, "No! What good would that do? You know he's set on saving Vievie. He'll not listen to you."

"Gad! That's true. He's hard enough to handle, at best. With this added--Yet I cannot but make the effort. I'll phone Mr. Griffith."

"Griffith? What's the use of wasting time? There's just one person who can save him, and you know it."

"No, unless Griffith--"

"Are you absolutely stupid? Can't you see? It's Vievie alone who--"

"Genevieve!"

"Now's the time for her to do something. She must prove her love. That alone can stop him."

"If she does love him."

"Can you doubt it?"

"She has doubted it."

"She may think she does. But it's all due to mamma's knocking and suggesting. Vievie loves him as much as he loves her. Needn't tell me! I know all about it. She made him fail--the time you took him up to Michamac. This time it's all mamma's fault. Vievie has got to save him!"

"Most assuredly it is hopeless unless she--"

"That's no reason for you to stand here gawking! You've got to go and tell her. She wouldn't listen to me; but you're a man and his friend. You can make her see the injustice of it all. She's to blame as much as mamma. This never would have happened if it hadn't been for her

shillyshallying."

Lord James paused before replying, his clear gray eyes dark with doubt and indecision.

"My word!" he murmured. "Could I but feel certain--This second failure, in so short a time! There is _her_ future to be considered, as well."

"Her future as Countess of Avondale!" scoffed the girl.

"No, I assure you, no!" he insisted. "Can you believe I could be so low?--and at such a time as this! It was of the consequences to her as well as to him--He has failed again. Can he ever win out, even should he have her aid?"

"You claim to be his friend!"

"For his sake, no less than hers--Consider what it would mean to a man of his nature, unable to check himself in his downward course, yet conscious that it was wrecking her happiness, possibly her life."

"It won't happen, not if she really loves him. You don't half know him. He could do anything--anything!--if she went to him and asked him to do it for her sake."

"Could I but be sure of that!"

"_Pah!_ You pretend to be his friend. How long would you stand here fiddling and fussing, if you didn't want her yourself?"

"That--it is too much!" he said, his face pale and very quiet. "I had ventured to hope that I might overcome your dislike. Now I see that it is as well that you have refused to regard me other than as you have."

"Why, what do you mean? I--I don't understand."

"You have always been candid. Permit me to be the same. The truth is that I had begun to wish Tom success--not alone because of my friendship for him. But now I realize that his fight is hopeless. I shall do my utmost to make your cousin happy."

Dolores stared at him with dilating eyes. "Jimmy!" she whispered. "It can't be you mean that you--that you--?"

"Yes," he answered. "Pardon me for saying anything about it. I shall not bother you again."

"Oh, thank you!" she scoffed. "So now you're going to stay quiet and wait for Vievie to fling herself into your arms when she hears about your rival."

The young Englishman flushed and as suddenly became white, yet his

voice was as steady as it was low. "I shall do whatever she wishes, if she finds that she does not love him."

"And that's all?" she jeered. "You'll calmly keep out of it while he commits hara-kiri, and then you'll step into his shoes."

"No. I shall go to her at once and ask her to save my friend--if she loves him."

"You will?"

"Yes."

"You will!" cried the girl, her cheeks flushing and her black eyes sparkling with delight--"You will! Oh, Jimmy!"

Even as the words left her lips, she became conscious of what she had done, and her flush brightened into a vivid scarlet blush. She turned and fled from him, panic-stricken.

He stood dazed, unable at first to believe what her tone and look had betrayed to him. When, after some moments, his doubt gave way to certainty, his face lighted with what might be termed joyous exasperation.

"My word!" he murmured. "The little witch! I'll pay her out jolly well for it all!"

But his blissfully exultant vexation was no more than a flash that deepened the gloom with which he recalled the disaster to his friend.

"Gad!" he reproached himself. "What am I thinking of--with her and Tom--"

He turned quickly to the door of the cardroom.

CHAPTER XXX

THE END OF DOUBT

When the Englishman entered the card-room, the last of the players to linger at their table had risen and were taking their leave of Genevieve. Her father and aunt were disputing over their last game. But at sight of the newcomer, Mrs. Gantry bowed and beckoned to him, instantly forgetful of her argument.

"You are always in time, Earl," she remarked. "We are just about to leave. May I ask if you have seen Dolores?"

"Not a moment ago. I daresay she has gone for her wraps."

"Huh! Ran off from you, eh?" bantered Mr. Leslie. "She's a coltish kitten. Didn't scratch, did she?"

"She misses no opportunity for that, the hoyden!" put in Mrs. Gantry. "Ah, Earl, we are the last." She rose and went to meet Genevieve, who was coming to them from the farther door. "My dear girl, I congratulate you! It has been a grand success!"

"Thank you, Aunt Amice," replied Genevieve in rather a listless tone. "Must you be going?"

"Lord Avondale has just come in to let me know that it is time."

"Er--beg pardon," said Lord James. "I wish to speak with Miss Leslie before going."

"Ah, in that case," murmured Mrs. Gantry, with a gratified smile, "you are excused, of course! Herbert, you may see me out."

Mr. Leslie looked from Lord James to his daughter doubtfully. But the Englishman was fingering a pack of cards with seeming nonchalance, and Genevieve met her father's glance with a quiet smile. He shook his head, and went out with Mrs. Gantry.

As they left the room, Lord James faced Genevieve with a sudden tensivity that compelled her attention.

"What is it?" she asked, half startled by his manner. "You said you wished to speak with me?"

"If you'll be so kind as to come into the library. It's a most serious matter. There'll be less chance of interruptions."

She permitted him to lead her in to her former seat at the library table. He took the big chair across from her.

"You look so grave," she said. "Please tell me what it is."

"Directly. Yet first I ask you to prepare yourself. Something has happened--most unfortunate!"

She bent toward him, startled out of her fatigue and lassitude. "You alarm me!"

"I cannot help it," he replied. "Genevieve, matters have come to an unexpected crisis. There can be no more delay. I must ask you to make your decision now. Do you love Tom?"

You have no right to ask that. I did not give you the right. You said you would wait."

"I am not asking for myself," he insisted. "It is for him. He has the right to know."

"The right? How?" she asked, with growing agitation. "I do not understand. You spoke of some misfortune. Has papa--?"

"Quite the contrary. Yet Tom is in a very bad way, and unless you--"

"Tom ill--ill?" she cried. "And I did not realize it! That I should have been angered--should have left him--because I thought he was in a rage--and all the time it was because of his suffering, his illness! It was despicable of me--selfish! Oh, Tom, Tom!"

She covered her face with her hands, and bent over, quivering with silent grief and penitence.

"You have answered me," said Lord James, regarding her with grave sympathy. "You love him."

She looked up at him, dry-eyed, her face drawn with anxiety. "Where is he? Why aren't you with him? He has a doctor? He must have the best!"

"That rests with you, Genevieve," he replied. "There is one person alone who can save him--if she loves him enough to try."

The truth flashed upon her. She stared at him, her eyes dilating with horror. "It is that you mean! He has failed--again!"

He sought to ease her despair. "Believe me, it is not yet too late-- Permit me to explain."

"Explain?" she asked. "What is there to explain? He has failed!" Her voice broke in a sob of uncontrollable grief. "I tried to forget, still hoping he was strong--that he would prove himself strong. How I have hoped and prayed--and now!"

She bent over, with her face on the table, in a vain effort to conceal and repress her grief.

Lord James leaned forward, eagerly insistent. "You must listen to me. He has not had fair play. Such a gallant fight as he was making! I believe he would have won, I really believe he would have won, had it not been for that woman."

"What woman?" asked Genevieve, half lifting her head.

"Pardon me," he replied. "But your aunt--It was most uncalled for, most unfair. It seems she sought him out--to-night, of all times!--when he was pegged--completely knocked-up. You have seen that yourself. This was after we deserted him."

"Deserted? Yes, that is the word--deserted!"

"At the moment when he tasted the wine, quite unaware of what he was doing. We deserted him at the time when he had utmost need of us. What clearer proof of his great strength than that he fought off the temptation?"

"Yet now you say--?"

"He fought it off then. He proved himself as strong as even you could desire. When I hastened in I found him still where I am sitting, but doubled over, utterly spent--asleep, poor chap. His hand was bleeding. He had shattered your--he had crushed one of the glasses with his fist."

"Crushed a glass! But why?"

"To prevent himself from drinking what was in it. Can't you see? The struggle must have been frightful; yet he won. Had I but foreseen! I fancied he would be undisturbed in here--would get a bit of refreshing sleep to pull him up. But your aunt came in. She took her opportunity --convinced him that you did not love him; that your feeling was only gratitude."

Genevieve bent over, with renewed despair. "And for that he gave up the fight!"

"He fought and won when we left him, when we deserted him in his need. It was only after your aunt had convinced him that you did not--"

"He foresaw that he would lose!" she cried. "He foresaw! But I--I could not believe it possible!"

"But you do not understand. It was not that he really lost. He did not give way because of weakness. He did it deliberately--"

"Deliberately?" she gasped. Surprise gave place to an outflashing of scorn. "Deliberately! Oh, that he could do such a thing--deliberately!"

"No, no! I must insist. To cut himself off from you, that was his purpose. He thought to save you from sacrificing yourself. However mistaken he was, you must see how high a motive--how magnanimous was his intention."

But the girl was on the verge of hysteria, and quite beyond reason.

"You may believe it--I don't! I can't! He's weak--utterly weak!"

"Genevieve, no! There's still time to save him. A word from you, if you love him."

"Love him!" she cried, almost beside herself. "How can I love him? He did it deliberately! I despise him!"

"You are vexed--angry. Pray calm yourself. I remember what you had to

say about him, there on the steamer, coming up from Aden. You loved him then."

"But now--Oh, how could he? How could he?"

The Englishman failed to understand the real cause of her half-frenzied anger and despair--the thought that Blake had ruined himself deliberately. "But don't you see it was not weakness? He proved it when he shattered the glass. His hand was cut and bleeding. He has proved that he can master that craving. I've sought to explain how it was. It is not yet too late. A word from you would save him, a single word!"

"No. It is too late. I can't see it as you do. It was weakness--weakness! I cannot believe otherwise."

"Yet--if you love him?"

"James, it is generous of you--noble!--when you yourself--"

"That's quite out of it now. It's of him I am thinking, and of you."

"Never of yourself!" she murmured. She looked down for a short moment. When she again raised her eyes, she had regained her usual quiet composure. She spoke seriously and with a degree of formality: "Lord Avondale, when you honored me with your offer, you asked me to wait before giving you a final answer."

He was completely taken unawares. "I--I--To be sure. But I cannot permit you--Your happiness is my first consideration."

"It is that disregard of self, that generosity, which enables me to speak. As I told you, I can now give you no more than the utmost of my esteem and affection. But if you are willing to take that as a beginning, perhaps, later on, I may be able to return your love as you deserve."

"But you--I do not know how to say it--In justice to yourself, no less than to him, you should make sure."

"I have never been more sure," she replied. "You have been most generous and patient. It is not right or considerate for me to longer delay my decision."

"Er--very good of you, very!" he murmured, gazing down at his interlocked fingers. "Yet--if you would care to wait--to make sure, y' know."

"But why should I wait? No, James, I am clear in what I am doing. I know that I can trust you absolutely."

Lord James slowly raised his head and met her gaze, too intent upon repressing the stress of his emotions to perceive the big fur-clad

form that stood rigid in the doorway beyond Genevieve.

"Miss Leslie," he said, speaking in the same formal and serious tone that she had used in giving her decision, "I am then to understand that you accept my proposal--you will marry me?"

"Within the year, if you desire," she responded, without any sign of hesitancy.

"It's very good of you!" he replied. "I shall devote myself to your happiness."

If his voice lacked the joyful ring and his look the ardent delight of a successful lover, she failed to heed it. He rose and bent over the table with grave gallantry to kiss the hand that she held out to him.

"Congratulations!" said a harsh voice, seemingly almost in their ears.

They looked up, startled. Blake stood close to them, at the end of the table, with his soft hat in his half-raised left hand, and his shaggy fur coat hanging limp from his bowed shoulders. He stood with perfect steadiness. Only in the fixed stare of his bloodshot eyes and the twitching of the muscles in his gray-white face could they perceive the mental stress and excitement under which he was laboring.

"Tom!" stammered the Englishman. "You here!"

"Couldn't get Ashton started," replied Blake. His voice was hoarse and rasping but not thick. Though he spoke slowly, his enunciation was distinct. "His man just carried him out. I've been waiting to slip out, unseen, this way. I ask you to excuse me. Long's I'm here, I'll make the best of it I can. Congratulations to you! Best man wins!"

While he was speaking, Genevieve had drawn her hand out of the unconscious clasp of Lord James and slowly risen from her chair. Her face was as white as Blake's; her eyes were wide with fear and pity and horror.

"You!--how could you do it?" she gasped. "When I had given you the second chance--to fail again!" The sight of his powerful jaw, clenched and resolute, stung her into an outburst of angry scorn. "Fail, fail! always fail! yet with that look of strength! To come here with that look, after failing again so utterly, miserably--in my house! You coward!"

"That's it," assented Blake in a dead monotone. "Only pity is you couldn't see it sooner. But you know me now. Ought to 've known me from the first. I didn't get drunk there in Mozambique 'cause I hadn't the stuff. You might have known that. But now it's settled. I've proved myself a brute and a fizzle--been proving it ever since Ashton got a bottle and showed me into a little room. We've been guzzling whiskey in there ever since. His man took him out dead drunk. So far I'm only--"

"Tom!" broke in Lord James. "No more of that! Tell the truth--tell her why you did it!"

"Tell her--when she's guessed already. But if you say so, Jimmy--It's the first time I ever owned up I'm a quitter. Great joke that, when all my life I haven't been anything else,--hobo, fizzle, quitter, bum--"

"Gad! Not that drive! If you can't explain to her, then keep silent."

"No, I don't keep silent till I've had my say," rejoined Blake morosely. "Needn't think I don't know just what I'm saying and what I'm doing." His voice harshened and broke with a despair that was all the more terrible for the deadness of his tone. "God! That's why the whiskey won't work. I've poured it down like water, but it's no use--it won't work! I can't forget I've lost out!"

Genevieve leaned toward him, half frenzied, her face crimson and her gentle eyes ablaze with scorn. "And you--you!--claiming to be sober--come in here and say that to me!--that you've deliberately sought to intoxicate yourself in my house--in my house! You haven't even the decency to go away to do it! You must flaunt your shame in my face!"

"I told you I meant to slip out unseen," he mumbled, for the moment weakening in his determination to vilify himself. "Didn't think you'd give me the gaff--when it was all for you."

"For me!" she cried, in a storm of hysteria--"for me! Oh! To destroy all my love for you--my trust in the courage, the strength, the heroism I thought was yours! Oh! And to prove yourself a brute, a mere brute!--here in my own house!--my guest! Oh! oh! I hate you! I hate you!"

She flung herself, gasping and quivering, into her chair, in a desperate effort to regain self-control.

Blake bent over her and murmured with profound tenderness: "There, there, little girl! Don't take on so! I ought to 've cleared out right at first--that's a fact. But I didn't mean to bother you. Just blundered in. But I'm glad to know you've found out the truth. Long's you know for sure that you hate me, 't won't take you long to feel right toward him. He's all I'm not. Mighty glad you're going to be happy. Good-bye!"

Genevieve had become very still. But she neither looked up at him nor spoke when he stopped. He turned steadily about and started toward the door of the cardroom. Lord James thrust back the heavy chair and sprang to place himself before his friend.

"Wait, Tom!" he demanded. "Can't you see? She's overcome. Good God! You can't go off this way! You must wait and tell her the truth--how it happened--why you did it!"

Blake looked at him quietly and spoke in a tone of gentle warning, as one speaks to a young child: "Now, now, Jimmy boy, get out of my way. Don't pester me. Just think how easily I could smash you--and I'm not so far from it. Stand clear, now."

"No! In justice to yourself--to her!"

"That's all settled. Let me by."

He stepped to one side, but Lord James again interfered. "No, Tom, not till you've told her! You shall not go!"

The Englishman stood resolute. Blake shook his head slowly, and spoke in a tone of keen regret: "Sorry, Jimmy; but if you will have it!"

His bandaged right fist drove out and struck squarely on the point of his friend's jaw. His nerves of sensation were so blunted by the liquor he had drunk that he struck far harder than he intended. Lord James dropped without a groan, and lay stunned. Blake stared down at him, and then slowly swung around to look at Genevieve.

She had risen and stood with her hands clutching the edge of the table. Her face was distorted with horror and loathing.

"You coward!--you murderer!" she gasped.

"Yes, that's it," he assented--"brute, drunkard, coward, murderer--all go together. You're right to hate me! But you can't hate me half as much as I hate myself. That's hell all right--to hate yourself."

Suddenly he flung out his arms toward her and his voice softened to passionate tenderness. "God! but it's worth the price!--to save you, Jenny! I'd do it all over again, a thousand times, to make you happy, little girl!"

She shrank back and flung up her arm in a gesture of bewilderment, which he mistook for fear.

"Don't be afraid," he reassured. "I'm going."

He turned hastily, stooped to feel the heart of the unconscious man, and rose to swing across to the cardroom door. He passed out swiftly and closed the door behind him, without pausing for a backward glance.

Genevieve stared after him, dazed and bewildered by her half realization of the truth. The door had closed between them--what seemed to her an age had passed--when the full realization of what he had done flashed in upon her clouded brain like a ray of glaring white light.

She flung out her arms and cried entreatingly: "Tom! Tom--dearest!"

She tried to dart around the table, but swayed and tottered, barely saving herself from the fall by sinking into a chair. The heavy, muffled clang of the street door came to her as from a vast distance. The merciful darkness closed over her.

CHAPTER XXXI

A BRIDGE GAME

The cold snap at Michamac had been broken for nearly a month, and work on the bridge was progressing with unprecedented rapidity.

Two days after the ball, Ashton had returned to the bridge sobered and chastened. The change in him may have been due to another cut in his allowance, or to a peppery interview during which Mr. Leslie had sought to browbeat him into resigning his position.

Whatever the cause of his change of heart, Ashton had so far proved himself almost feverishly eager to establish a record. Griffith, badly shaken by the failure and disappearance of Blake, had been peremptorily ordered South by his physician. Seizing the opportunity, Ashton, instead of interfering with the work, as McGraw expected, had astonished the phlegmatic general foreman by pushing operations with utmost zeal and energy.

More mechanics and laborers had been hired, and the augmented force divided into three eight-hour shifts. All day, in sun or fog or snow, and all night, under the bluish glare of the arc-lights, the expert bridgemen toiled away upon the gaunt skeleton of the gigantic bridge, far out and above the abyss of the strait. Not a moment of the twenty-four hours was lost.

But the Resident Engineer's brief spurt of energy had already notably relaxed, when, one sunny day near the end of March, a man not a member of the train crew nor a regular passenger came in on the afternoon train. As he emerged from under a coal car, one of the switchmen stared at him blankly, swore a few lurid oaths, and laughed.

The brake-rider had paid for his ride, though not in money. He limped as he walked off, and the gray pallor of his unshaven face was grotesquely shaded and blotched with coal dust. His shoddy clothes were torn and mud-stained, his soft hat begrimed and shapeless, his cheap shoes too far gone for repair. Yet for all his shiftless footwear and his limp, his stride was long and quick.

A watchman caught sight of him, and hurried after, to warn him off the grounds. The hobo disappeared behind a pile of girders. When the watchman turned the corner, his quarry had disappeared. He shook his head doubtfully at the bridge-service train, which was backing out

along the track before him with a load of eyebars and girders. There was reason to believe that the hobo had boarded it; but if so, it was under too speedy headway for the rheumatic watchman to follow.

His suspicions were well founded. As the train clattered past the unlovely buildings of rough lumber and sheet iron clustered about the bridge terminus, the stranger clambered up between two of the swaying cars and perched himself upon the wheel-like top of the handbrake. Seated thus, with feet dangling and hands thrust carelessly into the pockets of his disreputable coat, he gazed intently about at the bridge, regardless of the bitter sting of the lake wind.

The train rattled out across the shore span and along the anchor arm of the south cantilever. The brake-rider scrutinized the immense webs and lofty towers with the look of a father greeting his first-born. The train rolled on out between the towers and beyond, where swarms of carpenters and laborers were laying beams and stringers and floor planking and piling up immense stacks of material to be used farther out. The finishing gangs were following up the steel workers as fast as they could be pushed.

Beyond them, out near the end of the extension-arm, the electro-magnetic cranes of the huge main traveller were sorting and shifting forward a great heap of structural steel. The material thus handled came within the reach of the smaller traveller, which crouched upon the top-chords like a skeleton spider, swinging out the steel as wanted to the end of the unfinished suspension span.

At sight of the great heaps of structural steel and flooring material and of the ponderous main traveller so far out toward the end of the overhang, the glow in the sunken eyes of the brake-rider died out, and his grimy brows gathered in a troubled frown.

The airbrakes hissed, the cars bumped and clanked, and the train came to a laborious stop with the outermost cars beneath the lofty latticed framework of the main traveller. At once the electro-magnetic cranes began to descend, ready to swing off whole carloads of steel in their magic monstrous clutch.

The brake-rider had slipped down and was walking rapidly outward along the narrow plank footway. As he advanced he looked about him with an anxious gaze, but it was at the unfloored substructure of the bridge, not at the awesome spectacle of the swift-flowing, ice-covered stream a hundred and fifty feet beneath. Once he paused and stooped over to look closer at a rivet head.

He hurried on to where, under the smaller traveller, the uncompleted south part of the central, or suspension, span poised dizzily in space, over-arching the abyss. Many yards of gap still yawned between its tip and the tip of the sections that strained out to meet it from the end of the north cantilever.

The sections built on to the southern part of the central span had

brought the overhang still more dizzily out over the broad strait. The wonder was that men could be found who were willing to work day after day in a position of such real peril. Yet since Ashton's change of attitude, McGraw had experienced no difficulty in securing and holding enough and to spare of expert bridge-workers, who toiled and sweat at their task with seemingly never a thought of the abyss that yawned beneath them.

When the brake-rider left the train, the men of the evening shift, just come on, were swarming about the end of the overhang like ants upon the tip of a broken twig,--alert-eyed, quick-handed, cool-brained "Sons of Martha," who, balanced unconcernedly in mid-air on narrow stringers, clenched fast the rivets in Death's steel harness. During the lulls between the furiously rattling volley-blows of the electric riveting-machines they grumbled about the deterioration of smoking tobacco or speculated on next season's baseball scores.

With his beefy shoulders braced against the last top-chord post, McGraw stood chewing the end of a fat black cigar while he watched the placing of a bottom-chord of a new sub-panel. From the ox-like unconcern of his stolid face and deepset eyes, his interest in the proceedings seemed to be of the most casual nature. But at the slightest gesture of his pudgy hand, cranes swung up and down, men hauled upon guy ropes, riveters moved alertly forward with their machines.

One of the men caught McGraw's eye, and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. The general foreman looked about and saw the grimy stranger standing on the plank walk a few yards back. McGraw stared, ruminated, signed to a sub-foreman, and walked stolidly back along a string of single planks to where the stranger stood waiting for him.

The soft hat of the brake-rider was now pulled down over his eyes, and his chin was hidden in the upturned collar of his tattered coat. As McGraw approached him, he drew back out of the deafening clatter of the riveting-machines. McGraw followed, his heavy face of a sudden grown truculent. He came up close to the stranger.

"You dirty bum!" he threatened. "What you doin' here? Get t' hell outer here, or I'll trow you over!"

The stranger pushed back his hat, and met the other's menacing stare with a grin. His pale blue eyes were twinkling. McGraw's heavy jowl fell slack.

"Well, McGraw--thought you wouldn't forget me this soon. What's the latest from Mr. Griffith?"

"Jacksonville--Holy saints! you've sure been lushin' some, Mr. Blake."

"Looks like it; but as it happens I haven't. Tried to turn loose, but got switched. Instead of a spree, I've been on a bum--tour of the Sunny South."

"Bum?" repeated McGraw.

"Yes. Needed a change. Too much indoors work; so I got out."

"_Uh?_" mumbled McGraw in slow astonishment. "No booze?"

"No. That's the funny part of it. Didn't touch a drop of anything. I used to be afraid of it when I wasn't on a tear, but now I don't even think of it. Seems as if I couldn't get up a thirst if I tried. Can't make it out."

"Sick," commented McGraw.

"No. I'm eating like a horse, and getting my strength back, hand over fist."

"In your head," qualified McGraw, touching his forehead.

"Guess that's it. Must be. Never before opened the throttle and cut loose, to come to a dead stop this way. It's as if you got up a full head of steam, and then drew the fire. Mighty queer, though,--my head is as clear as crystal."

"Huh," grunted McGraw ambiguously. "Come to take your job--assistant?"

Blake's face darkened. "No, just dropped by on my way to Canada. Thought I'd have a look at my--" he paused, and altered his statement --"that I'd see how your old scrap-heap is getting along."

"Huh."

"But, long as I'm here, guess I'll take hold for a turn or two, just to keep my hand in."

"Good! Need an engineer."

"I might as well earn enough for railroad fare. This brake-beaming and riding the rods isn't as soft a snap as it used to seem when I was a kid."

"Soft? Y'look like a second-hand garbage-can!"

"Thanks. Where's your resident swell?"

"Quarters. Hit up the pace--work--been goin' some." McGraw swept his fat arm around in an explanatory gesture. "Laid down a'ready."

"All right. I'm on the job. But I've got to get some sleep soon. And say, just pick out a spry kid to steer me up against the wash-house, will you?"

McGraw signed to the nearest man. "Pete--Mr. Blake, our 'Sistant

Engineer--t' my room." He turned to Blake. "Help y'self. Safety razor 'n' tub handy. Clothes in locker. You c'n wear 'em over to commissary. Guess you c'n git into 'em."

He nodded, unaware that he had said anything humorous, and pivoted around to return to his work. Blake limped briskly away after the puzzled but silent Pete. At the bunkhouse Pete showed his charge into McGraw's room, and went to order hot water for a bath.

When he returned, Blake, with half the stubble already shorn from his lathered face, handed over a telegraph message addressed to Griffith.

Eager to be of service to the Consulting Engineer, the man hurried the message to the telegraph operator. The latter, no less friendly to Griffith, corrected the address to the sick engineer's hotel in Tampa, and wired the despatch "rush."

The message could hardly have been more laconic:

On the job. Tom.

When Pete returned for further orders, he met the Assistant Engineer at the door of the commissary, baggily draped in a suit of McGraw's clothes, which fitted nowhere except across the shoulders.

Blake dismissed him, and went in to outfit himself with a costume in keeping with his position. Almost asleep, he then went back to the bunkhouse, stumbling and yawning, and stretched out in McGraw's bed, utterly fagged.

CHAPTER XXXII

LAFFIE PLAYS--BLAKE TRUMPS

After an evening at poker with one of the new bridge-workers, Ashton had retired at midnight. He had not heard of Blake's coming, for McGraw had presumed that the Assistant Engineer had reported to the office before turning in to sleep.

When he awoke, the sun was half way up the eastern sky. He yawned, glanced at the sun, and rang for his breakfast. It was presently brought in to him by his English valet, who, like the chef, was not unused to the city social hours of his employer. Ashton did not trouble to go into his elegant little dining-room, but ordered the meal served at his bedside.

Sometime later, Blake, over in the bunkhouse, opened his eyes, yawned, and sprang out into the middle of McGraw's unaesthetic room. He had slept eighteen hours without a break. He awoke still stiff and sore,

but brimming over with energy, and hungry as a shark. He gave himself a cold rubdown, jumped into his new clothes, and ran to the cookhouse for a hearty meal.

When he came out again, he headed straight across the tracks for the office of the Resident Engineer. He smiled ironically as he noted the green and white paint and the trimmings of the verandahs with which Ashton had endeavored to give a bungalow effect to the shack-like structure. But as he swung up the steps into the front verandah, the grimness of his look increased and the humor vanished. His heavy tread through the weather vestibule announced his entrance into the office. He took no pains to walk softly.

Ashton, attired in a lounging-robe of scarlet silk, was half reclining in an easy chair. The big desk beside him was littered with engineering journals, reports, and blueprints of bridge plans, topped with detail drawings in ink of the long central span. The Resident Engineer was not studying the plans. He was reading a French novel of the variety seldom translated.

At Blake's entrance, he looked up, his delicate high-arched eyebrows gathered in a frown of annoyance. Almost in the same moment he recognized the intruder, and started to his feet in open alarm.

"How!--why!" he stammered. "You here? I thought you--that after--"

"Too bad, eh?" bantered Blake. "But you mustn't blame yourself. You did your best. But accidents will happen."

"Then you're--you're not--Yet you look--"

"Appearances often deceive," quoted Blake lightly. "You gave me a great start-off--had me going South. So I went."

"Going South?"

"Yes. But that's all by-the-bye, as my friend, the Right Honorable the Earl of Avondale, would say. I'm here now for you to enter my acceptance of the standing offer of the Assistant Engineership."

"You--you agree to take it--under me?" cried Ashton in astonishment.

"Why not?" asked Blake with well-feigned surprise.

"Why, of course if--You see, it's--it's rather unexpected," Ashton sought to explain as he regained assurance. "Old Griffith wrote me about the way you had put through the Zariba Dam. After that I never dreamed you'd accept any position as Assistant."

"Well, I like to please Grif," was Blake's easy reply. "He's been worrying because office work uses me up. Nothing suits me better than an outdoor job, and I happened to take a fancy to your bridge the other time I came. It's a good deal like those plans of mine that got

mislaid. Of course you can't know that."

"No, of course not!" assented Ashton, moistening his lower lip.

"Course not," repeated Blake. "So I can't blame you if you find it hard to believe that my plans would have been accepted before you drew yours if they hadn't been mislaid."

"Then you--no longer accuse Mr. Leslie of--having taken them?" Ashton ventured to ask.

"Couldn't prove it on him, could I? No use _baa-ing_ over spilt milk. Well, you understand I'm on the job now; I've accepted the offer."

"Ye-es," reluctantly admitted Ashton. "Not that I see the use. There's no need for another engineer."

"That's no lie. One engineer is enough," said Blake dryly. "You sure proved yourself one when you planned this little old cantilever. However, I'm short of cash. I'll hang around and do what I can. May be able to save you bother by carrying orders out to McGraw or checking over reports for you."

He picked up the vellum-cloth drawings of the central span and some of the blueprints, and began in a matter-of-fact manner to roll them up.

"Hold on!" sharply interposed Ashton. "What are you about?"

"I'm going to bunk with McGraw. Thought I'd take these over and try to get in touch with the work."

"No, you sha'n't! I can't allow you to take those. They're the original drawings. They must not be taken out of my office."

"Original drawings?" repeated Blake in a tone of perfect innocence. "Excuse me. I took them for copies."

"C-copies!" stuttered Ashton, turning white even to his lips.

"Yes. Hasn't Grif the originals?" asked Blake in a careless tone that was barely touched with surprise.

Ashton rallied from his fright. "No, you're mistaken, completely mistaken! These are the originals. I drew them myself. I couldn't trust to a draughtsman."

"Sure not, such important work as this span of yours. Grif tells me there's never before been anything built like this suspension span," agreed Blake, bending over to study the drawings. "But you'll admit some of these figures are rather slipshod for work on original drawings put in to win a competition."

"But I--I didn't compete. The idea came to me too late for that. I tried my utmost to be in time for the contest. I was working fast to get my plans drawn. That's why I made some errors--which you may have noticed."

Blake looked up with an ironical smile.

Ashton moistened his lips, hesitated, and asked in an uneasy tone: "About--about how long do you expect to stay? I suppose you will stay, won't you?"

"Well, three or four days, maybe. As you probably know, Grif screwed the company up to offer me a stiff salary--on the strength of that Zariba work, I suppose. I didn't intend to take the offer at all, but my clothes were--they got rather out of repair on my Southern tour, and I came on up here without stopping at my tailor's. Happened to leave my checkbook, too, and it's a long walk to town."

"Oh, if it's only that you're strapped," Ashton hastened to reply; "I'll be pleased to draw you a check--little loan, you know--anything from a hundred to a thousand. No hurry about paying it back. I'm flush."

"You're too kind!" said Blake dryly.

"It's nothing--nothing--a mere trifle!" assured Ashton, with a touch of condescension. "You know I'll have scads of money to burn some day." He opened a drawer of his desk and took out a checkbook. "I know you can't be anxious to hang around a dreary hole like this. Suppose I make it five thousand? You can keep the money as long as you wish. There's just time for you to catch the extra train we're sending down to the junction for more steel."

"Thanks. But I need a good rest," said Blake.

"I'll think it over, and let you know. Maybe I'll decide to loaf around with you a few days and save borrowing."

"Oh, well, if you can stand this jumping-off place," replied Ashton, visibly disappointed.

He glanced down into the open drawer, and his eyes narrowed with a look of furtive eagerness that did not escape Blake. In a corner of the drawer was a squat black bottle and a tumbler. Ashton lifted them out and poured a half-glassful of whiskey that was thick and oily with age.

"The real stuff!" he said, holding out the tumbler to Blake. "Older than your grandmother. Let's wet your welcome to Michamac!"

"Here's how!" replied Blake, with a geniality of tone and manner that diverted the other's attention from the glint in his eyes. He took the glass and deliberately twisted his hand backward so that the whiskey

poured out on the bare floor in front of the desk.

"Look out! You're spilling it!" exclaimed Ashton.

"No, just pouring it," explained Blake. "German custom. Next time you're in a beer-garden do it, and they'll let you know what it means."

"Means?" echoed Ashton.

"In this case, it means I never drink when I'm on a job. One of my rules. Told you I had accepted that standing offer, didn't I?"

"Yes. But I didn't know that you--"

"Well, you know now. I'm on this job."

Ashton shot a covert glance at his square-jawed opponent.

"Then it's a mistake--the report that you refused to accept any position from Mr. Leslie," he murmured.

"Mistake? No," curtly answered Blake. "Needn't try to fool me. Mr. Leslie turned the bridge over to the Coville Company months ago."

"Fool you?" sneered Ashton. "You're too easy! The Coville Company is only another name for Papa Leslie."

"Look here," warned Blake. "You're apt to learn soon that some lies aren't healthy."

"It's the truth," replied Ashton, giving back a little, but insistent on the facts. "It's a way he avoids responsibility. But he owns ninety-nine per cent of the stock. Griffith must have told you that. He knows all about it."

This obstinate insistence, despite the young fellow's evident fear, convinced Blake. He half raised his clenched fist.

"And I fell to it!" he muttered. "Let him bunco me into putting through that dam for him! Scheme to make me take his money!"

"You as good as put half a million into his pocket," jeered Ashton.

"What do I care about that?" rejoined Blake.

"It's that fifty thousand bonus. He'll be trying to force it on me."

Ashton thought he had misunderstood. "Don't fear he'll not pay up. He's good pay when you have it in black and white. There's still time to catch the train. You'll find your check waiting you at the offices of the company."

Blake did not reply. One of the dimensional figures on a blueprint of the south cantilever had caught his glance, and he had bent over to peer at it. A sudden stillness seemed to have fallen upon him.

After a perceptible pause, he asked in a tone that was very low and quiet and deliberate: "Would you mind telling me if this blueprint was made direct from your originals--from the original drawings used in ordering the structural steel?"

"Yes, of course," answered Ashton. "Why?"

"You are sure?"

"I'm certain. You don't think I'd let any one with a pen fool around my drawings, do you?"

"Lord, no! Might correct your damn errors!" cried Blake, all his stony calm fluxing to lava before an outflare of volcanic excitement. "You fool!--Lord! Wasting time! Sit down--scratch off an order. That cantilever must be relieved P.D.Q.--every ounce skinned off it!"

"What--what's that?" asked Ashton, staring blankly. He had never before seen Blake agitated.

"You fool!" shouted Blake. "You've got that outer arm loaded down with material 'way beyond the margin of safety. You damned fool, you made an error here in the figures--over the bottom-chords and posts. They'll hold anything, once the suspension span is completed, but now! Lord! McGraw is a mule--he'll insist on a written order. Weather report says wind. And another train loading to run out on the overhang, when we ought to be hauling steel off!"

"Oh, we ought, ought we?" blustered Ashton, venturing bravado in view of Blake's agitation. "Who d' you think is running this bridge, you barrel-house bum? I'll give you to understand I'm the engineer in charge here. You're my Assistant--my Assistant! D'you hear?"

"Yes, yes!" urged Blake. "Only scratch off an order! There's no time to lose! I'll do the work. For God's sake, hurry! You've a hundred men out there on that deadfall--a million dollars' worth of steel-work! Those bottom-chords may buckle any second!"

From eager pleading, Blake burst out in an angry roar: "Damn you! Get busy! Write that order!"

Seized with desperate fear of the big form that leaned menacingly toward him over the desk, Ashton snatched an automatic pistol from the top drawer, and thrust it out toward Blake.

"Stand back! Stand back! Keep away!" he cried shrilly.

Blake hastily stepped back. It was not the first time he had seen a panic-stricken fool with a pistol. The quick retreat instantly

restored Ashton's assurance. He rebounded from fear to contempt.

"You big bluff!" he jeered. "Good thing you hopped lively. I'll show you! Thought I wasn't armed, did you?"

"You doughhead!" rejoined Blake. "Can't you understand? I tell you that bridge--"

"_Bah!_ You knocker! I see your game. You know now that it's Papa Leslie's job; you want to get in charge--knock out my work--spoil the record I'm making. That's it! You think you'll get my place, and try to smooth things up with Genevieve."

"Shut up!" commanded Blake, raising his fist.

Ashton hastily sighted the pistol, which he had half lowered. "You--you--don't you threaten me! I'll shoot!" As Blake made no attempt to attack, he went on viciously: "You'd better not! I'll show you! I'm the boss here--get out of here! You're fired! Get out; keep off my bridge; leave the grounds, or I'll have you kicked off!"

"You fool!" said Blake. He swung around and started off with stern determination. But within three strides he faced about again. "You dotty fool! I had intended to let you down easy."

He came back toward the desk, grim-faced and very quiet. Ashton was puzzled and disconcerted by this sudden change of front. The pistol wavered in his trembling hand.

"Keep away! Don't you touch me! Don't you come near me!" he half whimpered.

Blake advanced to the opposite side of the desk, and spoke in a tone of cool raillery: "You're rattled. Better put up that gun. It might go off."

"It will in half a second!" snapped Ashton.

Blake leaned forward and transfixed him with a stare of cold contempt.

"You thief!" he said. "Your game is up. You sneak thief!"

Ashton lowered his pistol and cowered as though Blake had struck him. "No, no! I'm not--I'm not! You haven't any proof--you can't prove it!"

"Proof?" growled Blake. "When I've known it ever since I came up before--knew it the first look. My bridge from shoe to peak--every girder, every rivet--and my truss! Not another bridge in the world has that truss. You dirty sneak thief!--_Huh!_ you would, would you?"

Ashton had sought to raise and aim the pistol. This time Blake did not step back. Instead, he flung himself forward, and his hand closed in an iron grip on the wrist of the hand that held the pistol. The weapon

fell from the paralyzed fingers.

Ashton made a frantic clutch with his left hand to regain the pistol, but he was jerked violently forward, up and over the desk. As he floundered across in a flurry of rustling, tearing maps and papers, he swore in shrill anger. Blake's left hand gripped his throat, His anger gave place to terror. He sought to scream, but the fingers tightened and throttled him. He was dragged across and down upon the floor, choking and gurgling. Blake bent lower.

"Lie still!" he ordered. "I'm going to let go your throat. If you squawk, I'll break your neck!"

He removed his grip alike of wrist and throat, and Ashton, gasping and panting, felt gingerly of his throat with his soft fingers. He could not see the dark marks left by Blake's terrible clutch, but he could feel the bruises. He glared up, terror-stricken, into the pale hard eyes that blazed down into his own with a light like that of molten steel.

"You--you'll not--not murder me!" he panted.

"I'll break your neck if you don't keep quiet and mind," menaced Blake. He sprang erect. "Get up to your desk--quick!"

Ashton needed no urging. As lie scrambled around to the chair, Blake picked up the automatic pistol and tested its mechanism with expert swiftness.

"Don't! Don't!" implored Ashton, dodging down.

"_Bah!_ Take that pen--write!" commanded Blake. Ashton clutched at his pen and an order pad. "Steady, you fool! Now write, '_Bridge in danger. Strip bare. Blake in charge.'_" Ashton scribbled with frantic swiftness. "Got that? Sign your name in full as Resident Engineer."

The moment Ashton obeyed, Blake reached over and snatched up the order pad and an indelible pencil. In his other hand he thrust out the pistol to press its muzzle against Ashton's temple.

"Oh!--oh!--don't!" whimpered the coward.

"You skunk!" growled Blake. "Keep your mouth shut, or I'll smash you like a rattlesnake. I'm going to save my bridge. Don't get in my way!" He pointed with the pistol toward the rear door of the room. "What's in there?"

"My--my quarters."

"Get in there! Stay in! No yawping!" The terse orders ended in a flash of grim humor. "You're sick. Mind you don't get worse."

Ashton was already slinking into his apartment.

There was a rumble of freight cars outside. Blake spun about on his heel and rushed out through the vestibule.

CHAPTER XXXIII

ABOVE THE ABYSS

A train loaded with steel was backing out to the bridge. Blake ran down the track to the engine and swung up into the cab.

"Stop her!" he shouted.

The engine-driver was among the men who had been introduced to Blake on his visit with Griffith. He recognized the engineer at the first glance.

"Hello, Mr. Blake!" he sang out. "You here?"

"Brakes!" cut in Blake so incisively that the driver closed his throttle and applied the airbrakes with emergency swiftness. Anticipating his questions, Blake tersely explained: "Bridge in danger. I'm in charge. Have you a lot of empties handy?"

"How?--bridge?" queried the fireman, peering around at the stranger.

"Dozen empties--" began the driver.

"Good!" said Blake. "Clear these cars and--"

"What's this?" demanded the yardmaster, who had run up at the sudden stoppage of the train. "Back on out, Jones. There's the coal to switch."

"Damn your coal!" swore Blake. "Get a big string of empties out the bridge, quick as you can!"

"Who the hell are you?" blustered the yardmaster.

"Engineer in charge," answered Blake, holding out Ashton's order. "Bridge in danger--error in plans--overloaded--and weather report says wind! Jones, toot up your whistle--fire-call--anything! I want every man of every shift out here in two shakes."

Without waiting for orders from the yardmaster, Jones signed to his fireman, reversed, and threw open his throttle. The fireman clutched the whistle-cord and began jerking out a succession of wild shrieks and toots. As the train started away from the bridge, Blake swung to

the ground to meet the excited men who came running from all directions.

He held Ashton's order close under the nose of the yardmaster, and shouted above the din of the engine whistle: "See that? She'll go when the wind rises. Hustle out those empties, with every man you have."

Impelled by the engineer's look, the yardmaster sprang about and sprinted alongside the train, waving signals to his switch crew. Blake no less swiftly sprang into the midst of the mob of off-shift men streaming from the bunkhouse.

"I'm Blake--engineer in charge--from Griffith!" he shouted. "Bridge overloaded--will go down when wind rises. We've got to clear her. She may go down when the empties back out. Any yellow cur that wants to quit can call for his pay-check. I'm going out. Come on, boys!"

He started along the service-track at a quick jog-trot. The men, without a single exception, followed him in a mass, jostling each other for the lead. Near the outer end of the approach span they met the morning shift of carpenters and laborers, who were hurrying shoreward in response to the wild alarm of the engine whistle. Blake waved them about.

"Bridge in danger!" he shouted. "Volunteers to clear material."

Few of the carpenters and none of the chattering Slovaks and Italians caught anything except the word "danger." But zeal and fearlessness are sometimes as contagious as fear. A half-dozen or so drew aside to slink on shoreward. All the others joined the silent eager crowd behind Blake. Before they had gone a hundred feet every man in the crowd knew that at any moment the huge cantilever might crash down with them to certain destruction in the chasm, yet not one turned back.

A short distance beyond the cantilever towers they came to the foremost of the on-shift steel workers, who had halted in their shoreward run when they saw that the outcoming party showed no sign of halting. But those in their rear and McGraw, who had been left behind farthest of all in the race, were still moving forward.

Blake waved his pad to McGraw and called out to him over the heads of the others: "Here's my order! I'm in charge. Take every man you can handle, and work the main traveller to the towers. Hustle!"

"Your order!" wheezed McGraw stubbornly.

Blake was already close upon him. He had dealt before with men of McGraw's character. He tore off Ashton's order, thrust it into the other's pudgy hand, and paused to scribble an order to hold the train on the shore span.

On occasion McGraw could be nimble both in mind and body. The moment

he had read Ashton's order, he wheeled about to rush back the way he had come, and let out a bull-like bellow: "Hi, youse! clear f'r trav'ller! Out-shift, follow me!"

The steel workers who had been on shift raced after and past him to the main traveller. He followed at a surprisingly rapid pace, bellowing his instructions. Blake, holding back in the lead of his far larger party from the shore, began to issue terse orders to the gangs of carpenters and laborers. They strung along the extension arm, outward from the point where the floor-system was completed. Before Blake could pass on ahead, tons of beams and stringers, iron fittings and kegs of bolts and nails began to rain down into the abyss.

Having detailed half of the two shore shifts of steel workers to clear the way for the inrolling of the huge traveller, Blake took the other half out with him to the extreme end of the overhang. As soon as the main traveller began its slow movement shoreward, he ordered the smaller traveller run back several yards, in readiness to load the heavier pieces of structural steel.

All his own men being now engaged in the most effectual manner, he turned about to quiet McGraw, who, for once shaken out of his phlegmatic calm, had been reduced to a state of apoplectic rage by the inability of his men to perform miracles. Blake's cool manner and terse directions almost redoubled the efficiency of the workers. The main traveller began to creep toward the towers with relative rapidity.

Blake walked ahead of it, to steady and encourage the gangs that toiled and sweat in the frosty sweep of the rising wind. He came back again to the overhang and stood for a few moments gazing across at the outstretched tip of the north cantilever.

Suddenly his face lightened. He glanced over his shoulder at the lofty towers behind him, nodded decisively, and hastened back to where McGraw, once more his usual stolid taciturn self, was extracting every ounce of working energy out of the men who swarmed about the main traveller.

"Goin' some!" he grunted, as Blake tapped his arm.

"Stop her fifty feet this side towers," ordered Blake. "How many central-span sections have you stacked up out here?"

"All 'cept four north-side 'uns. Last come this mornin'. In yards yet."

"How long'll it take us to rig a cable tram from the traveller across to the north 'lever?"

"Huh?" demanded McGraw blankly.

"We'll run the north-side steel across by tram, and push the work from

both ends. Once the central span's connected, this bridge'll stand up under any load that can be piled on her."

"Wind risin'--an' you figurin' on construction work!" commented McGraw.

"If she doesn't go to smash in the next half-hour, we'll be O.K.," answered Blake coolly. "That train has waited long enough. You look to the steel. Load the first sections for this end on the outermost car. We can cut it off the train at the towers."

At McGraw's nod, he scratched off an order and sent a man running with it to the waiting train. Very shortly the three outermost cars came rolling toward him, pushed by the switch crew and a gang of laborers. Their weight was several times offset by the weight of flooring material that had already been hurled from the bridge.

Blake tested the force of the wind, noted the distance that the main traveller had moved shoreward, and promptly ordered the work of destruction to cease. Some forty or fifty thousand dollars' worth of material had already gone over into the strait, and he was too much of an engineer to permit unnecessary waste.

The electro-magnetic crane of the smaller traveller was already swinging up a number of pieces of structural steel to load on the cars as they rolled out to the extreme end of the service-track. McGraw came hurrying to take charge of the eager loading gang. Blake went out past them to the end of the overhang, and perching himself on a pile of steel, began to jot down figures and small diagrams on the back of his pad.

He was still figuring when a cheer from the carloaders caused him to look up. The cars, which had been stacked with steel to their utmost capacity, were being connected with the rear of the train by means of a wire rope. In response to the signals of McGraw, the engine started slowly shoreward.

Before the train had moved many yards the slack of the steel rope was taken up. It tautened and drew up almost to a straight line, so tense that it sang like a violin string in the sharp wind gusts. Then the steel-laden cars creaked, started, and rolled shoreward after the train, groaning under their burden. The men all along the bridge raised a wild cheer.

Blake stepped back beside McGraw.

"Well, Mac, guess we've turned the trick," he said.

"Close,--huh?" replied the general foreman, holding up his hand to the wind.

"Close enough," agreed Blake. "She might have gone any minute since we came out. _Whee!_--if I hadn't headed off that train of steel! Well, a

miss is as good as a mile. She'll stand now. Next thing is to connect the span."

"Huh?" ejaculated McGraw. "Ain't goin' t' tackle that, Mr. Blake, 'fore reinforcin' bottom-chords?"

"What! Wait for auxiliary bracing to come on from the mills? Not on your life! Once connected, she'll be unbreakable--all strains and stresses will be so altered as to give a wide margin of safety, spite of that damned skunk!"

"Huh?" queried McGraw.

Blake's lips tightened grimly, but he ignored the question.

"We'll drive the work on twelve-hour shifts,--double pay and best food that can be bought. Divide up the force now, and turn in with your shift--those who most need sleep."

CHAPTER XXXIV

"THE GUILTY FLEE"

In the midst of the wild flurry of work on the bridge, an engine from the junction had puffed into the switching yards with a single coach, the private car of H. V. Leslie.

Despite the shrill whistle that signalled its approach, no one ran out to meet the special,--no workman appeared in the midst of the sheds and material piles to stare at the unexpected arrival. Irritated at this inattention, Mr. Leslie swung down from his car, closely followed by Lord James.

"What can this mean?" he demanded. "Not a man in sight. Entire place seems deserted."

"Quite true," agreed Lord James. "Ah, but out on the bridge--great crowd of men working out there. Seems to be fairly swarming with men."

"So there are--so there are. Yet why so many out there, and none in the yards?"

"Can't say, I'm sure. I daresay we'll learn at the office."

"Learn what, Mr. Scarbridge?" asked Dolores, who had popped out into the car vestibule. Without waiting for an answer or for his assistance, she sprang down the steps, waving her muff. "Come on, Vievie. Don't wait for mamma."

"What are you going to do?" demanded Mr. Leslie.

"Hunt for our heroic hero, of course," answered the girl.

"You shall do no such thing," said her mother, appearing majestically in the vestibule.

Genevieve, pale and calm and resolute, came out past her aunt.

"We shall go to Mr. Ashton's office, papa," she said, as Lord James handed her down the steps. "If Mr. Blake is not there, Mr. Ashton will know where to send for him."

"Tom's out on the bridge," stated Lord James.

"He is? How do you know?" queried Mr. Leslie.

"It's a hundred to one odds. That wire to Griffith--'On the job,' y' know. He'll be where the most work is going on. I'll go fetch him."

"If you will, James," said Genevieve. "Tell him that papa--not I--You understand."

"Trust me!" He smiled, glanced appealingly at Dolores, met a frown, and started briskly away out the service-track.

"Wait," ordered Dolores. "I'll go, too. I've never been out on an unfinished bridge."

"You'll not. You'll stay ashore," interposed her mother.

"Oh fudge! Trot along, then, Mr. Scarbridge."

At her call, Lord James had halted and turned about, eagerly expectant. As, disappointed, he started on again, she addressed Mr. Leslie: "I'm not going back into that stuffy car, Uncle Herbert. Where's the place you call the office?"

He pointed to Ashton's quarters, and she skipped forward, past the engine, before her mother could interfere. The others followed her, wrapping their furs close about them to shut out the bitterly cold wind.

Dolores was still in the lead when the party reached the office, but she paused in the vestibule for her uncle to open the door. When he entered, she stepped in after him, followed by Genevieve and Mrs. Gantry. Darting his glances about the office in keen search, Mr. Leslie crossed the room to stare concernedly at the litter of torn maps and papers on the floor in front of the desk. He hurried to the inner door and rapped vigorously. There was no immediate response. He rapped again.

The door opened a few inches, and Ashton's English valet peered in at

the visitors with a timid, startled look.

"Well?" demanded Mr. Leslie. "What d' you mean, sir, gawking that way? What's the matter here?--all these papers scattered about--everybody out on the bridge. Who are you, anyway?"

"M-Mr. Ashton's m-man, sir!" stuttered the valet.

"His man? Where is he?--out on the bridge?"

"N-no, sir; in his rooms, sir."

"Tell him to come here at once!"

"Y-yes, sir, very good, sir. But I fear he'll be afraid to come out, sir. Mr. Blake--he ordered 'im to stay in, sir."

"Blake ordered him! Why? Speak out, man! Why?"

"He--he said the bridge--that it was about to fall, sir."

"Bridge--about to fall?"

"Yes, sir. So he pulled Mr. Ashton across the desk by 'is neck--manhandled 'im awful, and 'e told 'im--"

"What! What! Tell Ashton I'm here--Mr. Leslie! Tell him to come at once--at once! D' you hear?"

As the valet vanished, Genevieve darted to her father, her eyes wide with swift-mounting alarm. "Papa! Didn't you hear him? He said the bridge--it's about to fall!"

"He did! He did!" cried Dolores, catching the alarm. "Oh, and Jimmy's gone out, too!"

"Jimmy!" echoed Mrs. Gantry, staring.

The girl ran to the windows in the end of the room, which afforded a full view of the gigantic bridge.

"Hurry! Hurry, papa! Do something!" cried Genevieve. "If the bridge falls--!"

"Nonsense!" argued her father. "There can't be any danger. It's still standing--and all those men remaining out on it. If there was any danger--Must be some mistake of that fool valet."

"Then why are there no men ashore? Why are they all out there?" questioned Genevieve with intuitive logic. "Oh! it's true--I know it's true! He's in danger! And James--both! They're out there--it will fall! He'll be killed! Send some one--tell them to come ashore! I'll go myself!"

She started toward the door.

"No, no, let me!" cried Dolores, darting ahead of her.

"Stop!--both of you!" exclaimed Mrs. Gantry. "Are you mad?"

"Stop!" commanded Mr. Leslie.

Genevieve paused and stood hesitating before the vestibule door.
Dolores darted back to the windows.

A voice across the room called out: "That's--that's right! There's no need to go. It's all a fake--a pretence!"

Staring about, Mr. Leslie and the ladies saw Ashton beside the inner door. He was striving to assume an air of easy assurance, but the doorknob, which he still grasped, rattled audibly.

"You!" rasped Mr. Leslie. "What you doing in here--skulking in here?"

Ashton cringed back, all the assurance stricken from his face.

"You--you believe him!" he stammered. "But it's not fair! You've heard only his side--his lies about me!"

"Whose lies? Speak out!"

"His--Blake's! The big brute took me by surprise--half murdered me. He came here, drunk or crazy, I don't know which. Pretended the bridge was in danger."

"Pretended? Isn't it?"

"All rot! Not a bit of it!"

"What!"

"I tell you, it's all a put-up job--a frame-up. The brute thought he'd get in with you again--you and Genevieve. He schemed to discredit me, to get my place."

"Blake?--he did that?" eagerly queried Mrs. Gantry.

"Yes!" cried Ashton, and he turned again to Mr. Leslie. "Don't you see? He guessed that you were coming up. So he sneaked here ahead of you--took away my pistol and threatened to murder me if I left my rooms."

Genevieve looked the glib relator up and down, white with scorn.

"You lie!" she said.

"But--but--I--" he stammered, disconcerted. He stepped toward her, half desperate. "It's the truth, I tell you, the solemn truth! I'll swear to it! It was there, right at my desk. You see the maps, torn when he dragged me across--by the throat! Look here at my neck--at the marks of his fingers!"

"You're in luck. He had good cause to break your neck," commented Mr. Leslie.

"Herbert!" reproved Mrs. Gantry, greatly shocked.

"Papa! Papa!" urged Genevieve, running to grasp her father's arm. "You can't believe him! If Tom said the bridge was in danger--We stand here doing nothing! Send some one! If the bridge should fall--"

"Fall?" sneered Ashton. "I tell you it's safe, safe as a rock. Look for yourselves. It's still standing."

"Then he has saved it," snapped Mr. Leslie. "He's saved my bridge--his bridge! While you, you skulking thief--"

Ashton cringed back as if struck. But Genevieve dragged her father about from him. "Don't mind him, papa! What does that matter now? Send some one at once!"

"They're all out on the bridge already," he replied. "There's no one to send. Wait! I'll go myself!"

"Oh! Oh! The train has started on shore again--it's coming clear off the bridge!" cried Dolores. "It stopped part way, near this end. They'll be on it, they'll surely be on it. Yes, yes! There he is! There's Jimmy!"

She flung up a window-sash and leaned far out, waving her handkerchief. Her mother turned to Genevieve, who stood as if dazed.

"My dear," she said, "do you not understand? Lord James is safe--quite safe!"

"Yes?" replied Genevieve vaguely.

"And Blake!" exclaimed Mr. Leslie. "He'll of course be coming, too. I'm going to meet him--learn the truth."

He cast a threatening glance at Ashton, and went out like a shot.

"Uncle Herbert, take me with you!" called Dolores, flying out after him.

"Blake!--coming here!" gasped Ashton. He ran to place himself before Genevieve, who was about to go out. "Wait, wait, Miss Genevieve, please! Save me! He--he said he'd smash me if I talked--he did! He did! Don't let him hurt me! He threatened to kill me--it's true--"

true!"

"Threatened to kill you?" repeated Mrs. Gantry. "Genevieve, call back your father. If the man really is violent, as Lafayette says--"

"Aunt Amice!" remonstrated Genevieve. "Can you believe this miserable creature for an instant?"

"But it's true--it is true!" gasped Ashton.

"Mrs. Gantry, dear, dear Mrs. Gantry, you'll believe me! He will kill me! Take me aboard the car! Please, please take me aboard the car and hide me!"

"My dear Genevieve," said Mrs. Gantry, "the poor boy is really terrified."

"Take him to the car, if you wish," replied Genevieve. "He can leave it at the junction."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, Miss Genevieve!" stammered Ashton.

But Genevieve went out without looking at him. He followed with Mrs. Gantry, keeping close beside her.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE FUTURE COUNTESS

As the fugitive and his protectress passed out through the verandah and turned away from the bridge toward the car, they were relieved to see that Blake was not yet in sight. Genevieve was hastening out the track to where her father and Dolores and Lord James stood beside the heavily loaded bridge-service train.

Before Genevieve could reach the others, Lord James and Dolores came toward her, and Dolores cried out the joyful news: "It's safe, Vievie!--the bridge is safe now! Mr. Blake will be ashore in a few minutes."

"You're sure, James?" asked Genevieve. "Quite safe?--and he--?"

"Yes, yes, give you my word! Perfectly safe now, he said, and he'll be coming soon. Er--Miss Dolores, there's your mother going back to the car."

"And Laffi with her!"

"Quite true--quite true. I say now--you've left your muff in the

office. You'll be chilled--nipping keen wind, this. We'd best go inside while we're waiting."

"Yes," agreed the girl. "Come back in, Vievie."

"No, no, dear. I'll come later. I'll wait here with papa."

"Ah, if you prefer," murmured Lord James. "But you, Miss Dolores--really you should not stand out in this wind."

"Oh, well, if you insist," she acquiesced, with seeming reluctance.

"I do, indeed!" he replied, and he hurried her to the office.

When they entered, he led her to the big drum heating stove in the corner of the room, and went across to the inner door. He opened it, and called a terse order to Ashton's valet. He then closed the door and locked it.

Dolores started to edge toward the outer door. But he was too quick for her. He hastened across and cut off her retreat.

"No, no!" he declared. "You sha'n't run away."

"Run away?" she rejoined, drawing herself up with a strong show of indignation.

"It's--it's the very first opportunity I've had--the first time alone with you all these days," he answered. "I must insist! I--I beg your pardon, but I must find out, really I must! It seemed to me that--that just now you waved to me, from the window."

"To you? But how could I tell, so far off, that Mr. Blake was not on the train?"

"So that was it?" he replied, suddenly dashed. "Very stupid of me--very! Yet--yet--I must say it! Miss Gantry--Dolores, you've insisted on showing me your deepened dislike even since that evening. But you're so sincere, so candid--if only you'll tell me my faults, I'll do anything I possibly can to please you, to win your regard!"

"Ho! so that's it?" she jeered. "Because Vievie threw you over, you think I'll do as second choice--you think I'm waiting to catch you on the rebound."

"You?" he exclaimed. "How could that be? You've always been so frank in showing your dislike for me--how could I think that? But if only I might convince you how desirous I am to--to overcome your antipathy!"

"Lord Avondale," she said, "it is probable that you are laboring under a misconception. I am not an heiress; I am not wealthy. We are barely well-to-do. So, you see--"

"Ah, yes! And you--" he exclaimed, stepping nearer to her--"you, then, shall see that it is yourself alone! If I can but win you! Tell me, now--why is it you dislike me? I'll do anything in my power. Forget I'm my father's son--that I'm English. I must win you! Tell me how I can overcome your dislike!"

Dolores drew back, blushing first scarlet then crimson with blissful confusion. All her ready wit fled from her and left her quivering with the sweet agitation of her love.

"But it's--it's not true, Jimmy!" she whispered. "I don't--I'm not what you think me! I'm not sincere or honest--I'm just a liar! I've been pretending all along. It's not true that I ever disliked you!"

"Not true?" he asked incredulously.

She gave him a glance that answered him far more clearly than words. He started toward her impulsively.

"Dolores!--it can't be!"

She avoided him, in an attempt to delay the inevitable surrender.

"Ware danger, your earship!" she mocked. "I warn you I'm a designing female. How do you know it's not the coronet I'm after?"

"Dearest!" he exclaimed, and this time he succeeded in capturing the hand that she flung out to fend him off.

"Wait--wait!" she protested. "This is most--ah--indecorous. Think how shocked mamma would be. You haven't even declared your intentions."

"My intentions," he stated, "are to do--this!" He boldly placed his arm about her shoulders, and bent down over her back-tilted head. "_My_ dear Miss Gantry, I have the honor of saluting--the future Countess of Avondale!"

Instead of shrinking--from him, as he half feared, she slipped an arm up about his neck.

With a blissful sigh, she drew back from the kiss, to answer him in a tone of tender mockery: "The Right Honorable the Earl of Avondale is informed that his--ah--salute is received with pleasure."

"Darling!"

"Wait," she teased. "You have it all turned 'round. You've yet to tell me the exact moment when. Vievie took second place."

"My word! How am I to answer that? Really, it's quite impossible to tell. You piqued my interest from the very first."

"But did you still lo--like Vievie when you proposed to her?"

"Er--yes--quite true. That was the day after our arrival from New York, y'know."

"Of course. But I wished to make doubly sure that you were sincere with her. Oh, Jimmy, to think I've got you, after all! I'm so happy!"

He promptly offered another salute, which was not refused.

The sound of quick steps in the vestibule startled them. Dolores sprang away as Genevieve came hurrying in, too agitated to heed her cousin's blushes.

"Oh! I'm so glad you're still here!" she panted. "He's coming ashore. I--I told papa to tell him that--but not that I'm here! I must--I want to--"

"To play puss-in-the-corner with your Tom," rallied Dolores. "Oh, Vievie! who'd have thought it? You've lost your head! Hide over here behind the stove."

Greatly to her surprise, Genevieve instantly ran over and hid herself in the corner behind the big stove. Dolores and Lord James stared at one another. It was the first time that they had ever seen Genevieve flurried.

"Why, Vievie!" exclaimed the girl, "I actually believe you're frightened."

"No, I'm not. It's only that I must have time to--to think."

"Ah," said Lord James, with sympathetic readiness.

"I shall go out and meet him--detain him a bit."

"No, no. It's very kind of you, James. But there's no need. If only you and Dolores will wait and speak with him. I--I wish to hear how his voice sounds--first."

"Well, of all things!" rallied Dolores. "Can't you imagine how it will sound? He'll be hoarse as a crow, after shouting all his heroic orders to save the bridge. Ten to one, he'll have a fine cold, too--out there in this wind. Jimmy says it's really nawsty, y'know, with the beastly zephyrs wafting through the bloomin' steel-work, and the water so deuced far down below--quite a bit awful, don't y'know!"

"Don't tease, dear," begged Genevieve. "But you said 'Jimmy'! Oh, have you really--?"

Her face appeared around the bulge of the stove, flushed with delight. But the sound of a heavy tread in the verandah caused it to disappear on the instant.

Blake came in slowly and with anything but an elated look. It was evident that Mr. Leslie had refrained from rousing his expectations. He stared at Dolores in surprise.

"You, Miss Dolores?"

"What?" she teased. "You surely did not think it would be Vievie, did you?"

"Didn't think--"

"Yes--with Jimmy." She held out her hand to Lord James, who clasped it fondly.

Blake caught the glance that passed between them. His face darkened.

"Her?" he muttered. "Didn't think you were the kind to play fast and loose, Jimmy!"

"Tom! You can't believe that of me!" protested the Englishman. "Couldn't explain matters out there among all your men, y' know, but Genevieve insisted upon terminating our engagement the very morning after. I had said nothing. She had already seen her mistake."

"Mistake?" queried Blake.

"You men are so silly," criticised Dolores, with a mischievous glance toward the stove. "You ought to 've known she loved you, all the time. Of course you won't believe it till she herself tells you."

Blake looked about the room. Genevieve was close behind the stove. He shook his head and muttered despondently: "Till she tells me!"

"Did you ever play puss-in-the-corner?" asked Dolores.

"You witch!" exclaimed Lord James. To divert her attention, he drew her to him and slipped a ring on her slender finger. "Ha! Caught you napping! It's on--fast!" She gave him an adorable look. "If it's ever taken off, you'll have to do it."

"That shall be--never!" he replied. Drawing her arm through his, he led her toward the door. "We're on our way, Tom. See you later at the car, I daresay. Must go now to break the news to 'Mamma.'"

"Won't she be surprised!" exulted Dolores. "It's such a joke that you and Genevieve didn't tell her! She's so sure of her methods--so sure. She'll find there are others who have methods, won't she, Lord Avondale?"

"Most charming methods!" agreed Lord James.

"S'long, Jimmy!" said Blake, gripping the other's carelessly offered hand. "Here's congratulations and good luck to you! Tell her--tell the

others good-bye for me. I'll not come to the car. Tell 'em I'm too--too busy."

"Right-o! But we'll look to see you in town before a great while," replied Lord James, and he hurried Dolores out through the vestibule.

From the verandah the girl's clear voice sounded through the closed doors, free and merry, almost mocking.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE OUTCOME

Blake stood where the lovers had left him. Their sudden and seemingly indifferent leave-taking had added its quota of depression to his already sinking spirit. When he had come ashore and had been intercepted by Mr. Leslie he already had begun to feel the reaction from the strain and excitement of those interminable minutes and hours on the bridge--the frightful responsibility of keeping all those hundreds of men out on the gigantic structure, which at any second might have crashed down with them to certain destruction.

Now even the remembrance that he had saved the bridge could not stimulate him. Mr. Leslie's friendly praise, even his more than cordial hand-grip, seemed meaningless. The world had suddenly turned drab and gray. Her father had stated vaguely that some one was waiting to speak with him in the office. He had hastened in, half hoping to find her--and had found only them.

He had saved the bridge; he had found strength to do the square thing by Mr. Leslie and even Ashton. And now they were all gone, even Jimmy, and he was alone--alone! She had come with the party. He was certain that some one had told him that. Yet she had not spoken to him. She had not even let him see her!

He went heavily across the room to the desk, and dropping into a chair, began methodically to gather up and fold the torn and rumpled blueprints upon the floor. But even an almost automatic habit has its limitations. A drawing slipped, half-folded, from his listless fingers. He groaned and leaned forward upon the desk, with his face buried in his arms.

Genevieve came out from her hiding place very quietly, and stood gazing at Blake. It was the first time that she had ever seen him give way to grief or suffering. Always he had stood before her firm and unyielding, even when most certain of defeat. It had never occurred to her that he could be other than hard and defiant over his own struggles and sorrows.

All the mother-love of her woman's nature welled up from her heart in a wave of tenderness and compassion. She went to him and laid her hand softly on his dishevelled head.

"Tom!" she soothed. "Tom! You poor boy!"

The touch of her hand had stricken his body rigid with suspense. But at the sound of her voice he slowly raised his head and fixed his eyes upon her in an incredulous stare.

"It is I, Tom. Don't you know me?" she half whispered, shrinking back a little way before the wildness of his look.

"_You_!" he gasped. He rose heavily. "Excuse me. I thought you were with them--on the car."

"Did not papa tell you?"

"He said something. I thought I had mistaken him. But you _are_ here."

"Yes. I--I waited to speak with you--to tell you--"

"You told me that night all that's necessary," he said, averting his head to hide the look of pain that he could not repress.

"I was beside myself!" she replied. "You should have known that, Tom. How else could I have told you--told you--"

"The truth!" he broke in. "Don't think I blame you, Miss Jenny. Don't blame yourself."

"No, no, you do not understand!" she insisted. "Wait--what did you and papa do?"

"Made it up. So that's one thing less to worry you. He did it handsomely. Cracked me up for saving his bridge."

"Your bridge, too!"

"What! You know that?"

"Yes, and that you're to be partner with Mr. Griffith--finish your bridge, and build that great dam you invented, and--and if you wish, be partner in some of papa's business."

"That's too much. I told him I'd be satisfied with the credit for my bridge truss."

"Only that? Surely you'll not give up the bridge?"

"Well, 't isn't fair to kick a man when he's down. Ashton will have a tough enough time of it, I guess, from what your father said. He's to be allowed to resign, on condition that he acknowledges that he

borrowed my bridge truss."

"Borrowed?"

"Yes. It seems that his father is one of your father's particular friends. So that's all settled."

She looked at him with radiant eyes. "Tom! You're even bigger--more generous--than I had thought!"

"Don't!" he muttered, drawing back. "It makes it so much harder. You don't realize!"

"Don't I?" she whispered, the color mounting swiftly in her down-bent face. "That night--that fearful night, I--Tell me--has James explained how we searched for you?--everywhere, all those days! We telegraphed all over the country. James searched the city, and papa had all his private agents--Where did you go?"

"South."

"South? Oh, and all this time--But that's past now--all the dreadful waiting and anxiety! Could you but know our delight when Mr. Griffith telegraphed that you were here!"

"What! Then you came because--"

"Yes, yes, to find you. Don't you see? We should have been here sooner, only the telegram was not delivered until after midnight, and I had to persuade Aunt Amice. She refused, until after I said I'd come anyway. But of course she doesn't know, even now. Oh, Tom! Tom!--to think you're over that dreadful attack and--"

"Attack?" he inquired.

"The one that started that night--through my fault--mine!"

"Your fault?" he repeated. "How on earth do you make that out?"

"I should have seen--understood! James had tried to explain; but I was overwrought. Not until you were going--But that is all past, dear! I've come to tell you that now you must let me help you. It is not right for you to fight alone--to refuse my aid, when I--when I--love you!"

"Jenny! You can't mean it? After that night--after what I did that night!"

"Yes," she whispered. "If you--if you'll forgive me."

"But--the drinking?"

"You can win! You proved it that night, when you crushed the glass. I

no longer fear, Tom. All my doubt has gone. Even without my help I know that you--But I want to do my share, dear. If you're--you're willing, we'll be married, and--"

"Jenny!" He stood for a moment, overcome. Then the words burst from his deep chest: "Girl! Girl!--God! to think that I have that to tell you! Yes, it's true--I proved it that night--I won out that night! Do you hear, Jenny? I broke the curse! I proved it when I left you--went out into the night--after drinking all that whiskey--went down into the stockyards, past the worst saloons, all the joints. I went in and stood about, in all the odor--whiskey, beer--one after the other, I went in, and came out again, without having touched a drop. All the time I kept remembering that I had lost you; but--I knew I had found myself."

"Tom!"

"When I had made sure, I went to the freight yards, got into a fruit-car, and went to sleep. When I woke up, I was on the way to New Orleans. Been hoboing ever since."

"Oh!"

"Best thing for me. Put kinks into my body, but took 'em all out of my brain. About the drinking--it wasn't that night alone. I've kept testing myself every chance--even took a taste to make sure. Now I know. It's the simple truth, Jenny. I've won."

"My _man_!" she cried, and she came to him as he opened his arms.

THE END

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