



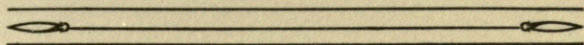
THE RULE OF THREE



ALMA MARTIN
ESTABROOK



40



THE RULE OF THREE





“ Forgive me ”

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THE RULE OF THREE

A STORY OF PIKE'S PEAK

BY
ALMA MARTIN ESTABROOK

ILLUSTRATED BY
GEORGE BREHM

*“ Multiplication is vexation,
Division is as bad;
The Rule of Three perplexes me — ”*



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TO
MY SISTER

ILLUSTRATIONS

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CHAPTER ONE

*“And after all, what is a lie? ’Tis but
The truth in masquerade.”*

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CHAPTER ONE

THE bungalow pouched pigeon-wise on the east side of Pike's Peak. It was weather-brown, with a worn red roof, and it flew its faded stars and stripes like the veteran it was, there among the sun-kissed crests. The porch was a double-decker, trailing away in a sort of incline at the back of the house, where it led directly out among the rocks and scrub oaks and pines which made the gray-green background. From the number of hammocks and chairs upon it one would have imagined the family large, or augmented by guests.

Yet only two persons were visible, sitting side by side on the upper gallery, their feet hooked over the pine-slab railing.

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Of those feet two were large and flat—the kind which not infrequently belong to the orator; the others were quite characterless, in worn tennis shoes. Two old caps were drawn over two faces, and two pipes—one a sweetbriar, the other a meerschaum—placidly puffed, puffed, puffed.

It was a slumberous, yawn-compelling scene, reeking with masculine contentment. Even the militant mountain-jays, shaking their sleek black plumes in the wild hop vine which tangled among the oaks, were gossiping with the chipmunks in lowered chirrups, so contagious is peace.

The flag rippled against the royal blue of the sky, and the white pantaloons of the Chinese cook, now whisking back and forth before the kitchen door made the only movement, while of sounds there were none except the soft patter of the Celestial's heels and the chatter of the

jays. A vaporous pink smoke arose from the kitchen chimney, mingling with delicious culinary whiffs which ascended by way of the open windows.

“Fish a la papilotte?” sniffed one of the men expectantly, stirring in his chair. He was a large, white, doughy person, who looked as if he would rub off shockingly on his black clothes. His heavy hair tossed back from his big bulging forehead gave him a nobly sincere look. Somewhere in his face, perhaps in the fullness of the lips, or in the shape and movement of the tongue, or in the eyes themselves, you read the gourmet.

“Plain flanked,” replied the other man, smiling a little at his guest’s unfailing gastronomic exuberance. “Yim does them very well that way, however.”

“The fellow’s a good enough cook for the mountains. I suppose it’s difficult to get a really first class one here, isn’t it?”

. . . How long have you been coming up, Langstaff?"

"A dozen years, off and on. It suits me exactly. Hope it won't bore you too much."

Benjamin Cockran removed his pipe, knocked the dodder from it, and poked the bowl with a huge forefinger. He yawned expansively.

"Dear me, no," said he. "It does a man good to revert to this sort of thing once in awhile. It means as much to his soul as a diet of bread and milk means to a tired stomach, eh?"

Gavin Langstaff did not look particularly pleased; he loved his mountains, and was unaccustomed to have them taken as so much spiritual Vichy.

"See your neighbors often, do you?" queried Cockran.

"As often as I want to see 'em. Have n't any except the Brindleys down there at

the foot of this last stiff climb, and a family or two farther up. Don't come here to cultivate people, you know."

"There's the inn at Minnehaha Falls. Noticed a porch full of girls there as I came past."

Langstaff nodded carelessly. "Up for the day, perhaps. I don't think they can accommodate many at a time. Haven't been there this summer. This suits me all right;" and he laughed comfortably.

"I see," said Cockran; "books, a pipe, friends who know when to go, and—by George, is the cog stopping?"

He swung forward in his chair, bringing his feet to the floor with a thump. He was a gregarious creature and the peaks did not bear him the intimate company which they seemed to bear his friend. He welcomed the idea of visitors.

The Skyland was set back among the rocks and trees a hundred yards or so from

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the cog road which crawls up the mountain side from Manitou. It had its platform where the little tumble-bug engine when hailed would more or less cheerfully halt with its load. But it was unused to having anyone knock upon its battened doors except those who were bidden. It was too far from the beaten paths below for the casual visitor, and its owner frowned with disapproval as the engine squatted at his platform. Up there among the clouds you are apt to hug your isolation and to leave your porch chairs empty.

“Visitors,” said Cockran, with pleasant anticipation.

A trim conductor, who looked as if he had been made to fit the trim train, got briskly down and assisted a passenger to alight. She appeared to roll up the trail toward the bungalow like a little dark blue ball of zephyr with the ends flying. Dark blue skirts swathed her, dark blue veils

wound her about, and her dark blue hands carried each a diminutive bag, — the only thing about her not dark blue.

That she was no casual guest, but had come with cheerful premeditation, was shown in the gay little wave of her hand toward the upper porch, where, for the instant, they stood gazing blankly down upon her.

A gasp of recognition tore its way from Gavin Langstaff's throat :

“ Aunt Marianna! By the gods, Aunt Marianna !!! ”

A very palsy of perturbation seemed to seize him. Then he shook it off, and darting toward the head of the stairs, darted back again to say excitedly :

“ Take yourself out of the way for a while, can't you, Ben? I'll explain later, but there's a lot at—er—at stake. *Everything*, in fact. See? Oh, hang it all, you don't see! But clear out, like

a good fellow, until I can make you understand."

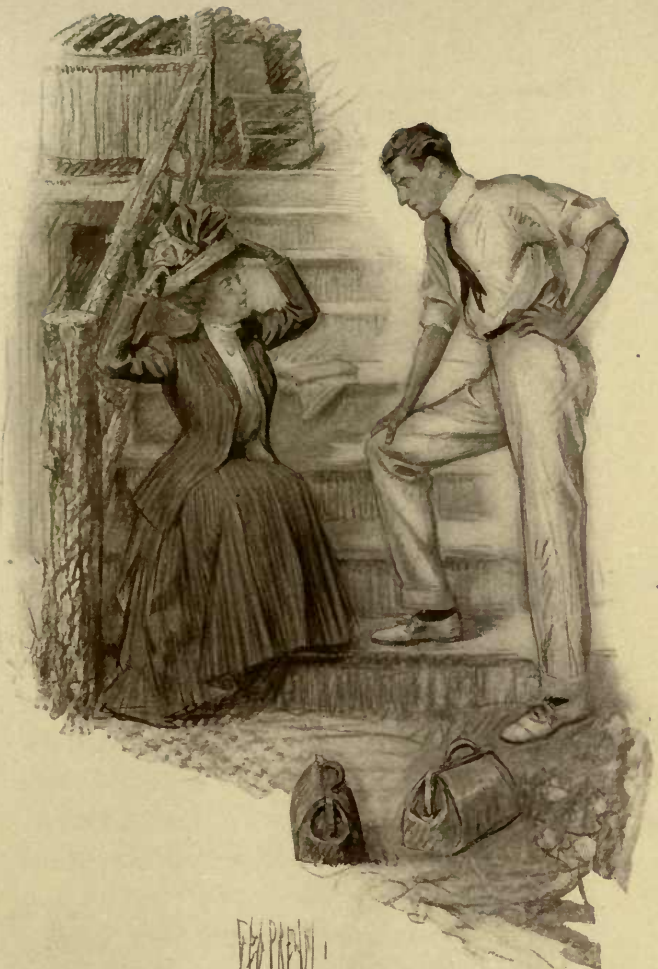
Then he bolted down the stairs which led from the upper stratum of the double porch to the lower, and still on down the trail, catching up the small lady bodily and depositing her on his steps.

Released from his well meaning but somewhat destructive grasp, Miss Marianna Langstaff began to throw back the folds that wrapped her, unveiling at last her dim little eyes, her two chins, and her one pertly inquiring nose.

"In the name of common sense *why* did you come up here?" she demanded pantingly.

"Why did *you* come?" he anxiously inquired, noticing at once her disturbed breathing.

"I wanted to see you and Bella. Gavin, you're married, of course? If I've come home to find— Gracious, what



FRANK
1909

“In the name of common sense why did you come up here?”
she demanded pantingly

a pain!" And she blinked and gasped alarmingly.

"It's the elevation. You ought never to have risked it, Auntie. Let me get you straight to bed. Come, please."

"Bed! Do you imagine I've journeyed all this way to go to bed? That I have n't! I stopped en route to surprise you and Bella. Where is she?" But without waiting for a reply she continued, pantingly, as if she and not the cog had puffed all the way up the hill: "When we landed in San Francisco I said to myself that it was high time I found out just how things were going with my boy. Do you realize that it's been two years since I went to Japan? And I've had scarcely a word from you in that time! If it were n't that the Langstaffs are all such abominably poor correspondents and that you come by it honestly, I'd scold you soundly for your neglect. Did you write me of the

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wedding? The letter must have been lost in following me about. Dear me, does the altitude always treat one like this?"

A grayish blueness was about her lips and a pallor over her brow, while her plump little bosom worked chuggingly, and her voice was like a breeze which has out-blown itself.

In very real alarm Langstaff got her upstairs and into a room which plainly did not await a lady's occupancy; a very manish, untidy place it was, with pipes lying about and vari-colored neckties festooning picture frames and chiffonier.

"I'm afraid we're a bit disorderly in here," said he, "but you won't mind, will you? Yim will tidy us up as soon as possible."

"It doesn't look at all as I fancied Bella's guest room would look," commented she in some surprise, "but I sup-

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pose you keep house less painstakingly in the mountains than elsewhere.”

“Oh, yes. What’s the good of slaving up here?” he hastened. “Besides, Yim’s getting old, you know.”

“Yim!”

“Kam Yim. You can’t have forgotten him?”

“Certainly I have n’t forgotten him. Neither have I forgotten what he used to say about leaving you the minute you married.”

He was helping her out of her traveling coat and his voice sounded natural enough, but it was well she could not see his face.

“He got over that prejudice all right.”

“Ah! He’s fond of Bella, then?”

“Why — er — everybody is fond of Bella, you know,” he stammered.

She dropped without warning to the edge of the bed, looking up blindly at him.

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“That’s a nasty pain that’s tearing at my heart, Gavin,” she murmured in fright.

He grabbed a water pitcher and came toward her.

“Don’t come near me with that. This dress spots! Do you want to ruin it? I’m not fainting, but oh, oh, how that stabs! Call Bella. I—I will go to bed, I think.”

He whirled toward the door, stopped, and spun about helplessly. Then he dashed back into the room and began to turn down the covers of the bed. He was desperately anxious and furiously embarrassed.

“Why *don’t* you call Bella? A man never knows what to do for you,” she declared fretfully.

He faced her.

“The truth is — is — that — well, you see, the truth is —” he gulped.

“You’ve quarreled! I understand perfectly. Oh, Gavin!” she wailed.

“No, we haven’t quarreled, — that’s the one thing we haven’t done. But you see, Bella is n’t—”

“Isn’t at home,” she half laughed in relief. “Don’t apologize for that. I have n’t forgotten how she loved to go gadding about, but she didn’t expect me and I ought n’t to blame her— Phew! This hurts.” And poor Miss Marianna went tumbling over among the pillows.

“There’s a doctor staying at the inn down the mountain. I’ll send for him. Yim can get him here in fifteen minutes. And maybe Ben will know what to do till he comes. Don’t get scared. We’ll have you all right in no time.”

“I don’t want Ben— whoever he may be. Tell him to — to go — away. I’m easier — Send for the doctor, if you like, but I’ll — be all right without him. I only want Bella. Why in the world don’t you send for her?”

“Yes, yes. I’ll send,” he muttered, speaking to Cockran outside the door, and coming quickly back to her side.

“Is n’t marriage everything I used to say it would be?” she challenged.

He got up abruptly and lowered the blinds at the western windows. His facial expression was somewhat that of one in the stocks. His laugh was limp and sickish.

“How do you know anything about it?” he teased feebly.

“One does n’t have to be married to know what marriage should be. Are you —” she was peering up at him anxiously — “are you evading me, dear boy? Are n’t you as happy as you had thought to be? Tell me.”

“Oh, good Lord, yes!”

“Bella makes you perfectly contented and comfortable?”

His glance strayed beneath the lowered blinds to the porch with its litter of papers

and magazines, its disorder of guns and rods and cushions, its untended masculine confusion.

“No man could be more comfortable than I,” said he, honestly.

“Then you would n’t have it changed, would you?” she queried, in a tender, I-told-you-so voice.

“Heaven forbid!” he fervently exclaimed.

His aunt smiled complacently. She felt as if she were twin sister to the little boy of the arrows and the quiver, for if it had not been for her he would never, never have married. And now here he was so ideally contented!

“Is Bella just as happy?” she pursued.

“Just as happy. And just as—er— independent.”

“Does she like it up here?” she asked. It seemed a very queer place to her, without much to recommend it to a woman.

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“ Well—er—that is, I hope she’s going to like it.”

“ Oh! So she does n’t— ” A recurring pain stopped her.

“ You are talking too much,” he declared with decision. “ You must stop it. Why, Auntie dear, in high elevations like this you ought n’t to talk at all just at first. Not till you’re used to it, you see.”

Miss Marianna’s smile was twisted and whimsical.

“ I’m afraid I’d never get used to it. . . . Do you know, the worst of it is the way my eyes seem to be affected. They’re never the best, but I’m really almost blind these last few minutes. I declare I am.”

“ That will pass if you keep perfectly quiet and try to sleep till the doctor gets here.”

She sat up with such startling asperity he was afraid she would snap one of the

brittle little old bones of her or tear a poor guttapercha artery.

“ Sleep! With — this — pain jabbing away like a hat-pin into the very heart — of me. Gavin, I’m a sick woman. I don’t know but — I’m — going — to die. My — heart — and I can’t see you at all.” Her hand was at her throat, her eyes were glazed with terror, and her gray hair was pushed back from the high dome of her forehead, giving her a strangely unfamiliar look. In that moment Langstaff thought her more like his father, than like herself, more like a frightened man than a woman. He was frantic with alarm for her, for he adored her. She was all he had in the world; indeed, father and mother and sister and brother in one. . . . And he had treated her shamefully. If her one ambition, her one dream for him, had run counter to his wishes was she to blame?

Benjamin Cockran responded creakingly

to his call for help, bringing with him several phials and a flask. There was a mild look of authority on his face, and Miss Langstaff obediently opened her mouth and took what he gave her, conveying by a slightly satirical smile that since she was probably going to die anyhow it really did n't matter.

“Has my nephew sent for Mrs. Langstaff?” she asked Cockran when Langstaff left them for a moment to see if the doctor was not yet in sight.

“Mrs. — er — Langstaff?” he repeated in amazement.

“Certainly. Can't you see that I require her?”

“But why — er — Mrs. Langstaff is dead, ma'm,” said he, gently.

“Dead!” The cry rang out, reaching Langstaff on the lower porch, and bringing him on the run. “When, oh, *when* did she die?”

“ She died some time ago, ma’m, as many as twenty years, I should say,” muttered poor Cockran in poignant perplexity and embarrassment. “ Langstaff was only a little boy, I remember he said.”

“ Idiot!” cried Marianna Langstaff, her face blazing. “ Idiot! How could you have failed to understand me? I was not asking for Mr. Langstaff’s mother, whom I myself dressed in her grave clothes, but for his wife.”

“ Oh, — er — yes! Why, yes, of course,” Benjamin Cockran said, and bent, with the convulsive movement of a large fish just off the hook, over a glass and a powder, shaking the latter into the former with such violence that his whole big body moved with the action.

“ Well, has she or has she not been sent for?” she demanded.

“ I’m afraid that she has n’t been, ma’m.”

“Then send. Do you hear? Send.”

Gavin Langstaff reached the door at the moment, his face white with anxiety. From the cry of the instant before he had expected to find his aunt dying.

“Get Bella,” she begged.

He stooped over her, pressing his distracted face close to her withered one.

“I will,” he cried, “I will, if I have to— Don’t fret, dear. I’ll have her here in no time.”

He kissed her hastily, stood up and met Cockran’s glance of sympathetic but half-amused inquiry, set his jaws squarely, and rushed out of the room.

On the lower porch he stopped for an instant, looking first up then down the grim-walled, cabinless cañon.

“My God!” he exclaimed, the perspiration standing out on his forehead, “where am I to find her—a wife? There’s only one girl I know of in miles,

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and I have n't even a speaking acquaintance with her. But she's got to come, or Aunt Marianna will die of the shock of disappointment and disillusionment. Why the devil didn't I marry long ago, as she thinks I did?" he groaned in dismal desperation, and plunged down the mountain side.

CHAPTER TWO

*“ Perhaps when you your way have lost,
You ’ll pause to think, and count the cost
Of having journeyed by a path
So undefined ”*

CHAPTER TWO

A SLIM brown girl in a crisp white gown lay in a big Canton chair on the Brindley porch, her palm under her cheek, her idle gaze lifted to the hills.

Suddenly she sat up very straight, listening, as feet scrunched and scrambled and slid on the trail, and the bushes parted to poor Langstaff, who shot out like a projectile, and gathering himself together ran breathlessly toward her. He had lost his cap, and his heavy crop of brown hair was disordered, his white shirt was snagged, and his tie loosened, his face flushed, and his canvas shoes stained with moss and earth.

She advanced to meet him, wondering if he were a madman or some neighbor in acute distress. Back of her there was

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a vista of a big cool room with Indian blankets and wicker chairs and a fireplace filled with boughs. It danced kaleidoscopically before his vision as he wiped his brow and tried to speak.

“Something seems to have happened,” she remarked politely, seeing that it was embarrassment as much as breathlessness which overcame him.

“Something *will* happen unless — Where is Mrs. Brindley? I ought to speak with her first, I suppose.”

“She’s putting the baby to sleep, and she has been having an awful time of it. Don’t you think you might tell me?”

“You are the girl who is visiting here, aren’t you?”

“I’m certainly here,” she laughed.

He flushed and gulped.

“That’s plain enough, isn’t it? Brindley told me about you the other day coming up on the cog. He said you were an

awfully good sort. For the life of me I can't remember your name."

"Does that matter?" she queried, with a scampering smile.

"No, no, of course not, but it seems queer to have come for a girl whose name you don't even know."

"Come for her? Have you come for me?" she cried.

He nodded. "I need you awfully, You'll go, won't you? I'm in such a mess."

Her eyes widened.

"Won't you help me out?" he pleaded.

"Make it plainer what you want of me, can't you? You do sound so mysterious. And really I can't think what possible good I could do you."

"Oh, you could! I know it seems sheer impudence of me to ask you. But if you knew! Oh, good Lord, if you knew!"

“Suppose you tell me,” said she, a bit crisply.

“My aunt has just come from Japan, and she’s ill. I don’t know but she may be dying. People do die in this elevation, though I can’t believe it’s as bad as that with her. But she’s completely undone, and I’m scared to death about her, and —”

“Why on earth didn’t you say all this in the beginning?” she interrupted impatiently. “You must have help, of course. Mary will go right up with you. She’s such a good nurse. I’ll call her.”

She whirled about, her skirts overturning an oriole basket that stood by the door. As she stooped to set it back in place he put himself before her, barring the way.

“Would n’t — er you just as soon come yourself?” he asked, growing constraint and embarrassment in his manner.

She regarded him wonderingly. "I'm no nurse at all —"

"There's the baby — Mrs. Brindley would n't want to leave him."

"Oh, as to that, I can take care of him."

He edged into the door itself, blocking it.

"It's you I want," he brought forth convulsively. "And there is—is something more to tell you."

"Is anyone else dying?" she inquired.

He mopped his forehead and ran a forefinger around the top of his collar.

"I feel as if I might, from embarrassment," he gasped.

She laughed at that, but it was from something half hidden in her eyes rather than from the laugh itself that he realized the humor tucked away in her and took heart of cheer.

"You need n't be afraid of me," she encouraged kindly and demurely.

"You're awfully good." He glanced

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anxiously up the cañon toward his cottage and drew a sharp breath. "There is n't a second to lose. And yet—yet—how am I ever to tell you?"

She sat down on the arm of the Canton chair.

"It really begins to look as if you weren't going to," she patiently observed.

He partially repossessed himself at that.

"The fact is I don't want you to come with me as a nurse or a neighbor, but as — as —"

"The cook. I could do it."

"I'll wager you could. But it isn't that."

"How, then?"

"As — as my wife."

She gasped. She paled. She flushed. She regarded him with anxiety.

"If I could be sure whether or not you are really quite sane," she ventured in an odd little voice.

“I was an hour ago, but I’ll swear I don’t know about it now. You see, I don’t really want to marry you,” he explained. “I only want to seem to be married to you. Do you understand?”

She stared at him wildly.

“No — goodness, mercy, no!” she cried.

Then he told her, in incoherent detail, all there was to tell. His aunt was his only near relative he said. And this seemed to impress her. There were only her grandfather and herself in their own family, she told him, so she could understand something of what the relationship must be. He nodded eagerly, and went on to say that he owed his aunt everything; they had been the warmest friends and the greatest comrades. They understood each other perfectly and had never had any trouble except over his marriage.

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For years she had urged that, and he had demurred. He had n't felt quite ready for it, but once she had decided that he ought to marry he should have had the sense to acquiesce. There was simply no going against her. He had held out pretty well, however, until last year, when he had promised to marry before she got back to America; and she had declared that if he did so she would give him the money he needed to further his business interests, but that if he refused she would hand it over to some choice charity. Now he wanted that money, but this was n't what was bothering him: he had given his word, and he had n't kept it. He had meant to do it, but how was he to foresee that she would shorten her stay abroad by three months? She had come back in June when she should have stayed until September. And she had come straight to the Skyland, expecting

to find him established there with his bride for the summer.

If she had been well he could have told her the truth at once, but what was he to do now? *Any* deception to keep her from knowing that he had failed to comply with her wish would, it seemed to him, be excusable.

Davie Bessire swayed thoughtfully on the arm of the chair.

“Do I understand that your aunt selected the girl for you?” she questioned.

He nodded quite honestly.

“Her name is Bella, Bella Kaye. I’ve known her since she was in caps and bootees. Her family and Aunt Marianna decreed us for each other even then.”

Her lips twisted oddly.

“Has she been any more enthusiastically acquiescent in the matter than you seem to have been?” she ventured.

“Oh, we’ve always understood each

other perfectly. We've been busy with our own pursuits and interests, and she isn't any more given to sentimentalism and that sort of thing than I am. When the time came for it we've known that we'd be contented and comfortable together. But meanwhile we've got on very well apart. Do you see?"

"I don't think I do — quite," said Davie Bessire.

"You mustn't misjudge her," he urged. "She's neither cold-blooded nor tamely yielding. She's just common-sensed and dependable. You can always put your finger on her. She never changes. Why, by George, I never knew that girl to change in her life, except when she went from pinafores to long skirts, and she did that so gradually you never noticed it until it was accomplished. As for deceiving herself or me in this matter, she would n't. She fairly worships honesty."



Davie Bessire swayed thoughtfully on the arm of the chair

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“M-mm. I know the type, I think.”

“It’s a fine type,” maintained he, loyally.

“Of course it is. But I’m afraid the rôle is too exalted for me to undertake. You see I’m out and out earthy. I lie when it’s needed, and I evade when its diplomatic. I *don’t* worship honesty, especially when its undressed — drapery becomes truth as much as it does a slim woman in my opinion. I do all sorts of things I shouldn’t and that your Bella wouldn’t; and your aunt would know the difference in a minute.”

“Then you won’t go?” he cried in dismay.

“I’d only botch things for you. Don’t you see?”

“But my aunt is practically blind — she’s always near-sighted and the pain seems to affect her eyes almost as much as her heart. The deception would be easy.

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And it need n't last but a day or two, as Bella is in the state, and will come at once, I'm sure."

"I could n't do it. Bella would n't arrive before your aunt would take in the truth. You'll have to get someone else."

"Get someone else!" he exclaimed. "Where? Tell me that. Even while we waste time talking here Aunt Marianna is no doubt working herself into an awful state, and —"

"I'm sorry. But it would n't be the least good, my going. If the girl were *any* other sort I would n't hesitate."

"You see what a fix it leaves me in," he cried.

"Why don't you try Minnehaha Inn for girls?"

His expression was grim.

"Excuse me for having troubled you," he remarked with dignity, and moved toward the steps.

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She balanced on the arm of the chair, somewhat regretfully regarding his departure.

“ If only she *were n't* such a paragon,” she murmured.

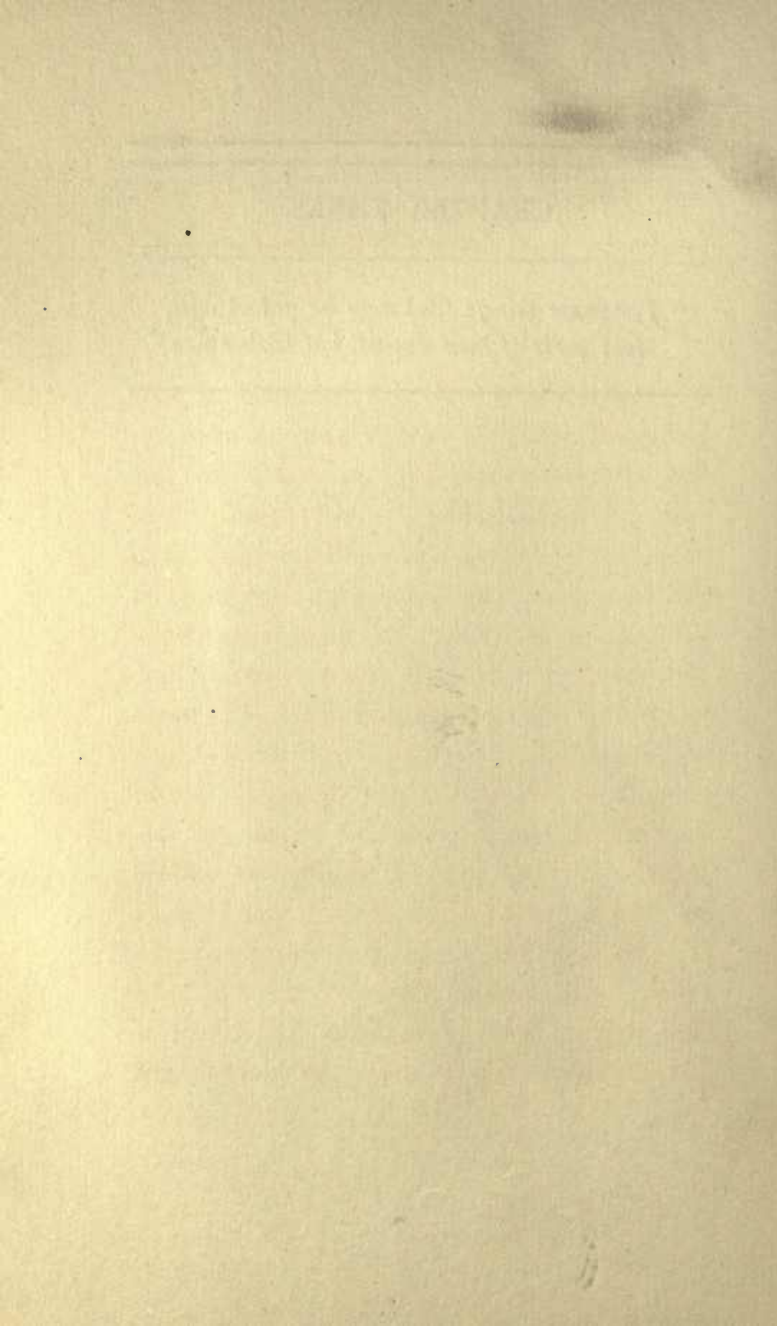
“ If you choose to exaggerate her virtues,” he turned to retort, “ I can't help it. She is a very ordinary girl. But it's your privilege to decline to help me. I'm sorry I troubled you. Good-morning.”

To the salutation she made no reply whatever. Slowly she swung back and forth propelled by her toes, a kindly and half humorous expression in her eyes.

“ It's too bad,” she said to herself. “ I hate to be unaccommodating, but oh, heavens, *Bella!*”

CHAPTER THREE

*“ For easie things that may be got at will,
Most sorts of men doe set but little store ”*



CHAPTER THREE

PLUNGING down the mountain, poor Langstaff wheezed and raged alternately. His extreme anxiety for his aunt, and his fear of not finding a girl, made him desperate. He saw himself pitching onto the Inn porch and charging the bevy of summer girls there. He had even a vision of himself carrying off one of them bodily, her blond puffs bobbing and her silly heels kicking. Then a chill seized him—suppose there was n't a girl there? Could the inn keeper's wife be made to answer? If she proved the only female on the mountain side she *would have to go*. He set his teeth and increased his speed. He looked back at the Skyland flag flying bravely against the blue of the afternoon sky. Had the doctor got

there yet? Was his aunt somewhat relieved?

The rocks rattled after him as he dashed down the trail, and the bushes flew aside, flapping when he had passed like long, menacing arms.

Then a voice out of the pines brought him up with an immense start.

A woman was standing on the trail below looking up at him. She had a parasol over her head and a book in her hands, and as she stood there among the trees she looked, with her russet hair and her water-green gown, more like a creature of the woods than a mere woman. And indeed if a nymph or a dryad had arisen in his way he could not have been more greatly surprised than he was to see Genevra Tellant.

“My bad, bad boy come back to me,” she murmured prettily, with just a touch of banter in her voice, and quite as if he

had merely run round the corner a moment ago, when in reality it had been years since they had met.

Sailing from New York to Bremen, he had, upon finding her irretrievably committed to Tellant, whom she was then on her way to marry, made rather violent love to her. It was a heady, indiscreet thing to do, as he told himself at the time, but such an indulgence was not one to which he often yielded, and he could see little hazard in it, since the brief days of the voyage were the only ones they were ever likely to spend together.

She was an American, thickly encrusted with foreignisms. Most of her life had been spent abroad, and she and Tellant were to live in Leipsic.

When the voyage had ended they parted somewhat emotionally, and he had heard nothing of or from her since. He supposed she had lived an ideal marital exist-

ence, and that she should be here now did not surprise him after the first shock of astonishment, since all travelers find their way sooner or later to the Rockies. Tellant was probably down at the inn.

Suddenly he had a flash of light — why shouldn't *she* help him in his dilemma? It would be much less embarrassing to ask this of her than of a stranger, and she was very accommodating he remembered. His spirits quickened with the thought. He fairly wrung her hands with cordiality, beaming at her with such warmth that she colored daintily.

“What vehemence of welcome,” she murmured, half caressingly. “And where were you going, pray? You blew down the hill like a typhoon.”

“I was going to er—to London town to get myself a wife.”

Her very dark brows lifted over her very bright eyes.

“So! And without a wheelbarrow? But in any case *your* wife would never have a fall.”

“Mrs. Tellant, will you seem to be wife to me?” he demanded rather startingly.

“Why, are you in earnest about the wife?” she exclaimed. “How extraordinary! Do tell me what you mean. What is it?”

“It is my Aunt Marianna,” said he, gravely.

“Is n’t it usually your Aunt Marianna?” she suggested.

“This is worse than ever before.” And he hurried to explain.

“But Bella—you did n’t tell me about her,” she reproached him when he had finished. “Yet—I forgive you, since there are a few things I did n’t tell you myself. And so you want me to play Bella until the real one arrives upon the scene?”

THE RULE OF THREE

“Will you?” he entreated.

“Is there anything on earth I wouldn't do for you? But tell me, what is she like?”

“I must have told you that,” he insisted; but she shook her head, her laugh rippling musically:

“In those days—our days—we talked only of each other. Have you forgotten?”

“And of Tellant. You were on your way to Naples to marry him, you remember.”

“Yes, yes! Now I am on my way to New York to forget him. But let us not speak of him now.”

“You can't mean—oh, I say, you really can't mean that—”

“Many things have happened,” she faltered. Now faltering in a woman like Genevra Tellant is as unnatural as stumbling in a trained trackster, and he was not deceived by it. Indeed he found himself

wondering how many times she had done it, thus effectively, at the exact spot in the narrative of her marital infelicities.

“Life is full of disillusionments and disappointments,” she went on, in that halting way, as if whatever had happened had left her still a little dazed, a little bewildered. “I—I have not seen my husband in eighteen months, and I shall probably never see him again. But I beg you, Gavin, dear friend, do not let us speak of that now.”

Assuredly it was the last thing in the world Langstaff wanted to speak of at the moment—or for the matter of that, at any time. Above her lovely bent head he glanced anxiously up toward the cottage where his thoughts all centered. To get her there as expeditiously as possible was his one concern. Murmuring incoherent sympathy he begged her to come with him, and with a smile meant to convey fortitude

in her own sorrow and interest in his welfare, she laid one hand on his arm, and with the other lifted the frills of her charming gown.

“Take me to your aunt and see whether or not I will be Bella,” she commanded.

His fingers closed over hers. His gratitude was really fervent. He hurried her along the trail, lifting her over the steep places and steadying her across the rocks of the boiling little cañon stream. He all but ran her up to the foot of the bungalow steps.

Laughing breathlessly she swept her hand up her back hair, lifted the lace of her stock closer to her chin, and shook the dust from her multiple ruffles.

“Did I tire you?” he asked anxiously. “Was it too steep a climb?” Now that he had got her here he was contrite at the precipitous way in which he had done it.

THE RULE OF THREE

Still breathless she shook her head, smiling reassurance at him.

At the instant a breeze ran down the cañon and darting into Miss Marianna Langstaff's room brought out with it the heavy odor of medicine.

Genevra Tellant lifted her awed face to Langstaff, the laughter gone from it, leaving it almost childishly sweet and grave, the red lips trembling a little.

“Oh,” she whispered, “it seemed like private theatricals, and it may be *death!*”

At the moment Benjamin Cockran squeaked down the steps from the upper porch, his face, in its solemn whiteness, resembling the pasty smoothness of an unbaked biscuit.

“How is she?” cried Langstaff.

“Easier, I think.”

“Has the doctor come yet?”

“Not yet. Yim probably had to follow

him into the woods somewhere. . . . You have brought your wife, I see."

Langstaff smiled feebly.

"This is — Bella," said he.

Cockran bowed gravely.

"It may interest you to know that she is already here," he remarked.

"Bella?" shouted Langstaff.

"One Bella," answered Cockran.

"She is up there?" demanded Gavin Langstaff, tragically.

Cockran nodded his big head. "Up there making herself very useful to your Aunt Marianna," said he.

CHAPTER FOUR

*“ You are too double
In your dissimulation.”*

CHAPTER FOUR

“WAIT here!” cried Langstaff in great excitement; and Mrs. Tellant sank into a chair, her gown rippling about her, her slender, ring-heavy hands dropping over the chair’s arms, an expression of unaccustomed annoyance on her face. To Benjamin Cockran she gave scarcely a glance, and having stood about helplessly for a minute he withdrew.

As Gavin Langstaff approached his aunt’s door the voice that reached him teased his memory. Certainly it could not be Bella’s, he told himself, yet in the darkened room the small white figure beside the bed looked not unlike his fiancée’s.

“Bella is here, you see,” cried his aunt, hearing his step.

The girl beside the bed straightened and faced him: it was Davie Bessire.

“I must have missed you, dear,” she said connubially. “There, Auntie, are you quite, quite comfy now?”

Sedately she smoothed the pillows, but there was a hint of daring in her that did not escape him as he stood dumb-founded on the other side of the bed.

“Perfectly so, child,” said Miss Langstaff, with a breath of profound relief. “Men are well-meaning, but deliver me from them in an emergency. They would get on exactly as well without heads as with them. Now here you are, Bella, home but five minutes or so, and yet I am comfortably in bed, with quiet restored. I’ve just been telling her, Gavin, how greatly improved I think her.”

“Yes, is n’t she?” he heartily agreed. He was beginning to rally.

“But,” went on his aunt, while Davie swept him a sternly reproving glance, “I don’t at all like her having grown so thin. Why, her hand is scarcely larger than mine, and it used to be quite plump. What size glove did you wear, Bella?”

“Seven, dear.”

“Seven! Oh, horrors, no! Your hand was never so large as that. But you can’t wear more than a five and three quarters now.”

“It’s a much more economical sized hand to have. They’re always having sales of gloves under six, you know,” replied Davie, with a laugh.

“Hear her! I guess there’s no danger of her breaking you up, eh, Gavin?”

“I’m not so sure about that,” said Langstaff, looking admiringly at the deft little figure moving lightly about the room, setting it to rights.

Davie’s frown would have been more

severe had she not been busy blowing the hair out of her eyes. She was not an untidy person, by any means, but she had the kind of hair that is always in the way, so that in moments of comedy and tragedy alike she had forever to be blowing it out.

Miss Langstaff, propped among the pillows, turned her straining eyes from one to the other of them: "I can't make out just what the change is in her," she mused, "but even her voice sounds different to me."

Langstaff's perturbed glance sought the girl, and she came swiftly to the rescue. Bending over the invalid she touched with her soft lips the band of wrinkled forehead which in years no one had thought of kissing.

" 'Not all that we have been do we remain,' " she quoted lightly, while Langstaff drew a breath of relief and pinned his faith to her on the spot.

“ You used to awe me a little, my dear,” the old lady continued, reminiscently. “ You were so very virtuous. You don’t mind my saying that I’m glad to find you a bit more human, do you? I’m such an old heathen myself that abnormal superiority always frightens me.”

Davie’s laugh was infectious : “ If I’ve a prayer, it’s to be kept human in this day of — what shall I call them? — saints or scientists ? ”

Marianna Langstaff laughed too — approvingly. “ That’s a healthy sentiment. Gavin, I congratulate you on your wife’s good sense. The future of your children is safe in her hands.”

A furious singeing red swept the girl’s little brown face, while Langstaff lurched into the conversational pause which followed, dragging with him the first thing he could lay hands on to throw into the current and change the stream of his

aunt's comments. What she had to say, however, swept unobstructedly on.

“ It takes such a lot of money to keep a family going these days, and I'm so happy to find that you have followed my wish in the matter, Gavin, and married young, as every man ought to marry, that I'm going to do the right handsome thing by you. I don't want you to worry over material possessions. And I don't want Bella and the children— ”

“ *Please!* ” broke forth poor Davie, uncontrollably.

Miss Langstaff laughed gently, then drew a breath of pain and lay quiet for a moment while Davie smoothed her forehead. When the attack was over she continued:

“ So I mean to settle upon Bella and the youngsters a sum quite adequate — ”

“ Oh, Auntie, why will you insist — ”

“ Now, now, my dear boy, it is n't

going to make me die a minute sooner to begin to dispose of my money. Let us talk it over sensibly and quietly. I expect to see those babies—”

“Dear Miss Langstaff, don’t,” pleaded the girl in a chaos of confusion.

“Well, well, we won’t talk about them if you don’t want to, but there is one thing more I do want to say, and then—”

“Mr. Cockran is calling,” said Davie, and Langstaff arose with alacrity, but his aunt put up a peremptory hand and bade him let Benjamin Cockran wait.

“I want your promise that the girl shall be called Marianna,” said she. “It’s a fancy of mine that I’m sure you will indulge. Besides, the name isn’t such a bad one. Now is it? What do you say?”

The crisis endured for a second, then Langstaff murmured: “I am sure that Bella will wish it to be as you wish it, Auntie.”

THE RULE OF THREE

“It is to be Marianna, then?” she crowed, finding Davie’s hand and pressing it.

“Oh, yes, yes,” murmured Davie. “Really, Gavin, you *must* see what Mr. Cockran wants.”

A few minutes later she too made her temporary escape, only to find Langstaff pacing the hall.

“When were we married?” she demanded. “I’ve been in mortal terror for fear she’d ask me to tell her all about it.”

“Let’s see,” he reflected. “Shall we say two months ago? That would make it about the time she expected it to take place. There was talk of my having to go on a long Canadian trip, and she thought Bella should go with me.”

“Do you happen to recall the exact date of the marriage?” she asked gravely.

“I suppose it ought to have been on a Wednesday, ought n’t it?”

“ Oh, yes, everybody is married on Wednesday.”

“ How would the tenth of April do?” he questioned, consulting a pocket calendar.

She nodded. “ Where were we married?”

“ In your mother’s old-fashioned parlor.”

“ Under a bell of smilax and carnations?”

“ Not much,” he declared with emphasis. “ There was no such nonsense.”

“ I forgot. There wasn’t any nonsense of any sort about it, was there?” And the look she gave him made him somewhat uncomfortable. He was of the opinion that, on her part, she believed whole-heartedly in nonsense of a good many sorts.

“ Have I a father as well as a mother?” she inquired after an instant.

THE RULE OF THREE

“You had. He died several years ago.”

“Was I very fond of him?”

“Reasonably so.”

“I’m not unreasonably fond of anyone, am I? You see I mustn’t appear out of character.”

“You certainly aren’t foolishly fond of your — husband,” he declared rather grimly.

Her eyes widened, and she hesitated, then said gently: “But I do care a little, don’t I? As much as some wives — most wives — care?”

“You care comfortably and genteelly. That doesn’t make the rôle difficult, you see.”

“I’ll do my best. But I want to tell you why I came after I had said I would n’t, you know. It really seemed so odious not to try to help you that I made up my mind to take the chance at deceiving your

aunt. I'm afraid I sha'n't be able to do it. She already notices many differences. But since there's nothing else for it, I'll see you through, and we'll hope for the best. Why, *who* is that?" She was staring down at the projecting corner of the lower porch where Mrs. Tellant sat waiting.

"That is another Bella," he stammered.

"*Another* Bella? Then I've only botched things by coming! I'll go straight away."

"You can't! You mustn't! You've begun to be Bella, and you'll have to keep it up. That is Mrs. Tellant, an old friend of mine, who is staying in the neighborhood. I ran across her on the trail just after I left the Brindleys, and she consented to come up and help me out, but it wouldn't do at all to try to make an exchange now, for Aunt Marianna would know in a minute. Besides, you are a

much better Bella than she could possibly be, and I'll have to depend on your staying by me."

"Oh, that's all right, if you really want me," said she, with the flash of an honest smile. "Now I must get along back to Miss Langstaff."

"Sh! Wait a second, will you?" called Cockran, moving down the hall on his toes. "She doesn't go away, you know, Langstaff, the other Bella. What shall I do with her?"

With an exclamation at his own neglect, Langstaff was moving toward the stairs when the doctor's face appeared at the landing.

"The lady below — Mrs. Langstaff, I presume? — told me to come up if I liked," he explained.

There was a second's pause, then Gavin Langstaff said quietly:

"This is Mrs. Langstaff, Doctor —"

THE RULE OF THREE

“Barber is my name. How do you do, madam?”

Madam looked girlishly embarrassed, but she bowed as gravely as the occasion required and led the way at once to Miss Langstaff.

Meanwhile Genevra Tellant was moving restlessly about the lower porch when a small, smoky-skinned man with a white imperial and twinkling eyes climbed the steps of the bungalow and, reaching the high plane of the porch, carefully brushed the dust from his white flannels before he addressed her:

“Is she dead?” he questioned.

“Dead? Not at all, I think,” said she, chillily.

The brows of the little old gentleman made interrogation marks of themselves.

“Much ado about nothing, eh?” he suggested.

“I have about come to that conclusion.”

“ Bless me ! ”

They stared politely at each other.

“ I think I have not the pleasure of knowing you, madam,” he remarked.

“ My name is Tellant,” replied she, stiffly.

“ And are you upon the bridge ? ” inquired he.

“ The bridge ? ” repeated she.

“ Certainly,” he twinkled; “ someone must be in authority here.”

“ Quite the contrary, I should say.”

“ Dear me ! Is that so, indeed. Then alack for the ship of finesse ! I believe I have a granddaughter somewhere about,” he remarked presently, quite unabashed by her frigid manner. A faint degree of interest seemed now to awaken in her, however.

“ Is she betrothed to Mr. Langstaff ? ” she asked.

“ Why, good Lord, ma'm, she never

saw him until she came up here to him."

"Then she is n't Bella Kaye?" There was immense relief in her voice.

"She is merely a substituted Bella," grinned he. And he drew a chair and proceeded to make himself comfortable.

The lively glitter of his personality, the twinkle in the depths of his old eyes, the lines so deeply etched in his smoky skin, and the apparent health of his wiry body were all attractive, but Mrs. Tellant did not like him. While he, on his part, as promptly and as cordially disliked Mrs. Tellant.

"You are a friend of the household, I take it," he observed.

"Mr. Langstaff has not a warmer, better friend than I," said she. "And you?"

"Merely a visitor in the neighborhood. Langstaff's need of help seems to have been pretty imperative? Tight box, is n't

it? I got only part of the story from Mrs. Brindley. Can you tell me if that granddaughter of mine has begun the rôle of niece-in-law to the erratic old lady yet?"

"I do not know. I had expected to go at once to Miss Langstaff, but I found that Miss —"

"Bessire is her name, and my own."

"I found Miss Bessire installed there."

"The solemnities of the installation can hardly be complete," he retorted, "and since we seem equally interested in interrupting them, suppose we see what we can do about it. If possible I want to take my girl home with me, while you, as evidently, desire to remain. Therefore let us effect an exchange of Bellas. What do you say?"

The lady now smiled amiably.

"A very good suggestion, since you are strangers and I a friend."

THE RULE OF THREE

“Here’s my girl now. She’ll be able to help us,” he exclaimed as Davie came down the stairs. “Davie, this lady, who is an old friend of Mr. Langstaff’s, is anxious to relieve you of duty. If we might speak with Mr. Langstaff, I dare say the substitution may be made.”

Davie stood on the bottom step, her glance traveling slowly from the graceful proportions of the older woman’s figure to her own slim almost boyish shape.

“We are n’t exactly duplicates, you see,” she smiled.

“But as I understand it, Miss Langstaff is almost blind,” urged her grandfather.

“Yes, her sight is very bad, but Mr. Langstaff is just coming. Let him decide.”

“To be sure. My dear Langstaff,” said Bessire, the presentations over, “you must believe that both my granddaughter and I welcome the opportunity to serve

THE RULE OF THREE

you, but we must not forget that it is to one's friends that one turns at a time like this. On this lady" — with a bow in Mrs. Tellant's direction — "you will naturally rely, and it is her privilege to help you."

Genevra Tellant gave him a brilliant smile, then she flashed another, of a very different sort, on Langstaff.

"Mr. Bessire puts it wisely," she said softly. "After all, the privilege is mine, Gavin."

"But my dear Mrs. Tellant, think of the difference between you and Miss Bessire," he cried; "between you and the real Bella, whose height happens to be exactly Miss Bessire's. Poor Aunt Marianna is in a bad way, but she still has most of her senses, and if we should try to foist another Bella on her, a Bella who has grown a foot in the last five minutes, on my word I don't think she'd stand for it."

THE RULE OF THREE

His glance moved appealingly about the small circle.

“ In the darkened room, with her sight as it is, Miss Bessire passes very well for Miss Kaye,” he continued; “ but Aunt Marianna is shrewd, and we could n’t hope to deceive her with someone so entirely different. We dare n’t take any risks in the matter. The doctor says she must be kept from all excitement and emotion. So you see the masquerade *must* be successfully maintained.”

Genevra Tellant smiled her most ingratiating smile, with just a touch of affectionate reproach in it.

“ Dear boy, don’t look so troubled about it,” she breathed. “ The matter must stand exactly as it is. Miss Bessire will do the part most cleverly, I am sure, and I’ll help her in every way possible. Perhaps at night, when it’s quite dark in the room, I can go in safely and care

THE RULE OF THREE

for your aunt. I shall love to do it if I may. You see, it is settled: instead of one Bella there will be two!"

"You are most kind," said Langstaff, with a good deal of embarrassment, "but I'm afraid—"

"Don't say another word," commanded she. "It is arranged, isn't it, Miss Bessire?"

Langstaff turned to David Bessire. "I'm afraid the arrangement will not suit you, sir. It's such a confounded lot to ask of a stranger."

"Davie and I are glad to be of any help. Believe that. I had no notion of conveying the slightest unwillingness on her part or my own. We'll stay, and be glad. You can tuck me away somewhere, can't you? A tent will do, if you haven't an extra room."

"We've plenty of room, and I'm no end obliged to you. I hope the real

THE RULE OF THREE

Bella will be here soon. She happens to be spending the summer in the state, and I shall wire her at once. Then everything will be all right," he declared.

"Magic Bella," murmured Genevra Tellant.

Langstaff flushed slightly.

"If you'll tell Yim what you require he will bring your bags up for you before evening," he said.

"Thanks," said David Bessire. "We'd like the Brindleys to know what had happened to us, otherwise they would be expecting us home."

"If you don't mind, Gavin, I think I won't come up to stay until some time to-morrow," said Mrs. Tellant. "I have several things demanding my attention, but you may count on me then. Shall you be able to get on without me, Miss Bessire?"

"Indeed yes! Don't hurry on my

account. You really won't be able to do much to help. She's so keen," said Davie, sauntering over to the corner of the porch where her grandfather followed, leaving Langstaff and Mrs. Tellant to speak together a moment.

Genevra Tellant's gaze followed the girl.

"How naïve!" she murmured. "So simple! So sweet! She makes me think of a garden pool bordered with geraniums and daisies."

"She's a tremendously good sort," said he. "They both are."

Her nod was absent. Her expression changed. She was looking up into his face, and her voice flowed with caressing inflections. The words were indistinguishable from the corner of the porch where the Bessires stood, but their pretty staccato pattered oddly.

Davie Bessire cocked her head, listening.

THE RULE OF THREE

“ She ’s talking baby talk to him,” she exclaimed in disgust. “ You ’ll muzzle me if I ever do that, won’t you ? ”

“ I will, my dear. You may depend upon it.”

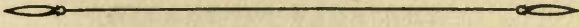
“ Do men like it ? ” she asked.

“ A man,” said he, “ is fed on many foods.”

“ Oh, Lordy ! ” groaned she, inelegantly.

CHAPTER FIVE

“ To alter for the better is no shame ”



CHAPTER FIVE

THE next morning Benjamin Cockran, bolting his breakfast to his own disgust, — there was much of the leisurely epicurean in him, — dashed out to catch the cog, a message in one hand and a couple of damson plums in the other.

“All right!” he shouted back to Langstaff, who anxiously regarded him as he swung aboard.

At Minnehaha Falls Mrs. Tellant got on and with a word of greeting took the seat beside him, inquiring anxiously as to Miss Langstaff and the entire Skyland household. Her manner was much more gracious than it had been the day before, so much more so, indeed, that he had the uncomfortable suspicion it had been put on, like her bright color, for the occasion.

THE RULE OF THREE

The native candor in Cockran demanded primitive honesty in others.

Deception in men and artificiality in women offended him equally, and if he had been certain that the rose in Genevra Tellant's cheek had not been put there by nature he would have excused himself and found another seat. But he gave the rose the benefit of a kindly doubt and sat still.

Her complexities and subtleties bewildered him and made him fussy and nervous. When she talked, throwing off scintillating generalities as an emery wheel scatters sparks, he looked out of the window, nodding vaguely and wondering what the deuce she really meant.

“Have you many errands at the Springs?” she inquired after a while. “I remember that Mr. Langstaff said last night there were several things he wished you to attend to for him. Among them I think he mentioned the sending of a mes-

sage to Miss Kaye. I am going to the telegraph office on my own account and if it would be of the least help to you I should be delighted to attend to that for you."

"Would you?" he cried in relief. "I am a little hurried, to tell the truth. I'm going to look after a grocery order for Gavin, and one ought to have plenty of time about a thing like that, you know. I don't like to be rushed, or to have other matters on my mind. Many of the things are canned, and you can't be too particular about getting the right canned goods. I'm acquainted with all the best brands, and I want to see that he gets 'em. He isn't any too particular about such things himself, I've noticed—does n't realize the importance of it, I suppose. But there's everything in knowing the right kind and in getting it. For instance, I wonder if you happen to know how very much su-

THE RULE OF THREE

perior to all others is the Flake of Snow brand of codfish? No! Is it possible? I grant that it is n't widely advertised, but advertisement does n't make quality. Not one person in a hundred goes into this subject exhaustively enough. Yet what could be more important? I have given my best thought to the study of foods, and I think I may be considered somewhat of an authority in the matter."

"I should think so indeed," murmured she with a mental yawn.

"I hope to be a great assistance to my wife — if I ever have one — in the matter of our table," he declared. "Too few men are any assistance in such matters."

"Will your first requirement of the lady be that she understand the science of cookery?" she suggested, too bored to be amused, but not daring to offend him.

"My first requirement," said he, with emphasis, "will be her absolute and un-

deviating honesty. Why, on my word, here we are at Manitou! What a pleasant conversation we were just beginning to have! You are sure you don't mind seeing to that message? Thanks, very much. I'm going to stop over a car and get a drink of the Iron Springs water. Will you join me? I consider it a duty I owe my blood."

"Thank you, no. Mine does very well as it is," said she.

"Then let me put you on the car."

He walked briskly beside her across the station platform to where the electric car was waiting. "The address—Miss Kaye's,—is inside the envelope with the message. They're both plain. I don't think you'll have any trouble," he said, as he put the envelope into her hands.

"I'll attend to it at once," said she, and smiled as the car slid down the hill.

"Accommodating of her, I must say,"

he murmured, crossing the road to the Iron Springs pavilion, where an orchestra was playing behind the flower boxes of the upper gallery, and where polyglot groups sat about inside the building and out beneath the trellised arbors, listening and drinking. As he entered, a bevy of sturdy young women carrying walking sticks and wearing short skirts and sombreros and stout boots passed him ready for a climb up the Peak. Their unadorned attractiveness quickly sponged off his mind, as it were, the slight impression which Genevra Tellant's artificiality had left.

He filled his pocket cup at the stone gargoyle in the rocks and drank slowly, while the pleasant buzz of voices rose above him and a rollicky air that he liked came chuckling down from the balcony.

Meanwhile Mrs. Tellant had tucked the message into her bag after carefully perusing it.

THE RULE OF THREE

Later at the desk at the telegraph office she re-read it attentively, pausing a moment afterward in deep thought.

It read : "Aunt Marianna ill here. Disposed as usual to disregard the doctor's don't. Come."

She took up the pen, her eyes curiously alight, and after changing a period and a capital in the message, she pushed it across the counter to the polite young clerk who waited to take it.

A half hour afterward she ran into Cockran at a crowded street corner, just as he was stepping off a Manitou car.

"The telegram has gone to Bella," said she, reassuringly.

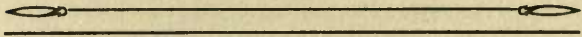
"Good! Many thanks. It's a relief to know I may take all the time I need with that order. By the way, do you like spaghetti? You see I must consider your taste, since you are to be one of us for a while. You do? That's good.

THE RULE OF THREE

Sphaghetti awash with pleasant sauces, of course. Well, good-by, and thank you once more."

Mrs. Tellant picked her way across the street.

"That's *one* sort of a man," she said to herself with a scornful little smile.



CHAPTER SIX

“ They also serve who only stand and wait ”

CHAPTER SIX

“AND can we be of no help?”

Mrs. Brindley asked the question of David Bessire that same morning in her cool, fragrant living room. She was a tall, pretty young woman, and as she stood, her baby on her hip, she made a much more charming picture of a mother and child than any Madonna he knew, he told himself enthusiastically.

Brindley stood beside his wife. He lacked an inch or two of being as tall as she. If he had carried himself with more care and dignity he might have appeared at least as tall. This had been suggested to him, but although he desired nothing so fervently as added inches, it had no perceptible effect upon his carriage or his conduct. He had a square, protruding

THE RULE OF THREE

chin, but you did not hold it against him when you saw his eyes with their good-humor and their immense kindness.

“Nothing at all,” said David Bessire. “All we can do is to humor the old lady and wait for Bella. She’s staying with friends in Greeley, and she ought to reach here to-night.”

Bessire was polishing his glasses with a cream-colored silk handkerchief. He regarded them critically, and spoke without looking up: “Queer situation all round, is n’t it? Langstaff does n’t strike you as the sort of man who’d let a woman map out his life for him. But I dare say, in spite of his having deferred the marriage so long, he must be fond of this Bella.”

“Maybe it’s she who has deferred it,” suggested Mary Brindley. “You know how long it takes some women to make up their minds.”

THE RULE OF THREE

“Does it though?” grinned Brindley.

“That’s not worthy of you, Tom,” she cried. She looked very thoughtful and pretty as she sat, her hands clasping her knees. She wore a plain percale gown of black and white, as crisp and fresh as a lettuce leaf, and David Bessire wondered why more women didn’t wear gowns like it instead of those with so many frills and dragging furbelows. . . .

“It does take them a long, long time,” she mused, “and afterward—they’d give their souls to get back the lost years.”

“You see what *she* thinks of matrimony,” commented her husband.

“That’s neither here nor there,” put in she, with a wave of color over her girlish cheeks. “What I want to know is why Mrs. Tellant thinks she is needed up there. I met her the other day at the Inn and I don’t like her.”

“Come, come, don’t be so severe,”

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said Brindley, who was the most charitable soul on earth, "she's all right. She does some ungodly thing to her hair, I'll wager, but that does n't convert her into a whited sepulcher, does it?"

"Just the same, I would n't trust her. She's insincere, and she would intrigue. You'll see. I've a prophetic intuition that she'll make mischief."

David Bessire swung his glasses on a delicate forefinger.

"I don't care for her myself," said he, quietly. "She is a sentimental debauchee, or I'm altogether mistaken."

"'Cure the drunkard, heal the insane, mollify the homicide, civilize the Pawnee, but what lessons can be devised for the debauchee of sentiment?'" quoted Brindley, lightly. "I say, but you and Mary are hard on her. She knows how to make the best of her artifices, and she keeps a keen weather eye out for her ad-

vantages. But what of that? She knows Langstaff is engaged to Miss Kaye, and she can't have any designs on him. As for you and Cockran, you're safe enough, aren't you?"

David Bessire sat screwed up in his chair, his face like a leaf that rain and wind have beaten till it is only fiber and veins. Prophetic intuitions like Mrs. Brindley's were out of his line altogether, but he knew a designing woman when he saw her.

"What a goose you are, Tom," cried Mary Brindley, in exasperation. "Don't you know anything of the audacity of feminine trespass? Do you suppose she'd scruple to go in for Gavin if she really wanted him? And I tell you he is n't to be scoffed at, with his position and his prospects."

Thomas Brindley laughed in sheer good-natured amusement.

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“Quit worrying about that part of it. Langstaff’s perfectly able to look after himself. You can’t pitch the lady over a cliff, can you? Accept her, and let her alone. You’ve got enough to do to back up Davie in her rôle. You’re going to stay down with us for lunch, are n’t you?” he asked of Bessie.

“No, thank you. I only came down to give you a more intimate notion of the state of affairs up there. Davie wanted you to know. She had a fair night, though Miss Langstaff did n’t sleep much. We’re getting along all right so far. It would be easier for me if anyone had sufficient invention to think of an excuse for my presence there. As it is I’m relegated to the background, and I don’t fancy that altogether. I can’t sail under the Kaye colors, for Miss Langstaff knows the whole relationship. But I manage very well, by keeping my wits and talking

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under my breath." He took up his hat—it was a panama, almost the shade of his flannel suit. His tie was a rich brown, the exact color of his twinkling eyes, and of the kind affected by artists and musicians. Above his cream-colored canvas shoes his silk-clad ankles showed the exact shade of the tie. And as he marched up the trail, erect and dapper for all his sixty and more years, the Brindleys looked after him fondly.

"He is shaded just like a meerschaum pipe," chuckled Mrs. Brindley. "Bless him!"

The bungalow was a peaceful spot as David Bessire approached it. The red hammock with its worn fringes swayed emptily on the upper porch. The striped chairs yawned. Langstaff's big flag shook itself jauntily in the face of the clouds. Kam Yim smoked his pipe in the pines at

the side of the house, and on the lower porch Davie lay in a big chair talking with Langstaff.

“Stay with us,” she said, as he climbed up to them. “Miss Langstaff is asleep and we’re having a little visit.”

“I’ll go up and read my letters and have a game of solitaire,” said he, “and if the patient wakes, I’ll call you.”

He chose a corner within sound, but out of sight of her door, adjusted an awning, found the most comfortable chair on the porch and carrying it over, settled in it. He took out his mail, which Brindley had brought up from the Springs for him, drew from his pocket a small ivory letter opener and inserted it in the flap of the first letter.

But the Skyland and its affairs still held his interest, keeping him for the moment from the world beyond the crests and cañon, the buttes and plains, and he

sat, the unopened letter in his hands, his brows tightly knotted :

“She’s a mischief-maker,” said he with conviction. “We’ll just keep an eye on her.”

“Tell me more about Bella,” Davie was saying to Langstaff, leaning toward him out of the steamer chair, a vivid little figure.

He pulled off a leaf from the stubby oak tree which pressed its branches close to the porch rail and smoothed it over his finger.

“It’s difficult to describe anyone that you know as well as I know her,” he said.

“Have n’t you a picture of her? It would make it so much easier for me if I had a definite idea of her. Besides, I don’t mind admitting that I’m curious.”

“Why, I ought to have one. Wait,

and I'll see;" and he ran upstairs and rummaged recklessly through drawers and trunks, only to return in some embarrassment without it.

"Can't put my hands on it. Things have such an annoying way of getting somewhere else up here," he apologized.

She nodded, a queer little look of questioning in her eyes. Then she lay back in her chair watching a long-bodied bird that flew out from the rocks high above and, circling, swept off into space.

"Do you know, I'm really very much obliged to you for letting me have the opportunity of knowing your Aunt Marianna," said she. "She's splendid. She'll make an abject slave of me if Bella doesn't come soon. The way she tries the edge of her humor on things is great. It fairly fascinates me. She whittles pretty deep sometimes, you know, but she never mutilates. . . . And then I'm obliged to you

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for the side lights," she continued, as one who, actuated by the spirit of daring, ventures upon insecure footing.

"Side lights?" he repeated.

She nodded. "On your ship of love, when she sails by night. This is sailing pretty much in the dark, is n't it? But she'll weather the seas all right, I'll wager;" and she smiled mischievously. It was curious to find oneself upon such easy terms with a man who had yesterday been a complete stranger.

However, she wisely forbore to go deeper into the subject.

"My! I like your mountains," said she. "I like any outdoors, don't you? I've no patience with lives that are voluntarily spent behind lace curtains and frosted office windows. Think of the people who have forgotten — if they ever knew — how beefsteak tastes when it's broiled in the open! I'd rather forget my

prayers occasionally than to forget that. It wouldn't endanger my soul half so much."

"Good for you!" he cried enthusiastically.

"It is n't that people really don't care for such things, is it, but that they let themselves get flabby — muscles and enthusiasm alike. Why, look at the Jap; he'll walk a hundred miles to get to a cherry orchard on a festal day! . . . But dear me, how far we've got from Bella. Tell me more about her and her family. I ought to know, you see, so I can talk intelligently when it's expected of me. What is my mother like?"

"Very domestic — a perfect 'hearth-woman.'"

"Are you — er — properly fond of her?"

"Yes, I'm on the best of terms with her."

“That’s right. You’d have to be, I can tell you, if I were really Bella, and she were really my mother.”

“If you had been Bella —” he broke off absently. He was thinking what a fine thing it would have been had she been Bella.

“When do you expect her?” she asked. “Not that I’m anxious for her to arrive. Goodness knows I’m having a fine time just as it is. I’ll be frightfully jealous when I have to give your aunt over to her. We’ve hit it off astonishingly, she and I.”

“She tells me frankly that she adores you. I’m afraid you are doing rather a glorified edition of Bella, are n’t you?”

“Well, why should n’t I? *You* idealize her, don’t you?” she laughed.

She lay in the chair, her face turned toward him. Her spontaneity and freshness delighted him. He had known from

the first that he would like her, — what astonished him was that in so short a time he should like her so well. Even in the stress of the last twelve hours she had revealed many things to him.

To see her at the head of his breakfast table had given him a distinct shock of pleasure. Some men are rarely able to disassociate marriage from the morning meal, but through all his quasi-engagement to Bella he had never visually realized her pouring his morning coffee. So that, knowing only a boarding house and hotel existence as he did, he had no idea how fetching a girl could look doing it, especially when she wore such crisp, fresh things as Davie wore. Neither had he the least idea what a jolly affair a mere breakfast could be, even though the sky was unpromising and the peaks frowned and the cañons belched a raw, ugly wind. The pine boughs had crackled in the fire-

place, the jays chattered in the bushes outside the windows, Kim's breakfast was delicious, and everything seemed just right. Yet it was, he knew, the high priestess of the homely ceremony who gave it its charm.

He found himself looking forward to the next morning when Davie should descend upon them in her pretty girlishness to assume the dignity requisite with the coffee urn.

Then a most disconcerting thought entered: Genevra Tellant would be here!

But Bella's coming would be the solution of the whole matter. He was as firmly bound to Bella as she had been to Tellant in those brief and foolish days. He could depend on Bella. He smiled, realizing how squarely she would meet the other woman's challenge.

But — if Bella should not come? The thought brought him up standing. Was

he counting without his host? Perhaps Bella might not choose to respond to his long-delayed summons. What then? Theirs had been a nondescript sort of understanding which could scarcely be called an engagement. Merely they had from infancy had the fact instilled into them that they were born for each other, and neither of them happening to care for any one else, and the day of the marriage being so far removed, they had amiably acquiesced to the plan proposed for their happiness.

Business had taken him back but infrequently to the little home town in the middle states where she lived, and they had seen each other only a few times in the last half-dozen years. But they had never failed to understand each other. Exactly as he had postponed Bella, so had Bella postponed him, and the knowledge had kept him from having any conscience in the matter, while his half-humorous convic-

tion of her loyalty had made him faithful to the peculiar relationship between them — except for that one brief lapse in the case of Mrs. Tellant.

Yet what if Bella had resented his obvious indifference, after all? His alarm increased at the suggestion, which had really never occurred to him before.

He needed Bella. Lord, lord! *how* he needed her! What could he do without her? To go on deceiving his aunt with a trumped-up Bella, no matter if she were as clever as Davie, would soon be impossible, for her sight would return with her strength. And if she once found out the state of affairs it would jeopardize not only his material interests but her complete convalescence. He knew how she bore shocks, and he groaned inwardly. Why had n't he married Bella when he ought? Why the deuce had he let it come to such a point as this?

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“ Oh, come, come, cheer up,” laughed Davie Bessire, as if she read his lugubrious thoughts. “ To-morrow your Bella will be here and everything will be well with you. You ’ll be laughing together over the whole business. Come along with me now to your aunt. You look as if you needed her enlivening influence.”

He ran up the stairs after her, to find Miss Langstaff looking very comfortable indeed. All traces of masculinity had been removed from the room, which was darkened to almost the blackness of evening. A bough of waxy oak leaves stood in a Satsuma vase at the head of her bed, and in her stiff white satin kimono with dragons wriggling over it she looked as if she might have come from Kam Yim’s land.

She put out a hand to Davie and one to Langstaff as they came in laughing together, and with a touch of sentimental-

ity joined their hands and held them so for a second, quoting a bit of an old poem.

Recalling the poem reminded her of how beautifully Bella had used to read the German classics. Wouldn't she read to her now? In her traveling bag beneath her black silk short kimono there was a copy of Schiller from which she was never parted. If Gavin would get it she was sure Bella would humor her.

Flushing from the touching scene of family amity through which she had just passed, but more so from the knowledge of the mess she would make of the German, Davie shot Langstaff an imploring glance, but he was already buried in the closet.

“ Really, Gavin, I'm going to be quite hopelessly spoiled by this dear child,” said Miss Langstaff, fondly patting Davie's hand. “ She waits on me hand and foot. You'll be wanting me out of the house if I continue to keep her so much away from

you. She might have hours a day more with you if she would only take them. It distresses me that she insists upon staying by me so closely. It isn't fair to either of you. And then she loses so much rest. Did she sleep well after I sent her in to you at midnight?"

Somehow the agonized moment passed. Langstaff's head fairly swam with embarrassment. He gulped out something unintelligible, and Davie buried herself in the diabolical pages which awaited her, while Miss Marianna, beaming affection, settled luxuriously among the pillows to await the reading.

"Begin at the first, Bella, dear," said she, and quoted softly:

*"Es lachelt der See, er ladet zum Bade,
Der Knabe schlief ein am grünen Gestade."*

Davie threw another glance of appeal at Langstaff. The whirlpool of embarrass-

ment just passed was a less dreadful thing than the Teutonic reefs which now threatened her. High school Latin and seminary German marked the boundaries of her linguistic attainments, and she recalled most poignantly with what unflinching regularity her work in the latter had been labeled P.

Langstaff saw her danger, *his* danger, and tried desperately to avert it.

“Yim wanted you awhile ago, Bella,” said he. “It was something about lunch, I think. I forgot to tell you. Perhaps you’d better see him before you begin.”

“To be sure,” said Davie, springing up.

“Sit down,” commanded Miss Langstaff. “You spoil that celestial terribly. As if he could n’t prepare a simple meal for the three of us without your advice.”

With a look of utter helplessness poor Davie sank down again, fluttering the leaves of the awful book. In the panic of

the moment she could have as easily read Chinese as the almost forgotten lines before her.

Langstaff looked across at her in equal helplessness. It was a crisis which neither of them underestimated.

“ Well, aren't we ready ? ” queried Miss Marianna.

Davie lifted the volume and moistened her lips, — all the blood in her body seemed to be beating in them.

“ Es—lachtet—der See — ” she floundered, “ er — ladet — ”

At just that instant there was a crash which shook the cottage to its foundation of cedar props.

“ What is it ? Oh, what is it ? ” cried Miss Langstaff in the greatest alarm.

Langstaff and Davie rushed to the door.

“ I don't know what it can be, but thank God for it ! ” he whispered profoundly.

At the bottom of the lower stairs Ben-

jamin Cockran was getting slowly and stiffly to his feet. About him was a veritable riot of the things he loved so well, — vegetables and meats, breads, pastry and pickles, canned things and bottled things. A bag of water cress had slit and adorned his neck like the garnish on the neck of a big Christmas bird, while a broken egg painted a sunrise on the toe of his boot.

Davie Bessire leaned against the upper newel post and laughed smotheredly.

“ Providence disguised in green stuff ! ” she gurgled.

Langstaff repressed his mirth and ran down to his prostrated guest.

“ Good Lord, Ben, how ’d you do it ? What were you up to anyway ? Are you hurt ? ”

“ Do you think anything could hurt me after that ? ” said Benjamin Cockran, tragically, drawing from beneath the wreckage a once beautiful but now quite flattened

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marshmallow cake upon which he had squarely sat. "It's what I get for trying to make a porter of myself. The box came up with me on the cog and I could n't make Yim hear, so I carried it in myself. I did n't want it to sit there stewing in the sun."

Dazedly he surveyed the ruin.

"Call the Chink," he said tonelessly.

CHAPTER SEVEN

*“ And my people ask politely
How a friend I know so slightly
Can be more to me than others I have liked
a year or so,*

*“ But they’ve never known the history
Of our transmigration’s mystery,
And they’ve no idea I loved you those
millenniums ago.”*

CHAPTER SEVEN

GENEVRA TELLANT lay in one of the porch chairs looking up at Langstaff as he stood by the rail. Over in a far corner of the porch Cockran puffed away on his old pipe, but otherwise the household had withdrawn.

Mrs. Tellant had come up from the Springs on a later cog than the one which brought Cockran and the ill-fated box. She was in the best of spirits, and finding her plate laid at the head of the table and Davie absent from the meal, she had promptly risen to the occasion, charming even David Bessire. Now as she lay, the reflection of the dinner hour's little triumph in her eyes, she was really a most fascinating woman.

“Do you know what I wanted to do

to-night?" she asked, with a backward glance toward Cockran to see that their privacy was not invaded. "I wanted to drink a health to yesterday. It would have been both toast and reminder. For — you have forgotten. Don't deny it. I read you so well, and I'm not scolding you. You remember, don't you, how I always preached forgetfulness to you? It's a little disconcerting, however, and rather a blow to one's vanity to find how easily you learned your lesson. That's all." She sighed softly. "This wonderful, wonderful Bella! Frankly, I'm wild with curiosity to see her."

Langstaff played nervously with a branch of wild hop-vine that wound the porch column.

"How very clever she must be to have changed you so!" she went on. "You will let me tell you how I admire her, won't you? But — for making those brief

days of our friendship seem so utterly gray and colorless to you now — ”

Her face was lovely in the moonlight, and also a little wishful. She threw out her hands to him in one of her adorable gestures.

“It’s in me. Can I help it that I’m frightfully jealous of your Bella?”

“Oh, come, come,” laughed he, fidgeting with the hop-vine tendril.

“Just what *is* her magic, Gavin?” she asked.

Bella’s magic? Good little common-sense, practical, tailor-made Bella!

She misread his embarrassment.

“Never mind,” laughed she, “I’ll find it out myself, if you are too modest to tell me. Oh, I forgive her for taking you from me, but how, *how* am I to forgive *you* for having forgotten me utterly? A woman’s heart is a potpourri jar filled with the petals of friendship, but a man’s is

merely a wide-mouthed receptacle, yawning, always yawning, and always empty, swept bare by the winds of every leaf and petal that ever helped temporarily to fill it."

"You are hard on us," he said, but he made no protest. For the life of him he could n't. There is, perhaps, no astonishment so mighty as the self-astonishment of the man who, having emerged from an illusion, looks back upon it.

The brown flecks of Mrs. Tellant's eyes covered the pupils, her lids narrowed and the prettily assumed tone of reproach held an unnatural note of constriction. She arose and moved to the corner of the porch, the softness of her gown emphasizing the grace of her figure. As she stood, one arm lifted to the trellis, the moonlight back of her, she was so exquisite that he marveled he could look on her unmoved, yet not a pulse pounded nor an inclination quickened.

He went analytically into the change in himself. Why did she leave him cold? Was it that his marriage so closely approached? It seemed improbable, under the circumstances, that the anticipation of his benediction should render any less delightful an occasion like this. Yet what he most profoundly wished for at the moment was that something would happen to end the scene: that Cockran, propped back in his chair, his ponderous feet on the rail, should lose his balance; that Kam Yim might break forth in a blood-curdling tirade against the invasion of mountain rats in his kitchen; that his aunt should require him; or that David Bessire should come down to join them, — anything, anything to end it!

Other men have known such moments. It is one of the penalties, perhaps the supreme one, for injudicious love-making.

Mrs. Tellant was looking at him stead-

ily with a gravely sweet expression in which a hint of amusement lay.

“ My naughty boy turned virtuous,” she murmured. “ It is beautiful to see.”

“ Oh, by Jove, don't rub it in ! ” he exclaimed. Then flushing at his lack of control: “ I beg your pardon, but a fellow does n't care to be strung up like a flag on a pole just because he 's going to be married.”

A faint redness revealed itself in her cheeks, lifting to the smooth brow. She was not an easy-tempered woman. Her choler was like a wind which rises in a breeze and sweeps on in fiercer and fiercer gusts until it has become a hurricane.

Just as it was getting well under way, Davie Bessire came downstairs.

“ I'm sorry,” said she, “ but your voices reach Miss Langstaff, and she wonders what woman can be here. I've put her off by telling her it must be someone

passing on the trail, but I think perhaps you'll have to stop talking or go somewhere else."

"Quite astonishing ears she has, has n't she?" observed Genevra Tellant, significantly, her glance like ice on the girl's face.

To the full Davie took the measure of her meaning. Surprised and quite unprepared for the attack, she stood for just a breath, going very white and staring at the other woman wonderingly. Then with a smile that would have spoken without the words, she said quietly:

"Not so astonishing, it seems to me, as Mrs. Tellant's suggestion." And she went quickly up the stairs.

Mrs. Tellant moved her shoulders in a shrug of amusement.

"So the garden pool has bees in its flower borders," she remarked composedly. "I feel my poor self quite full of stingers."

She yawned, fluttering a bit of lace before her mouth. Then she smiled at Langstaff, appending it tentatively, as it were.

His face was crimson, his eyes furious.

“Well, good-night,” said she, lightly, giving him no time to speak. “I think I’ll go to bed. I do hope Miss Bessire will call me if I’m needed. That’s what I’m staying for, you know — to help you if I can. . . . Good-night, Mr. Cockran.” Her lifted voice was musical, without a trace of anything to spoil its melody. “Are you quite over the fall yet? I should n’t feel too badly about the wreckage of the green things if I were you. They can all go into a salad, you know.”

She laughed, waiting at the foot of the lower step, one hand on the rail, while Langstaff lit her bedroom candle. As she took it from him, raising it to the level of her face, a little sigh seemed to breathe from her lips and she let her

pleading glance strike straight into his eyes.

“ Words have never been necessary between you and me, have they, Gavin? ” she asked simply, holding her long white gown out of the way of her white-shod feet, and moving slowly up the stairs.

“ Nor between you and me, ” muttered Benjamin Cockran with a grin as she disappeared and he came out of the shadow yawning : “ I think I ’ll go to bed too. Good-night. I ’m sorry for you, Langstaff, but you ought to have known better. ”

A few minutes later Langstaff went up the stairs. A shaded candle burned by his aunt’s bed and Davie Bessire stood at the window looking out. She was dressed as she had been except that her gown was turned back at the throat and wrists and her hair was done in a big soft knot unlike the one she wore it in by day. Her

hands were clasped behind her and there was something in the poise, the sturdy little feet rather widely planted, the shoulders squared, that was almost boyishly pugnacious.

He crossed the room softly without her having heard him.

“Come out a minute. I must speak with you,” he whispered.

She turned with a start, then after a glance at his aunt who slept soundly, went with him into the hall.

“I know what you want. But let’s not talk about it. I don’t blame you,” she said at once.

“I can’t tell you how it humiliates me that such a thing should have happened to you — and in my house.”

“It was odious, hateful! But cats scratch wherever you meet them, whether or not it happens to be in the house of a gentleman.” She steadied her lips with

her teeth. "I suppose I ought to apologize for calling your guest names; but she is horrid, and I've no apology to make."

"She has n't any feeling against you, believe me," he urged. "It is only that—I don't quite know how to make you understand—that you happened to change—to turn the attack. Do you see?"

Her eyes widened, and she half smiled. "Oh, that's the way of it, is it? I wondered what I had done. It does n't excuse her, however. And I'm not amiable enough to declare I'm glad to have saved you the blow. I hate that sort of thing. Let's forget it."

"But will you?" he begged.

"Of course I will. I sputter like an arc light at the slightest provocation. Don't think any more about it. Good-night."

He was standing looking after her as

she moved down the hall, when she turned suddenly and came back to him.

“ I forgot to tell you that your aunt Marianna is going to live with us,” she said. “ With you and Bella, I mean of course. She decided just as I was tucking her in and kissing her good-night. I thought you ’d like to know.”

“ As you were *what* ? ”

“ Kissing her good-night. Why ? ”

“ But — er — Bella — ”

“ Oh, would n’t Bella have done it ? ”

“ I don’t think she would. She er — well, you know, she is n’t given to that sort of thing.”

“ There are much worse things than kisses,” declared she, warmly.

“ I should say so indeed,” he gravely agreed.

An enchanting scarlet swept her cheeks, but she inquired quite without a trace of embarrassment or confusion : “ By the

way, did you hear from Bella this afternoon?"

"No. It seems strange that she didn't answer my wire, but I expect her tomorrow."

"Oh, of course. She'll probably come right on, without wiring." She hesitated, then, with an impulse to establish sympathetic relations between them and to efface all trace of the evening's unpleasantness, offered him her slim, brown hand.

"It's so nice that you'll soon be married, and so fittingly and happily. Anything, *anything* but a joyless marriage! You probably haven't thought much about what a monstrous thing it is, because you've always known you were going to marry Bella; but I've thought a lot about it, you see. Marriage is such a jog-trot with so many, many people. How *do* they ever endure it?"

Inwardly he winced, but looking down on her with a smile he said :

“ When we hear that you are married we may know it has n't been tamely, then? ”

The moonlight touched her ardent little face.

“ When I marry it will be because I simply could n't live without the man. Because there would n't be any stars or moon or sun for me without him. Because I'd even — even wear last year's sleeves if he were n't there to see. Oh, laugh, but that's exactly how I feel about it.”

His eyes kept to her face.

“ Most people take those things as they come, I think,” said he.

“ Of course they do,” she cried impatiently. “ Some men don't use half the discrimination in selecting their wives that they do in picking out fish and oysters! ”

“ You believe in the love that fairly sweeps along in spite of you ? ”

She nodded emphatically.

“ There are people,” he reminded her, “ who think that there is no feeling which can't be controlled.”

“ What idiots ! ” snapped she.

“ Then you don't believe it ? ”

“ I believe it of the eremite and the mummy and the ascetic and the bloodless. I believe it of men and women like Thoreau — or like the Thoreau that Stevenson gives us. You remember, don't you, — the ‘ kind of man in whom the needle does not tremble, as in richer natures, but points steadily north ’ ? But real men and women, with pulses strong enough to know their own desires — oh, why *don't* you stop me ? Fancy, going on like this at such an hour ! Good-night.”

“ Wait,” he begged, his voice full of troubled gravity; “ does n't love invari-

ably grow with association and mutual interest?"

"If living together meant loving together do you think there would be as many broken hearts as there are, and most of them in pairs under the same roof? Oh, love *is n't* proximity; it's response."

"And what is that?"

Her gesture was full of impatience again.

"You ought to know without the telling. You've met it. I have n't. When I do, I'll marry it — if it will have me." And she went off smiling over her shoulder at him.

He closed the door of his own room behind him and without lighting a candle dropped into a chair and sat staring up at the Peak; but he did not see it; he saw Davie Bessire's vivid little face lifted to

him there in the moonlight of the unlit hall: for without warning his "kindled hour" had come!

Whether or not it was Genevra Tellant's insufferable behavior to her, or the intimate way in which her hair was done, or the fatal "us" in "Aunt Marianna is coming to live with us," or whether it had been coming from the first time he had set eyes on her, he did not know. But *it had come!* . . . It had come, with Bella steaming toward him at the rate of forty miles an hour, no doubt; had come, when by every sense of honor and decency he must be married before the week was out; it had come when there was no reprieve! And the oddest part of it all was that the feeling awakened in him seemed one of resurgence rather than of sudden birth. It was as if somewhere he had loved her before.

He did not pretend to deceive himself by calling it *camaraderie* or friendship or

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any one of a dozen names. He called it love, because he knew it to be that. All his life he had scoffed at affinity and things of that sort, but he knew now that it was because he had understood them so little. He recalled a boy he had once known, who, laughing at electricity, had thrown himself upon a live wire. A curious chill seized him at the thought of what his own fate must be.

That he had not greatly cared for Bella had never troubled him. When the time came he would grow fond enough of her, he had always told himself comfortably, counting upon marshaling his affections as he marshaled his affairs. But they deserted, going openly into another camp, and not all his generalship could bring them back, he knew.

This and more he realized as he sat there, ranging them side by side: the girl he should have loved and did not, and

the one he should not have loved and did. All manner of verities were Bella's, all manner of contradictions, Davie's. Without a pretense of denial he admitted it. He knew with what zealot-like stoicism Bella would front the cannonading of calamity and the picket-fire of trifles, while Davie would probably cover her ears and run. He knew that Bella's spruceness and orderliness would keep his household in perennial bloom, but you could drop ash from your pipe on Davie's favorite Kazak and Davie would n't bat an eye, he was ready to wager. With Bella a man would never have to lay out his own clothes or bother about ordering coal, and he would n't, if he were dead spent, have to heave to and help lift the domestic *ménage* out of the mire, for Bella would see to all that. Yet—he shivered as a breath from this rarefied domestic atmosphere seemed to blow over him, and he

turned quickly to warm himself by Davie's smile, — that delicious, responsive, provocative little smile, — which was not for him.

He felt as if he had been caught up by a whirlwind of emotion, whipped about violently, dropped breathless and broken. An actual physical numbness seemed upon him. He could only sit, staring wretchedly down the path of the future.

“Anything, *anything* rather than the joyless marriage!” Davie's words rang in his ears, and her face danced alluringly before his mental vision. He groaned despairingly. To the end of his days she would haunt him, his small, adorable ghost!

The inexorableness of his fate smote him. He could not even struggle for freedom because of the bonds that wrapped and held him like webs of steel: Bella, his Aunt Marianna, fate, circumstances, his honor, his personal interest, — all arose before him. There was no appeal!

Through his open window he heard, in the stillness of the late night, Davie, speaking softly to his aunt. What service to give a stranger! How sweet she was in all her attention! Nursing was plainly not her mission in life, yet how splendid she was in her eagerness to do the right thing, how amusingly painstaking and conscientious. Ah, she was the stuff his dreams were made of!

A chipmunk came scurrying along the rocks that were almost on a level with his window, pausing suddenly and sitting up, his tail waving jauntily, his bead-bright eyes shining. With his head on one side he posed there, an impudent little figure in the moonlight.

Langstaff tossed a pine cone from the hearth at him.

“You irresponsible little devil!” he cried enviously.

CHAPTER EIGHT

*“And when perchance of all perfection
You’ve seen an end,
Your thoughts may turn in my direction
To find a friend.”*

CHAPTER EIGHT

“QUEER, isn't it, that no word has come from Miss Kaye?” remarked David Bessire the next day after luncheon, as he and Cockran sat smoking together.

“Mighty queer. Langstaff's message went off by ten yesterday morning. Thought we'd hear in the afternoon without fail. Can't understand it at all.”

“They put the wire through, did they? There's still some trouble over the strike, you know.”

“Oh, yes, it went through all right. Mrs. Tellant took it around to the office for me. She was going on her own account, and it was a great accommodation to me to have her do it. I met her a half hour afterward and she assured me it had gone.”

The keen old brown eyes widened beneath the hemp-colored brows.

“ So Mrs. Tellant attended to it, did she ? ” Bessire remarked.

Benjamin Cochran turned his cigar attentively in his plump white fingers. It was one that Langstaff wanted him to try, — a new brand, — and he could not make up his mind whether or not he liked it. He considered it, frowning judicially.

His interest in the situation at the Skyland was not great. Indeed he was rather irked than otherwise by it, since Miss Bessire’s attentions to the invalid kept her almost continually in the sick room, and Mrs. Tellant not only bored him but was in turn — as he was beginning to see — bored by him. Langstaff was preoccupied, and gave little heed to the running of the household, and matters were in no wise as comfortable as they had been before the female invasion. Besides, he could see

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no reason for uneasiness: as long as the troublesome old dame up there kept to her bed there could be no exposure.

He drew a long inhalation and blew successive smoke rings, pursing his fat lips critically as the last one left them.

Tom Brindley came up the steps at the moment and gave them greeting, throwing himself into a chair and mopping a hot forehead. Climbing at midday in June is stiff work.

“Well, what news? Bella here?” he asked.

“Neither here nor heard from,” said Bessie.

“What! That’s odd. Nothing wrong, is there? I thought Gavin felt he could count on her.”

Benjamin Cockran squinted an eye at them. “The truth is their engagement is a mighty peculiar one,” said he. “Most men would be afraid to risk it, unless they

were indifferent about losing the girl. From what he tells me she's the soul of honor, and I don't think wild horses could keep her from coming if she knew he needed her. It may be she was out of Greeley, in the mountains somewhere, — they go into 'em by automobile from there in a few hours, you know, — and the message may have to follow her. She'll show up all right in time, I've no doubt."

"How is Miss Langstaff to-day?" asked Brindley.

"Better — alarmingly so," said Bessire. "She begins to take notice. There won't be any fooling her after a few days at most."

"Eyes better, too?"

"Not as much improved as her general condition — fortunately."

"Don't approve of this masquerading business, myself," growled Cockran.

"Gavin was put to his wit's end, of

course, with her lighting on him like that, but it seems to me he might have hit on a better plan. I don't believe in deception of any sort."

"Don't you, indeed," carelessly remarked Bessire, as he looked at his watch. "I do. It's the only anesthetic for some forms of acute nervous and mental disorder."

"I've no patience with mind-sickness. Who wants to be anesthetized, anyhow?" muttered Cockran.

"It's a part of the doctor's prescription in Miss Langstaff's case, and it's got to be carried out. No risks of any sort. He was emphatic about it. . . . It's about time that cog was coming down, is n't it?"

"Going to the Springs?" asked Brindley, in some surprise.

"Yes. It's time for the — er — new magazines."

Arriving at the Springs he forgot his eagerness for the fresh periodicals, however, and went at once to the telegraph office, where he asked to have shown him a copy of the telegram sent on the day before to Miss Bella Kaye by Mrs. Tellant, signed by Gavin Langstaff. He explained that no reply had been received and that some fear was entertained that the wording of the message had not clearly indicated that one was expected. He had been commissioned by Mr. Langstaff to look into the matter. His manner was careless and pleasant and the clerk brought at once the desired duplicate.

Polishing his glasses he set them astride his nose. Then he read the copy :

“Aunt Marianna ill here. Disposed as usual to disregard the doctors. Don't come.”

For a long minute David Bessire stood staring down at it.

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“Humph,” he muttered to himself. “Trust her to see how easily it could be done. Confound that chuckle-headed Cockran for leaving it to her.”

Then he drew the pad toward him and wrote a simple and direct message to Bella Kaye, saw it put through before he left the office, and arranging to have the reply sent to the Skyland whenever it arrived, he left the place with turbulent emotions.

Langstaff meanwhile was having a bad day of it. His disappointment and annoyance had begun with breakfast when Davie had sent down word that she would be occupied for some time with Miss Langstaff, and begging him on no account to keep the meal waiting for her. There was nothing to do but to proceed without her, Geneva Tellant gracing the coffee urn. He was so outraged with her for her treatment of Davie the night before that he felt more

like laying violent hands on her than placing her at the foot of his table.

Davie kept well to the sick room all the morning, though with apparently no marked intent; but he realized that with Mrs. Tellant trailing about he would see little of her outside of his aunt's room.

His whole inclination was to ask Mrs. Tellant to leave, but this was, of course, impossible. Neither could he afford to offend or neglect her. She was more than a guest under his roof, — she was the friend in need, and he must at least be decently polite to her. He was, however, in no state for her raillery and her confidence. He dreaded the one as much as the other. She would relive what it would please her to call the tragedy of her life, or she would die in the attempt. Some women exhibit their wounds of life very much as children exhibit stubbed toes and cut fingers; there is the same quivering

of sensitive chins, the same furtive seeking for sympathy, the same pride in being thus distinguished by suffering. They take off the stained bandages fold on fold, till the wrapped thing is disclosed in all its hideousness. Then they slowly re-cover that which should never have been exposed, and with heads held a little higher than usual, and faces sweetly resigned, they continue on what they imagine others call their brave way.

The revelation of the night before had left Langstaff too bewildered to consider any other than his own world of upheaval. He had slept but little and felt physically and mentally undone. Besides, he was greatly worried that no word had come from Bella. The danger of the situation grew with every hour. The demand he had made of Chance was perilous. Would she fail him?

His thoughts busied themselves with

their own affairs and he dodged Mrs. Tellant, although Bessire and Cockran were both conveniently at hand throughout the morning, so that the dreaded moment of intimacy was averted. At luncheon Davie came down, chatting gaily with her grandfather. Her nod in Geneva Tellant's direction was careless, yet quite perfect in that it was neither too indifferent nor yet conciliatory. And the meal had gone better than he had dared to hope. Then Bessire had departed, Cockran had gone off with Tom Brindley, and he and Mrs. Tellant were alone at last.

She lay on a wicker couch, her arms above her head, the lace of her sleeves falling away from them, her eyes on the mountains.

“ Was it Dr. Johnson who thought one green field like every other, and who preferred to go to Cheapside to see men ? ”

she asked in a lazy voice. "I suppose he would have said the same thing about the hills, would n't he? But see them! How could anyone care more for men than for nature?"

He smiled to himself, knowing the many roads women take to reach their conversational destination.

"Yet," mused she, "they make me think of men, these mountains of yours; they are such big, potential, mighty fellows." She turned to him abruptly with a caught breath and shining eyes: "Is there anything so fine as the bigness of men and dreams and resolutions and— loves?" she challenged. "How, *how*, I hate a pigmy,— a little fluffy, baby thing that belongs in the nursery yet goes strutting about in swaddling clothes, calling itself grown-up."

"You mix your figures," he commented, with a tinge of impatience. "In-

fants in swaddling clothes don't strut, you know."

She laughed, — she had saved so many moments with that laugh of hers. All his antagonism she felt, and set herself against, determined to conquer it. "Figures are such wooden things at best," she declared lightly. "Let's have done with them, — lift them out of the conversation like so many awkward saw-horses. There is so much to say we must not be cumbered."

She lay, blue pillows behind her russet head, eyes on the hop-vine that swayed in the breeze, and when he did not reply she turned her head slowly and looked at him.

"Are you saying to yourself that 'to know what to leave unsaid is better than to know what to say'?" she demanded, with a gay laugh. Then her face became suddenly grave, — that abrupt change of a

merry face is the best trick some women play. “But why should n’t we talk, Gavin? Why cover with silence as with a cloak that which is no shame to us? Tact holds its tongue, I grant you, but — *so does cowardice.*”

“What do you mean?” he asked warmly.

The black lashes swept her cheeks quickly as if they caught back tears, and her voice was appealing with its catches of feeling: “We *must* speak of you and your happiness!”

“Oh, I beg you —”

“Now, now, don’t try to prevent it!” She sat up, smiling gently, and, beating the pillows, she leaned more effectively than ever among them. “I’m so concerned for you, dear boy. I have extracted bit by bit — don’t scold me for it, — from your friend Mr. Cockran the whole story of your arranged betrothal.

We may speak plainly, may we not, Gavin ?”

“ Only when the affair is between you and me,” said he.

A smile drew sharply at the corners of her delicate mouth.

“ Aren't you straining at a gnat ?” she suggested rather crisply. “ You can't hold inviolate that which screams itself to all the world. I don't mean to be horrid, but it does surprise me to find you so tamely acquiescent. I thought your blood ran swift and hot and that you would allow nothing to keep you from dominating your own destiny.”

The sting of her words and smile did not touch him. He was merely wondering how women could be of such different texture as she and Davie Bessire.

“ It may be that your fiancée's beauty of character resigns you the more willingly to your aunt's plans,” she reflected. “ Mr.

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Cockran was most enthusiastic in his praise of her, based entirely on your report, since he tells me he has never had the pleasure of seeing her."

"She's a fine, good girl," said he, stoutly.

"Fancy a hedonist like you married to such a girl!" she exclaimed, an indescribable expression in her eyes. "But that's always the way of it, — men want women for friends and saints for wives! . . . Of course this ends things between us. I had thought —" again there was the tremor of voice, the quick sweep of long lashes — "that if fate brought us together again it might be — different. But that is n't to be thought of now. I get on badly with perfection. So you mustn't expect me to be friends with Bella."

There were many things he longed to say, but he held his tongue. And she gave him no opportunity for speech, in-

deed. "Life is queer," she said, "—so full of strange entanglements and stranger partings. . . . This is our real good-by. To be sure, we shall say it later before the others, but what an empty ceremonial the mere *saying* of it always is!"

He was fretted immoderately. Women who were so "long on talk" always bored him, and she was making an abominable nuisance of herself, he grumbled inwardly, vaguely aware that to most men she must appear bewitching as she lay there in her fetching gown, meeting the light as fearlessly as a girl ten years her junior would have done.

"Don't hate me," she begged, leaning suddenly from the pillows and laying a hand upon his arm. "Can't you see that it's because I care so much for you that I'm half savage with anxiety for you?"

"Don't bother about me," he stammered.

“But — but how *can* you be happy with your little paragon, Bella?” she cried. “Oh, I know you could shake me for saying such things. I know perfectly how loyal you are to her, and I respect you for it. But, Gavin, Gavin, don’t deceive yourself about it; you’re not the kind of man to be content under dreary marital conditions! You’re not the man to live upon a starvation diet!”

She held out her hands to him in an adorable gesture: “Forgive me — and if you can remember me as anything but an unpardonable meddler, come to me, if — if there is ever anything I can do to help you or to make life a little brighter for you.”

CHAPTER NINE

*“ They lock'd the bower, they lit the torch ;
• 'T was hurry-skurry a' .”*

CHAPTER NINE

“TOM is staying with the baby,” Mrs. Brindley said to Langstaff that evening as she came up the bungalow steps, “and I’ve come to send Davie out for a bit of air. She’s so used to outdoors that she must be missing it a little. I can go in to your aunt quite openly as your neighbor, and not take the risk of having Mrs. Tel-lant stay, you know. You can trust me with her. I’m a very discreet person, and I promise not to endanger the situation.”

“I’m no end obliged to you,” he said earnestly. “I’ve been trying to devise ways and means of getting Miss Bessire out of the house, but I can’t budge her. It distresses me to think of her close confinement.”

“ Oh, don't worry about Davie, — she's the toughest little wretch you ever saw, and she's having a lot of fun out of the masquerade, I'll wager. . . . How do you do, Mrs. Tellant,” — as that lady came out and, offering her an indifferent hand, sank gracefully into a chair. “ Where are the others ? ” with a glance about the deserted porch.

“ Gone off to smoke in the pines, perhaps. It's rather difficult to be always guarding one's voice, you know, as Mr. Bessire and I have constantly to do. I think it irks him, and he gets away as often as possible.”

“ Mercy ! That's so, is n't it ? Do you appreciate the fact that they hold your destiny in their hands, Mr. Langstaff ? ”

“ That he does n't,” declared Genevra Tellant, with a curious smile flickering in her eyes. “ He scarcely thinks of us at all, he is so worried over Miss Kaye's non-

appearance. . . . Are you leaving us, Gavin ? ”

“ Merely to fetch Miss Bessire. Mrs. Brindley is to stay with Aunt Marianna while she takes a little airing. ”

“ Ah, a very good arrangement. . . . It does seem strange that Miss Kaye should fail him when he so needs her, does n't it ? ” she questioned in a lower tone, as he went up the stairs.

“ Perhaps, but it may be that — ”

“ That she refuses to fly at his call when he has so persistently neglected her. Women retaliate when they have the chance, the best of them. ”

“ Sh ! ” warned Mary Brindley, for already Langstaff and Davie were at the stairhead.

“ I think I 'll go up toward the Peak and get some forget-me-nots, ” said Davie, running down to them. “ Miss Langstaff has n't seen the Pike's Peak variety. ”

“Don’t go too far,” urged Mrs. Brindley; “it will soon be dark.”

“Hadn’t I better come along?” suggested Langstaff, torn between a desire to go and the conviction that the less he saw of her the better it would be for him.

“No, indeed,” smiled she, over her shoulder, and went off down the steps. “Stay and entertain your company,” and she waved a gay little hand to them and hurried lightly up the trail.

“Aunt Marianna is sleeping,” explained Langstaff, and drew up a chair for Mrs. Brindley.

“You have a better view than we,” she said critically. “I always tell Tom so. We see the Peak itself plainer, but your view of the plains and the Springs and the hills between here and the Garden of the Gods is much finer than ours.”

They looked out between the close-pressing ribs of the mountains to the mesa

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running like a sea: gray where it met the grayer horizon, deep blue where it laved the foothills. About the peaks themselves it was all sharp shadow and brilliant color, — the shadows of the giant boulders on the towering crests, the crimson of a sunset just fading. They talked while the color died and the shadows spread, while lights ran up the rocks on every side from Manitou and sprinkled like star-drift over the town itself. Away over beyond the Springs the Printers' Home twinkled at all its windows, and dimly, from farther rises in the undulating purple mesa, misty gleams showed, like candle flames.

A train crawled below along the rocks. They heard its rumble and they knew how it looked as it crept in and out of the tunnels and behind the riven slabs of granite, twisting like a huge irised snake. And after awhile Bessire and

Cockran came strolling in from the pines, and Mrs. Brindley went upstairs to be there when Miss Langstaff should waken.

An hour later Langstaff began to move restlessly about the porch, a furtive eye on the trail: there were clouds about the Peak which worried him. It was certainly time Davie came home. The mountains were not safe for women alone, he told himself, so many people of every sort go up and down the burro trail and the cog road. Many more than usual had passed to-day and he wished that he had insisted upon accompanying her.

The shadows had now blotted out the color of the sunset, and the darkness was thickening, while a feel of storm was in the air. He glanced at David Bessire, but that gentleman was deep in a story, and had apparently forgotten that Davie was away.

Mrs. Tellant met his anxious look and smiled banteringly.

“What’s the matter, Gavin? You are as fussy as can be,” she said.

“It’s time Miss Bessire was here. I don’t like the idea of her being up there alone after dark.”

“What’s that?” exclaimed David Bessire. “Why, that’s so, she hasn’t come, has she? To be sure she oughtn’t to be up there at this time of the night. I’ll go up and meet her.”

“No, let me,” urged Langstaff. “Mrs. Brindley is with Aunt Marianna. Ben, just explain to them that I’ve gone to meet Miss Bessire, will you?”

“I’ll come along,” said Bessire. “How foolish of her to have ventured so far, with night coming on. Besides she doesn’t know the mountains. We’ve been in the neighborhood such a short time. What a weather-breeder the Peak is! Don’t like those clouds about it, do you? Suppose we try calling her? She may be

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in reach of our voices," and he stopped on the trail, and shouted through his trumpeted hands. It was the Australian bush-cry:

"Coo-ee! Coo-ee! Coo-ee!"

Silence answered it.

"She's farther away than that," said Langstaff, trudging on. "And the wind's blowing the wrong way. I wish we had brought a light."

"We can have a torch when we need it. I've plenty of matches."

They moved rapidly up the trail, each with an anxious eye on the gathering clouds.

"Why not try the cog? We can make better time on it," suggested Langstaff, and he swung along easily at the side of the rails, while Bessire fitted his slender feet to the cog and moved up beside him, but with more difficulty. The sheer lift of the road ahead seemed to challenge

them; drifting clouds settled gray and angry over Cameron's Cone, and the wind increased.

"Where do the confounded forget-me-nots grow?" panted David Bessire.

"She probably made straight for Grand Point. The nearest ones are there. Let's try calling again."

The cry rang out bravely, whipped by the wind: "Coo-ee! Coo-ee! Coo-ee!" And the unsteady tones of the older man echoed it: "Coo-ee! Coo-ee! Coo-ee!"

Only the rocks made answer with *their* echo.

"No use," muttered Davie's grandfather.

They talked but little now: facing the wind at an elevation of eleven thousand feet is not conducive to conversation, especially when the lungs are old, and David Bessire wheezed like an asthmatic. It had begun to rain very softly. A burro

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party hastening down the trail shouted at the burros and disappeared in a helter-skelter of noise and dust. The mountains glowered: Old Baldy was black and beetling, and Red Mountain drew the shadows like a huge shawl about his shoulders. Bessire quickened his steps to keep up with Langstaff, but his breathing was increasingly worse.

Langstaff broke a stick for him and whittled it as they went. He was beginning to be gravely anxious for Davie's safety, and it fretted him to have to time his steps to the older man's. The rain now sheeted down the mountain side and the clouds were so low that Bessire felt he could have dragged them down under his feet by merely putting up his stick and impaling them. He shivered uncontrollably.

"Poor little honey!" he breathed.

Langstaff's hands shut spasmodically. Better than Bessire he knew the risks of

the mountains, — knew the panic which seizes you when darkness and clouds and grim walls shut you in; when cañons are alleys of blackness and a false step may mean tragedy. And while he comforted himself in thinking of Davie's cool head and high courage, he was very far from being assured of her safety.

Bessire was turning up his collar and buttoning his coat tighter across his breast, muttering that she wore her thinnest dress and no wrap, and Langstaff lifted his voice again and again, shouting desperately into the teeth of the gale, Bessire joining, his old voice shaking piteously. But only the elements answered, — the malignant wind, the stream dashing among the rocks at the side of the track, the shiver of the lean pines.

At the point of the road where the trail leads off toward Grand Point they felt their way across the track and along the

side of the cliff. It was no use to try to carry a torch in the wind and rain, so they slid and slipped and held to each other, trying to scale the cathedral-huge rocks ahead, and to detour the jagged declivities. But it seemed impossible in the darkness. Bessire was now breathing alarmingly, and Langstaff felt a sickening sense of helplessness. He was thinking fast and hard: would it be wiser to push on, with the probability of tumbling off the cliff at any step and leaving Davie without succor until someone else could get to her, or to hurry back for a light and all the men available from the Inn and Brindley's and the bungalow?

Some such thing was going through David Bessire's mind also; the impossibility of pressing on without equipment was borne upon him more and more heavily. His old legs shook beneath him, his head swam with the effort to pierce the

darkness, and his chest ached cruelly. If he gave out and Langstaff should lose his footing and go pitching down below, what would become of Davie?

He groaned miserably, but at the instant Langstaff gave a tremendous cry of relief: "The light! The search light! Thank God!"

Reaching straight out from the top of Pike's Peak a huge arm of light swept slowly from side to side, touching the rocks and the trees and they two, who stood staring at each other, white with anxiety, trembling with relief.

"We can't tell how short a time it may play," said Langstaff. "If it keeps it up for fifteen minutes I'll get to her. You stay here, sir, and if it fails, find your way back to the bungalow and send the others;" and he plunged away along the hazardous trail.

The great light swung like a dazzling

pendulum, — a party of visitors was evidently staying the night on the Peak and for its entertainment what is probably the highest search light in the world was being trained upon the lower peaks. It does not happen often. That season it had occurred infrequently, and to both men it seemed providential.

Thick clouds were between it and them, lit to iridescence, till they shone like huge irregular opals against the black breast of the sky.

They trained the light well up there on the summit. It flashed and darted like a sea-skimmer. It quivered over the seared sides of the mountain and made Langstaff's path clear. Then it swept on and left him in darkness, and he slackened his gait and caught his breath for the moment when it should come again.

Grand Point loomed majestic in its towering blackness. The light swung over

it, over the trail which zig-zagged to it, and Langstaff called Davie's name, dashing eagerly on again, hope reviving in him. The rain had ceased for the moment and the wind was dying. If the light only continued to play a little longer he would find her. He was sure of it!

He poised on a ledge as the search light swung around once more, and called again through his hands, his voice fairly hurtling through the night; and from back there where he had left David Bessire he heard him calling too,—pleading with the darkness to give her up, conjuring her out of it.

“Davie! Oh, Davie, child!” the broken voice drifted.

Straight out from the Peak like the huge arm of a crane the light now stretched, and stayed for a moment,—then faded, and left a world of pitchier blackness than it had found. It had failed him just when

it was most needed ! When he was within so short a distance of the Point, and at the most difficult place in the whole trail ! His cry rang out poignantly into the tenuous darkness ahead.

And out of it an answer came !

He plunged recklessly down the declivity at his feet.

“ Where are you ? ” he shouted, “ where are you ? ”

In the darkness a little wet figure groped its way to him, and he caught it in his arms.

The light swept out again, breaking over them.

“ I’ve been falling and getting up, and falling — oh, don’t look at me ! Don’t ! ” cried Davie, with something of the foolishness of hysteria.

The spasmodic tightening of his arms stopped her. He held her close, muttering incoherent things over her, and with a

frightened little cry she wriggled away from him, blue-white and shivering.

“Come, come, we must get away before the light fails,” she pleaded, high-pitched and tremulous.

He was struggling to pull himself together. To have agonized over her, dear little brave thing, and yet to have no right to tell her what he had suffered! No right to hold her, to cherish her!

The light swung back and forth and she caught in terror at his arm.

“Do come — it may go out any minute, you know.”

“Wait,” he said; “you are cold and shivering. You must wear this;” and he slipped out of his coat, put her, protesting, into it, and fastened it across her breast, his throat aching at the thought of what she had been through up here alone, — the terror, the exertion, the helplessness.

“Are you sure you’re not hurt?” he

insisted for the twentieth time, and when she declared herself all right, he took her arm and they ran up the path which the light made bright.

“Does Grandfather know I’m away from the bungalow?” she asked anxiously. And when she found out the truth, she made him stop and try to make David Bessire understand that she was safe. And after that at every pause for breath she spent more than she got in calling out a reassurance which could not possibly reach him.

Huddling limply on the rocks, David Bessire had waited, watching the light in an agony of anxiety, lest it suddenly stop playing, swearing roundly when it ceased, then standing up excitedly as it flashed again, and sending broken shouts into the abyss below.

“You are wearing yourself out, Mr. Bessire,” said a voice at his shoulder, and

he turned with a start, as if a ghost had come upon him, or the woman had evolved out of the clouds and the mist: it was Genevra Tellant, lifting a white face from the voluminous folds of a veil that swathed her head and shoulders.

“ I followed,” she gasped. “ But you — you came so fast I could n’t overtake you, yet I was — afraid to turn back. Oh, it was awful ! ”

“ Don’t talk,” he snapped. “ Listen ! ”

Then out of the drifting clouds a voice exulted: “ Found ! ! Found ! ! ” and again: “ Found ! Bessire, found ! ”

As they came up the trail a minute later, climbing the breastwork of rocks, Genevra Tellant ran forward to meet them. In moments like this many things are plain, and — it was for just this moment she had come.

But Davie had not even a look for her. Rushing past her she threw herself into

her grandfather's arms to be smothered with kisses, while Langstaff had little more thought for her than if she had not appeared there so startlingly in the darkness. He scarcely felt the keen searching glance that tried to read all that was in his heart.

They set off down the trail at once, without speech. They were all too spent for it. The wind had grown strong again and the mist was like rain. Davie clung to her grandfather's arm, and left the other two to follow.

“ We 'll have pneumonia, I suppose,” said Mrs. Tellant, when having reached the cog road at last they walked single file beside the rails.

“ You need n't have exposed yourself,” said Langstaff, curtly.

“ A good many things have been — of no need,” she said hotly. She was furiously angry with herself for many reasons, angrier with him for that which had been

revealed in the instant when he had come up out of the mist and the clouds with Davie Bessire. The heat of passionate rebellion burned in her veins. She could forgive the real Bella for having come before her with Gavin Langstaff, but her pride revolted that this girl should come after her.

She had known that Langstaff was in Colorado, and she had come with the determination of bringing him again under her spell. She had planned her campaign cleverly and had counted confidently upon success. Better than any other man she liked him, and she was, besides, most seriously in need of financial reimbursement. As the nephew of Marianna Langstaff he would be a very rich man some day, while his own private fortune was not insignificant.

When she had learned of his quasi engagement she had understood at once that

nothing short of a miracle would make him cease to regard it as binding, but she did not accept the condition of affairs as final, — she had seen the miracle of the pretty woman worked so often. And relying upon her dependable charms and her equally dependable wits she expected ultimately to save the day. Her credo was one of action, including nothing so passive as sitting in the ashes of resignation. She had accordingly altered the telegram to Bella, dropped a word now in one quarter, now in another, keeping a watchful eye in all directions, and awaiting with tranquility the interesting finale.

Now here was this new and entirely unlooked for complication! This preposterous counter! It was maddening.

She understood perfectly that this sudden infatuation of Langstaff's was a force much more powerful than any which had touched his easy-going life. and having

sensed it intuitively she now tried dispassionately to gauge it, but as she stumbled along down the mountain side she was unable to put herself into anything approaching a temperately critical mood. The completeness of her failure taunted her. She hated herself for it, marveled at it, and was utterly unable to comprehend.

Before her, buffeted by the wind, Davie tramped, slim and slight, her uncovered hair quite straight, her face wet, her boots muddy. She looked, in Gavin's coat, more like a boy than a woman — a woman who could wrest a man's love from its safe moorings and carry it out on precarious seas!

She glanced over her shoulder at Gavin, and the unaccustomed sternness of his face was fuel for her wrath: he would suffer, — he was already suffering over this utterly insignificant girl whom he had not known a week! — and she had been

unable to move him. She dropped back alongside him.

“So you love her,” she said quietly.

Out of his abysmal bitterness his laugh rang curtly.

“Do you wonder?” he said.

Her passion made her forget her caution, and in the swirl of it her judgment was sucked down: “You seem to have forgotten Bella,” she said deliberately.

“Am I likely to forget her?” he exclaimed, and falling back left her to go on alone as before.

In silence, trudging one by one, leaning against the wind, hurrying as the light swung over them, checking their steps as it swept on, they came at last to the Skyland.

Cockran's big figure moved bulkily down the porch steps to meet them, and Kam Yim pattered up from the kitchen. His part of the welcome was expressive,

while his yellow forefinger twisted over his shoulder toward the kitchen where, he conveyed, hot broth awaited them, then hot baths, and into bed. Was it not worth while to have been exposed to the storm for the sake of such a home-coming? Grinning affectionately at Langstaff, and kowtowing before the women, he skipped briskly back to his domain.

“Bella, Bella, do come and assure us that you are all right. Such a fright as you have given us!” called Miss Langstaff as Davie ran up the stairs.

“How could you have gone so far?” reproached Mary Brindley. Then she caught Davie’s forlorn little figure to her. “If they had n’t found you! Oh, if they had n’t found you!”

“But they did,” said Davie, practically, and being released from her friend’s arms unpinned Gavin’s coat and slipping out of it put her hand inside her shirtwaist and

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brought forth a bunch of crushed forget-me-nots which she laid on the coverlet with a little laugh: "They did the mischief," she said.

"You darling!" cried Marianna Langstaff in a moved voice, and catching the small cold hands covered them with kisses, while Davie stood beneath the show of emotion very much as an embarrassed boy might have done.

"I'm sorry to have excited you all like this, and to have dragged poor Gran—I mean Gavin up there through the storm. I did n't dream it would get dark so soon, and the Point was much farther than I thought. I could n't bear to turn back without the flowers. . . . Is there any witch hazel in the house, I wonder?"

"Are you bruised, dearest?" they chorused.

"Bruised? Well, I should think so. I look like a liver-spotted dog, I'm sure.

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I know Gran—I mean Gavin must need witch hazel too.”

Miss Marianna nodded till the dragons of gold on her white kimono seemed wriggling off the shoulders. And with most minute instructions gave Davie a little push and told her to run along and begin to take care of herself. Then she caught her back for an instant, and drawing her down beside her, murmured poignantly: “If Gavin had lost you, child!”

CHAPTER TEN

*“ A lovely Ladie rode him faire beside
Upon a lowly Asse more white than snow.”*

CHAPTER TEN

NOBODY was particularly cheerful the next day. David Bessire felt stiff and irritable and had a cold beside. Mrs. Tellant was suffering so from the exposure that she spent the morning in bed. Davie's knees were black and blue and her throat sore, and Langstaff was worn and cross and fast becoming desperate over the situation. Not a word from Bella, and his aunt declaring she would be out of bed to-morrow!

Growing excited as the day wore away he urged Cockran to go down and visit all the offices at the Springs and Manitou to see if by some chance a message had not been overlooked, and Cockran had departed not unwillingly since the tense state of affairs at the bungalow was not conducive to ease of spirit.

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The last cog of the afternoon came up without him, however, and Langstaff was forced to conclude that he had sent another wire to Bella and was staying over in the hope an answer would arrive that night. The sun was now setting, and the Peak looked like a huge inverted bowl of copper, the signal station like a small black incrustation upon it. The usual burro party straggled down the trail, the shouts and laughter, the smacks which were smartly administered to the reluctant little beasts sounding lustily.

David Bessire sat in that corner of the upper porch which he had appropriated, the cards spread on the table before him for a game of solitaire. Davie lay curled up on the couch outside the sick room door, and Langstaff was within, reading to his aunt. Kam Yim's dinner spoke eloquently in drifting odors that made Davie smile and whisper to her grandfather that

it was a pity Benjamin Cockran should miss it.

He nodded absently, his mind on the cards — all of it except that subconscious part which kept puzzling over the non-appearance of Bella Kaye. He played his next card, then sat for an instant after, his brown forefinger on it, distracted by another disturbing thought: did Langstaff love Davie. He had asked himself the question a dozen times since the night before.

“ Good gad, but things do get twisted in this world ! ” he said to himself, recalling the look in Langstaff’s face when he had come up out of the mist with the girl.

Davie, meanwhile, sat up as if she were galvanized, staring down the trail in wide-eyed astonishment. Then with a smothered exclamation she slid off the couch and ran to the sick-room door. It was as dark as usual — as dark as they wisely insisted upon keeping it. The bandage — upon which

they also insisted—was pushed back from Miss Langstaff's eyes and she lay looking fondly at her nephew as he read to her.

“Gavin, can you come here a minute?” asked Davie, shaking with excitement, but managing to keep it out of her voice.

“What is it?” he cried, coming out to her, the thrill of her agitation imparting itself to him.

She pointed tragically to the trail.

“Bella!” he cried. “Bella!”

“Bella?” questioned Mrs. Tellant, emerging from her chamber door at the moment.

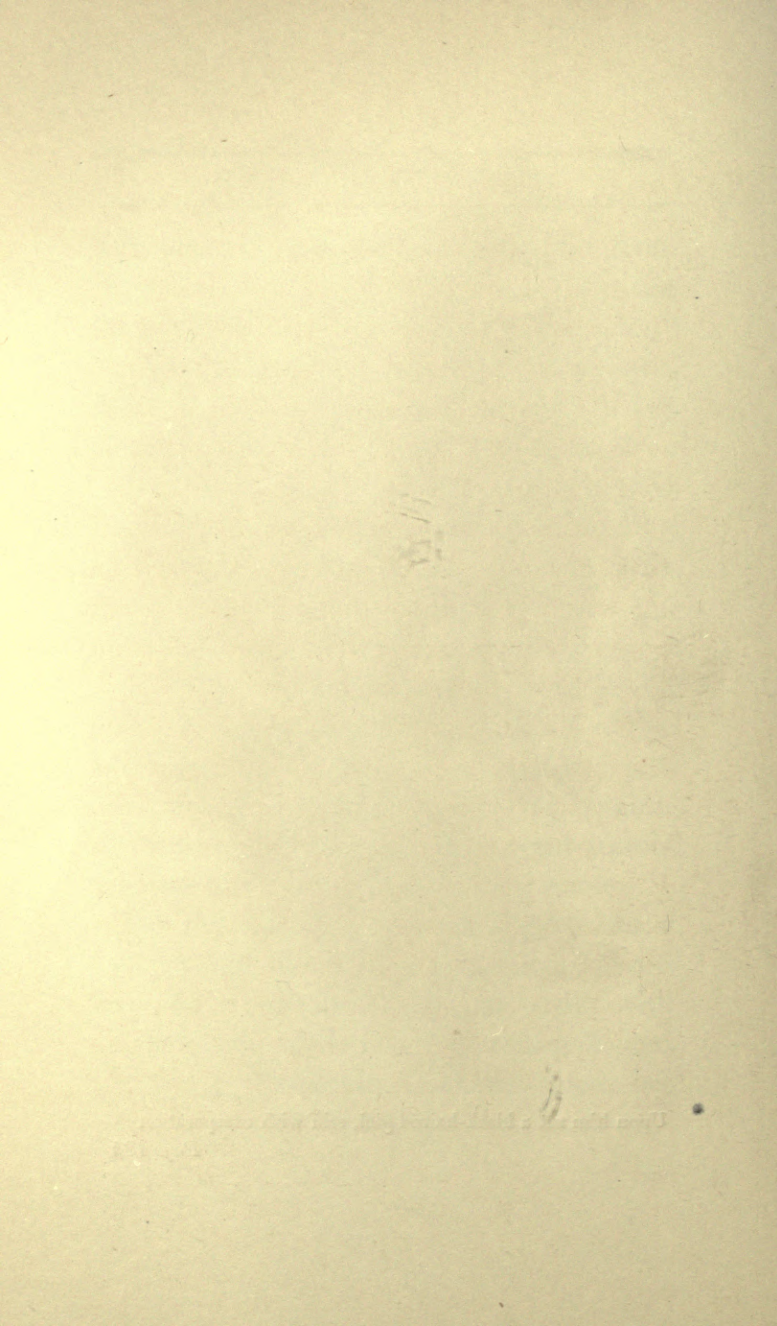
“Bella!” whispered old David Bessire, in immense relief; and they went tiptoeing down the stairs to the lower porch.

On the trail below a small gray burro was planted like a grim statuette. Upon him sat a black-haired girl, stiff with exasperation, while large, determined, and perspiring Benjamin Cockran stood be-



Upon him sat a black-haired girl, stiff with exasperation

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hind him, his two palms to the animal's rump, just ready to boost him bodily up the incline. His own beast, released for the moment, stuck his soft muzzle toward Cockran's pocket, in which there was no doubt something to eat, sniffing investigatively.

A ripple of amusement, no more to be suppressed than the lapping of the surf on the beach, ran down the line at the lower porch rail, and in that exact moment Bella Kaye looked up.

A flash of lightning in the face could scarcely have been more blinding than the glance she focused on poor Langstaff, who recovering himself at once hurried down to meet her, as the burro, once more persuaded on its way, ambled up the last incline to the Skyland steps.

"What on earth are you doing on these burros?" he cried, his surprise ringing in his voice.

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“What would you have had us arrive on — dromedaries or those awful saw-backed horses from the livery stable?” demanded the girl. “Mr. Cockran had two of them brought round, but I’d have as soon thought of mounting a hip-roof.”

“But why —”

“We missed the cog, and we could n’t fly.”

She slid from the saddle without seeing the hands he held out to her in aid and welcome, and shaking the dust from her skirts moved briskly up the steps. At the third from the top she turned and waited for him.

“Who are these people?” she demanded in a voice only partially lowered.

“The Bellas,” said he, with an effort at humor and equilibrium. “All but the man, you know.”

Benjamin Cockran padded softly past them up the steps, and the others, seeing

themselves under scrutiny, withdrew from the railing.

“ Whatever do you mean ? ” sternly demanded the real Bella.

“ Cockran has told you how affairs stand, surely ? ”

“ He gave me a slight idea, but I had n't imagined anything so utterly farcical. Your poor aunt must be quite senile to be put upon like this ! . . . Don't ask me to meet these women until I've washed. I'm as dusty as a mummy. May I go to my room at once ? ”

“ As soon as we've had a word together in the living room ! I want you to understand.”

“ Oh, I understand perfectly. You were always theatric. It was like you to have conceived this thing, and I dare say you've found it very amusing. Perhaps I've arrived too soon ? ”

They had entered the room and closing

the door he stood with his hand on the knob, facing her. "My dear Bella, do let me explain," he begged.

"Don't go into it now, I pray. What I want at the minute is soap — soap and plenty of water."

"We must really speak together seriously for a moment."

"Well, then, what is it you want to say? Do be quick about it." She ached from the ride and had a slight headache and loathed the taste of dust in her mouth and the feel of it on her lashes.

"Do you expect me to whisk it out, like a rabbit from a hat?" he cried; he too was cross and worn and not patient. "There hasn't been a very clear understanding between us, but we've both known that some day we'd marry. If we have delayed it, it's been because —"

"Because neither of us was in any hurry to hasten it," she put in.

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“Er — perhaps, but we haven’t deferred it, I’m sure you’ll agree, — because of any real disinclination, but through a failure to comprehend how much we were — er — missing. Yet I’m sure we’ve both felt all along that when the time came we’d be very happy and contented together.”

“In short,” said she, with a peculiar little smile, “that we’d know how to make the best of a bad joke. Don’t contradict, and don’t try to ‘emote,’ Gavin. We’ve got on well enough without any frills of sentiment, so what’s the use of tacking them on now?”

“If we have been entirely indifferent — if you have been so, and I had guessed it, I’d never have asked you to come to me, Bella,” he said earnestly.

“Oh, that’s all right. I’m glad you sent. Glad to come. If this had n’t happened we’d have put off the marriage

indefinitely, no doubt, and to tell you the truth, I begin to want a home of my own. I'm tired of single blessedness. I'll do my best by you, and you'll do your best by me. And we'll get along splendidly, no doubt. Now where's that soap and water?"

"You forget there is a fact or two to get out of the way before you see Auntie," he smiled. "About the marriage, you know."

"That's so, — when are we to be married?"

"To-morrow, if you will."

"As well then as any time," said she.

"But remember that to Aunt Marianna we are already married, you know," he reminded her.

"What! She has to know the truth in the end, why not give it to her now?"

"She isn't well enough to stand it, and besides there's no use in her ever knowing just how things have been. She

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—er. — does n't take a joke well, you know."

Bella pursed her red lips. "You needn't expect me to enter into this thing, Gavin. I hate deceit. I'll marry you tomorrow if it can be arranged, but until then I won't pretend to be married to you, not for your sake, or your aunt's, or anybody's concerned. It's no use to argue. You know my principles. . . . Where is that soap?"

"But, by George, can't you see what this does?" he exclaimed. "It puts me in a very devil of a fix."

Her laugh ran like a rapier through the air: "It seems to me you've put yourself in one," said she, and moved toward the door. "What time do you have dinner?"

A few minutes later David Bessire came into the room and finding Langstaff pac-

ing it perturbedly was told just how matters stood.

“A pretty state she’d throw your aunt in by her virtuous disclosures,” he sputtered. “Would you mind turning the young lady over to me to see what I can do with her?” he inquired, a humorous smile playing beneath the hemp-colored mustache. “Trot along somewhere and leave us together when she comes down. I’ll promise to do no harm, if I don’t succeed with her. But I’ve had some experience and— Go along,” and he pushed Langstaff toward the door.

When Bella came down a few minutes later, looking fresh and rather mannish in her severely tailored things, it was to find him reading there. At her entrance he arose and made her a bow so elaborate it amused her.

“Someone should be here to present

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me," he said, "but as they are not, I shall have to present myself. I am David Bessire, grandfather to one of the Bellas. I'm glad to be the first, except Langstaff himself, to tell you how welcome you are. Maybe you can fancy how we've awaited you?"

"I should not imagine the time had passed tediously," observed she.

"My dear lady," said he, with a humorous twinkle, as he placed her a chair, "we have sat on the edge of Vesuvius, anticipating an eruption at any minute."

"Do you expect me to take you out of harm's way?" she asked, a glint in her eyes. "I'm sorry to seem unaccommodating, but the fact is I'm going to let you get yourselves out of danger, Mr. Bessire. The volcano isn't of my making, you know."

"Believe me, nobody knows just how it came about," he urged. "Where there

was a pleasant level country, presto, there it spurts!"

"To speak without figures, I believe in honesty," said she.

"In moderation, — only in moderation, Miss Kaye."

"There can be no excess of honesty," she cried, flying open somewhat as a jack-knife.

"What! Not! Oh, yes indeed, it's the most harmful excess in the world."

She crossed her knees with energy, and leaned to him, her face full of color.

"It is absurd to say that honesty may be qualified; if it is honesty, it's honesty, if it isn't, it is —"

"Kindliness," promptly supplied he.

"We have different ways of considering it," she said with tight lips.

"Better the lie more than the lie less, believe me. We old fellows know that

gatling guns can do no more damage than what some folk call rugged honesty. Humanity is the thing, and humanity means honesty and dishonesty. It does n't mean hyper-virtuousness."

Over her swart keen face the color rushed: "Perhaps you'd better not tell me any more of your astonishing doctrines. I've no patience with 'moral legerdemain.'"

"Nor I, madam, but I do believe in an occasional shifting of the truth. Take, for instance, the little deception which is being carried on here. Any disclosure now would be probably disastrous. Things must remain exactly as they are. Take my word for it, there is nothing for you to do but to fall in gracefully with the plan. Miss Langstaff's recovery must not be jeopardized. There must be no state of turmoil— Ah, Davie, come in. Let me present you to the real Bella. Miss Kaye,

this is the other Bella, the second Bella, I may say."

Davie stood in the door looking crumpled and flushed. After shaking hands cordially with the newcomer she explained, as she preened a little, that Miss Langstaff had fallen asleep with her head on her shoulder and had mussed her up a bit, whereat Bella remarked somewhat drily that her interpretation of the Bella rôle was pretty but not quite accurate, she was afraid, — conveying that friendly shoulders and tired heads were not exactly in her line.

"Miss Kaye and I have just been discussing the situation, Davie," said David Bessire, "and I have been telling her how imperative it is for Miss Langstaff to remain in ignorance of the state of affairs."

"Oh, by all means!"

"I cannot see it that way," said Bella, with a shake of the head. In some women that sidewise movement of the

head means little, in others, much, — in Bella Kaye it meant everything. “If it comes to a question between her physical and my moral health, I must decide in favor of the latter,” said she.

“She is right, sir!” boomed a voice at the open door, and Benjamin Cockran stood there, his face shining from water and soap and approval of the sentiment just expressed, his hair more nobly tossed than ever, his body arrayed in a suit blacker and finer than ordinary, his big head nodding solemnly like the head of a cotton lamb.

David Bessire and his granddaughter exchanged eloquent glances.

“Honesty is the best — the only policy,” said Cockran.

“It is, indeed, Mr. Cockran,” murmured Bella Kaye, and in that moment she suggested nothing so much to Bessire as the small gray burro sitting stubbornly down

on the trail. As he stared at her, longing to do something to her bodily, he had an illuminating flash.

“Permit a suggestion,” said he. “Suppose that until the marriage takes place, my granddaughter continues at her post. In this way the invalid will be spared the shock of revelation, and at the same time Miss Kaye’s excellent spiritual health will be unimpaired. Do you see?”

Bella considered while Davie bit her lips in vexation at the virtue embodied in these two who stood looking at each other, having thus speedily discovered that they were kindred souls.

“I believe that Mr. Bessire is right,” said Benjamin Cockran at last. “The doctor has said —”

“Don’t tell me what the doctor says! I’ll do as my conscience dictates,” snapped Bella.

A moment of strained silence fell, broken

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by the rustle of silken skirts as Mrs. Tellant swept in, and extended a hand to the newcomer.

“The third Bella,” said David Bessire, with a bow and a smile.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

*“Life and love and death all come
Without sound of step or drum,
Without herald, without word
They come unheard.”*

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ON second thought Bella decided that it would be wiser to postpone the wedding until the day following, so that she might become acquainted with the household and its management before assuming her new duties. To this plan it was not difficult to gain Langstaff's consent, although he accepted the postponement apathetically, since it was only respite, not reprieve. Meanwhile Bella and Benjamin were busy with plans for the wedding feast. Indeed so engrossed did they become in recipes and menus that it was difficult to dig either of them, even temporarily, from the sticky pages of Yim's cook-books.

Davie continued at Miss Langstaff's bed, using persuasion to keep that rapidly

improving little lady from hopping out and into her clothes, but she succeeded in exacting a promise from her to remain just one day longer, and Langstaff, learning that nothing could keep her there beyond that time, made ready for his bride.

It was expedient that Bella's belongings should be moved into the room adjoining his,—the room his wife would naturally occupy,—and while she helped Cockran plan the spread and kept Yim dancing attendance on her, he carried over her bags, the little dressing table, and an easy chair or two from the room she now occupied. There was a short kimona on the back of one of the chairs, her toilet articles were on the dressing table, and her slippers by the bed. The intimacy of it all filled him with actual recoil. It was hideous that he should feel like this, he told himself, but it swept him to his

foundations and he was utterly powerless before it.

He heard her talking with Cockran on the porch below, her voice as flat as her heels, and presently she went down the steps, passing into his line of vision and stopping to break off a bough of scrub oak, and he hated the squareness of her body and the sleekness of her hair, — hated her when to-morrow he must take her in his arms and begin his unending pretense of affection for her! In that moment he could have fled from her in very horror.

But his saner self had no such thought. By every sense of honor he was bound to her inexorably. Impulse would have thrust him from her, but reason held him and his will never wavered. Mechanically he carried the flowers he had gathered for her and put them on her dressing table, giving a last careful glance about to see

that all was as it should be. Then he hurried out.

If Davie were coming to him! If it were for her he had gathered the flowers! The persistent thought of her had become a torment. He pulled himself resolutely together, determined to be rid of it, else presently she would become impressed on the very air, so that wherever he looked he would see her, and wherever he walked she would walk beside him.

He ran down the steps to join the others, and found Bella standing for the moment alone, beating the oak leaves against her skirt. She looked up at him with gracious eyes, and he thought he had not seen her so approachable since her arrival. — she looked almost happy.

“We’ve made the very nicest menu,” she said enthusiastically. “Mr. Cockran

is quite delighted. How clever he is about such things! There is to be — shall I tell you about it? Well, then, there's to be soup, of course, fish, an entree, chicken à la Maryland, biscuits, a magnificent cake, and a dozen things which are to be a surprise. I knew you'd be relieved to have us take the matter off your hands."

"Yes, I'm worthless at such things. Ben's good at it, is n't he?"

"Splendid. I never saw anything like it. It's quite extraordinary to find a man so interested. . . . About the minister. Whom are we to have?"

"I'd like to have Dr. Wheatley marry us. He is an old friend of my father's, who happens to be staying with some friends just across the mountain. I thought perhaps Ben — Here he is now. We'll ask him. I say, Ben, would you mind riding over early in the morning

and bringing Dr. Wheatley back with you? He is staying with the Stevenses, on the other side of the mountain."

Cockran nodded absently, and went padding by, his nose still buried in a cook-book.

Walking up and down the porch with his fiancée, Langstaff tried desperately to rise to the occasion, but the words he forced fell like chips hewn off the log of abstraction, and he wondered if she guessed how hard it was for him.

He had not long to wonder, — you never had, with Bella.

"We are an eloquent pair, aren't we? — and our wedding day to-morrow," said she, with an odd, sharp laugh. "I wonder if there was ever such another betrothal and marriage?" Something approaching wishfulness seemed to ring in the tone, but he could not respond to it. If one of their lives instead of the happiness of them both

had depended on it he could not have deceived her then. He would have given worlds to have had it otherwise, to have been able to say the healing word, or to have looked the lie his lips refused. After they were married he would make amends somehow for his coldness. His loyalty would compensate, in part, and she should have everything on earth she wanted and do exactly as she pleased.

He tried to say something of this to her but she cut him short, having no taste whatever for substitutions. And it was a relief to them both when Cockran emerged from the kitchen hallway and asked her to come and confer with Yim. Free to be off, Langstaff went up among the pines back of the house. He was in no mood for companionship and he was afraid that Genevra Tellant, trailing her draperies, would descend upon him.

He was sitting at the foot of a twisted

old tree a half hour later when he became conscious of a figure moving up the hill along the bed of the stream. A flash of pale blue glinted through the greenery and then Davie came into view, bearing a tray on which was some dainty culinary concoction, which she was evidently carrying up from the Brindleys'.

The scrub oaks made an effective screen from behind which he watched her, the slim little body lifting lightly from stone to stone, with indescribable ease and grace. Had the dryads worn pale blue, he wondered and, what need had they of wings when women moved like this without them!

Then a loud and dismal "wow!" alarmed him, and he sprang up to see that she had slipped and was sitting in the furiously hurrying stream.

"Are you hurt?" he shouted, dashing down to her.



Had the dryads worn pale blue, he wondered, and what need had they
of wings when women moved like this without them!

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“What are *you* doing here?” she cried in disgust when she saw him. “Why aren’t you at home with Bella?” Her lugubriousness would have amused him if he had not been anxious for her. Running out on the rock that towered above her he stooped and, lifting her bodily, carried her to the bank. He was trembling as he released her, and he pushed her almost roughly away.

She steadied herself, looking at him curiously.

“Why are you always getting yourself into scrapes?” he demanded furiously.

Her astonished eyes widened at him.

“How can a man forget such things?” he cried. “The feel of you—your arms—your cheeks, your—”

“You don’t know what you’re saying. Stop!” said she, in a voice that quivered from repression.

“Oh, you see how it is with me! You

can't help but see! Why didn't you come before?"

For just an instant, as she comprehended, the color left her face. She stood, tempestuously conscious of but one thing: he loved her! Then voice and gesture came under her swift control, and she spoke gently, in an impetuous rush:

"Yes, yes, I see. You think you love me, but—"

"Think! My God!"

"It's perfectly natural," she hurried on. "Don't you see how it is? You have n't been with Bella for so long that you've grown apart. You weren't—were n't thinking much about her when I came, and we—we were thrown together so intimately, and so you—you thought about me. The mind has to be busy with some one, you know."

"Don't!" he said impatiently. "What's

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the use? You don't believe that any more than I do."

"But I do. I do," she insisted rather wildly. "The mind is just like an ocean cave,—some wave or other has to wash it. Didn't you ever think of that? In the nature of things it can't stay empty." Her eyes met his bravely but briefly, then she stooped and wrung the water out of her skirts, talking on without an instant's pause about other things: how she had slipped, the rocks, the stream.

"You must go home," he said dully.

"In a minute. Don't worry about me. I'm an awful sight, but—but," with a queer little laugh, "maybe it's a good thing, if you'll just remember me as I look now." And she stood farther away from him and shook herself like a water spaniel. Then she pointed tragically to the stream.

"Look at that beautiful 'Floating

Island' that Mrs. Brindley sent your aunt!" she cried, as a dish of creamy yellow stuff with little fluffy mounds on it went sailing gaily down the stream and wrecked itself against a boulder. But the sight of it brought no smile to his face. She regarded him anxiously for an instant, then returned unflinchingly to the subject she had hoped to push away.

"What you've got," said she, "is only an obsession. It won't hurt you, because it won't last. Take my word for it. For goodness' sake don't imagine it's anything serious. Dear me, don't you think I know all about it? Why, I've had your symptoms a dozen times anyway."

She put out a sodden foot and moved the toes expansively, whereat a stream of water ran from the heel of her shoe.

"Go right home and stop thinking about it," said she. "This isn't going

to hurt anybody concerned. I'm a mighty, mighty little wave, and Bella will chase me clear out to sea. The first thing you know — without knowing — you'll have forgotten all about me." She gave a last wring to her drabbed skirts, and stood up, shaking herself again and blowing the hair out of her eyes. "I'll go back to the Brindleys' and get some dry things," she said. "Make some excuse to your aunt for me, and do, *do* be sensible about this, won't you?"

He smiled at her miserably.

"Never mind me. . . . You'll take your death of cold," he muttered.

"Oh, no, I won't. I'm the healthiest animal you ever saw."

"I can't let you go like this," he cried, as she turned to go. "At least tell me that you forgive me," and he held out his hand to her appealingly.

"Forgive you? Now don't be ab-

surd. There's nothing to forgive. But I'm not going to shake hands with you. There are times when — when — it would be tempting disaster to shake hands," and she ran scrambling through the bushes, her wet skirts swishing about her ankles. Just as she was disappearing she turned and waved gaily, calling back to him: "Mind, you are *not* to worry."

She skurried on again to the end of the trail, where as she emerged, she ran into her grandfather who was beginning a leisurely ascent. He dropped back from her in amazement as she plumped into him.

"What have you been doing to yourself?" he demanded. "You are a sight."

"I'm glad of it," snapped she.

She had left a stain on the sleeve of his white flannel coat and as he carefully removed it he glanced up at her, arrested at the tone.

“What’s the matter?” he urged.

“Matter? It does n’t make you feel particularly cheerful to fall into a creek, does it?” she clicked. “I was carrying something up to Miss Langstaff, — Mary had made something particularly nice, and I fell.”

“Humph. Too bad. . . . The Brindleys are coming up to the wedding, you know.”

She made no comment. She was busy with her skirt—over busy, in fact. He flipped his glasses onto his nose and scrutinized her searchingly, but the top of a tousled head does not reveal a great deal, even to eyes as keen as his.

“Anybody see you fall?” he asked, with what appeared to be irrelevancy.

“Gav—I mean Mr. Langstaff.”

“Pshaw! No wonder you were perturbed. But never mind, —he’s as good as married, you know.”

She nodded, still bending over the dripping skirt.

“I suppose the whole place will be decked out with wedding trappings tomorrow,” he went on, singularly careless of her comfort in that he detained her in her soaked garments. “Goodness knows what basis of companionship there will be between Langstaff and that girl Bella.”

She straightened with a little blind gesture.

“I must go,” she said.

“Davie, look at me!”

Davie held herself very straight, her lips unquivering. There was the pretty back-tilt of the head that he liked, the gallant control worthy of her, he said to himself, but—Davie did *not* look at him, and a strangling sense of disaster swept him.

“Let me see your eyes, child,” he begged.

THE RULE OF THREE

“No,” cried she, “no, no!”

“Look at me,” he commanded, his old voice grown suddenly weak. “Look at me, honey. Look at grandfather.”

A broken breath left her. Slowly she turned, and the eyes of his own youth lifted to him in her little brown face: it was but natural that he should be able to read them.

“Davie! No?” he protested.

“Yes!” sobbed she, and flung away from him.

For a long time after she had gone he stood, leaning there as one stricken, and indeed fate had wounded him where he was most vulnerable. Bewilderedly he regarded the shaft. His pain was all for her pain. His remorse that he had not contrived to avert her suffering. Where had his vigilance been that he had not foreseen this thing which had happened?

THE RULE OF THREE

His care had failed her! Now it was too late to lift a finger for her happiness. Yet — was it?

“He loves her. . . . They love each other,” he said to himself. And again the question repeated itself in his heart: “Is it too late?”

He moved up the hill, a trim and militant figure.

“Certainly not,” said he, when he neared the Skyland. “*Certainly not.*”

CHAPTER TWELVE

*“ I have conniv'd at this. . . .
* But what is got by this connivancy ? ”*

CHAPTER TWELVE

“HE-HAW! He-haw! He-haw!” The duo of brays split the peaceful morning air.

“What the devil do you want?” demanded Tom Brindley out of his chamber window.

“I don’t want anything,” replied Benjamin Cockran, looming large on the back of the greater burro and leading the small gray one. “I suppose these animals only mean to be neighborly with their morning greeting. Sorry if we wakened you.”

Brindley emitted a faintly polite laugh: it was four o’clock and the baby was just beginning to let him get in his best licks.

“He-haw! He-haw! He-haw!” reiterated the burros.

“Muzzle 'em, can't you?” suggested Brindley.

“What's up?” cried David Bessire from his bedroom window. He had spent the night here, giving up his room at the Skyland to Bella.

“I'm up, worse luck,” growled Cockran. “I'm on my way for the preacher, This is the wedding day, you know.”

“Wait a minute. I'll come down,” said Bessire, hastily.

“So will I,” said Brindley, and they emerged simultaneously, one in blue pajamas, one in tan. Tom Brindley's had a button or two missing and his feet were thrust into battered slippers that had seen faithful service throughout his son's teething period, and he rubbed his eyes and slouched a good deal as if he needed the day to rouse him, while David Bessire was exactly as wide awake and as alert as usual. His feet showed in delicate suede

THE RULE OF THREE

the exact color of his pajamas, his hair was smooth, and he carried himself with erectness and decision.

Behind the softly moving curtains of the window which Brindley had just quitted there was a suggestion of a feminine presence — something felt rather than seen.

“Too bad to rout you out like this,” said Cockran, “but the donkeys made a straight set-to for your place the minute they saw it, and heaven and earth could n’t stop ’em. I suppose they thought you’d welcome the opportunity to renew your felicitations. Of course you are all going up for the wedding. It’s to be at one o’clock, you know. I ought to get the preacher back by eleven. That’ll give him time to rest up a bit.”

“Haven’t they hurried the wedding a little?” asked Brindley.

“Hurried it?” Cockran’s laugh rang

heavily. "They've been engaged since they were children. You don't call that hurrying it, do you? If I had been in his place—" he broke off discreetly, reddening and readjusting himself in the saddle. "He's a lucky chap, that's all I've got to say about it." He gave them a glance of something approaching defiance, and lifted the reins. "Well, I must be off. Git ap, Jenny!" and he slapped the red burro soundly.

It started forward as the little gray swayed backward.

"Smack that fellow, will you?" roared Cockran. "He is the most reluctant little beast I ever saw."

Brindley smacked, but the gray only blinked sadly, while Bessire and the feminine presence behind the curtain chuckled with laughter. Still the burro inclined backward and still Brindley smacked. Then Bessire lifted his suede-

clad foot, and the burro, divining like a flash, lifted his.

“Take care!” shrieked the feminine presence.

“He’s got to move,” shouted Brindley.

“Try this.”

A large palm leaf fan fluttered out of the window, whereupon Brindley doubled up silently on a rock, rolling gently from side to side.

“Good Lord, Mary,” he gasped, “it’s not the burro that’s hot.”

Over the mesa the sun shone brightly, but it had not yet peeped into the cañon. The breeze was here, however. It fluttered Benjamin Cockran’s hair, the fringes and tassels of Brindley’s pajamas, and the superfluous fulness of David Bessire’s.

“Wait, and I’ll get a shovel and scoop him along,” cried Brindley, shivering as the wind lapped him, whereupon he liter-

ally dumped the burro on his way with a huge coal shovel.

“Heavens, how you’ve mussed him up,” giggled Mary from the window. “Where he was only gray he’s perfectly black!”

“It is n’t anything to what that preacher will be when he gets there,” said Brindley. “Hate to have my marriage depending on such a beast. He may delay the ceremony for hours.”

David Bessire nodded absently. Many things were troubling him. He was old but he had not forgotten what pain love can bring, and he knew only too well how the Bessires loved, and how sure they were in their love. That Davie was certain of herself he had never doubted. He had looked into her eyes and read her soul. Yet comprehending it all as he did, — her love for Langstaff and his love for her, — how was he to make the knowledge count?

THE RULE OF THREE

Half the night he had asked himself the question.

At ten that morning he sat in the pines beside the trail by which Cockran and Dr. Wheatley would arrive. He was apparently deep in his paper when they finally came in sight, but as they approached he arose and went hastily forward to greet them. The Reverend Timothy Wheatley was a pleasant-faced gentleman older than himself by several years. He was a man with whom one associated precision and a conscience habituated to working over hours, yet the ministerial mien was only moderately tinctured with piety.

He had evidently found the gray burro a most uncomfortable mount, since the incongruity of their different heights made it necessary for him to bow his knees lest his heels should drag, and he cheerfully acquiesced to Bessire's suggestion that he get down

a bit, allowing Cockran to catch the cog and go to Manitou for the wedding cake. After resting in the shade he could continue his journey to his friend's house.

When Cockran had departed, leaving the reverend gentleman and the two burros in David Bessire's care the two elderly men sat down together.

"This is most thoughtful of you, sir," said Dr. Wheatley, with gratitude. "I was beginning to be tired and worn. Only my friendship for young Langstaff would have permitted me to mount one of those dreadful little beasts. But of course my reluctant old bones couldn't be allowed to postpone the ceremony, so here I am."

Bessire nodded absently. Then he wheeled about with a smile in which was mirrored great depths of truth.

"The fact is I wasn't thinking of your

comfort, Dr. Wheatley," he admitted. "I wanted a word with you before you reached Langstaff's. Shall we smoke?"

Timothy Wheatley took a cigar from a case extended him, lighting it like a man who has denied himself many things for many reasons, but whose appreciation remains unimpaired. The air was spicy and cool. The tethered burros attended strictly to their browsing, the busy little chipmunks to their own affairs with occasional bright-eyed glances toward the two old men sitting smoking on the rocks, and the chatting of the birds was scarcely more obtrusive than the rustle of the oak leaves. A wild hop-vine, heavily laden, trailed from a clump of bushes along the rocks, where sometimes the toe of Bessire's boot stirred its blossoms.

"When I want a thing, I buy it if it is to be bought," he explained rather abruptly. "If it is n't, I maneuver for it. But I'm

THE RULE OF THREE

not going to maneuver in this case, Dr. Wheatley, I'm going to ask you straight out for what I want of you, but I'm coming to it circuitously. We are strangers, meeting for the first and probably the last time, and we may therefore be very plain spoken with each other. We are old men, you and I, and we have discovered for ourselves what all men of our age have discovered, that the only thing worth while is love, — plain, honest, human love, with all its passion and its pets and its demands and commonplaces, not a transcendental affair, not a makeshift. It's that sort of love a man must have if he is to be happy. For as you live, sir, happiness isn't made of well-cooked breakfasts and common tastes and an exchange of attention and consideration. It is n't born of pride in a woman who wears well the clothes you buy her, nor of her ministry to you when you are ill and your care of her when she

fails. It's another sort of thing altogether. Is n't that so?"

Dr. Wheatley regarded him with keen, narrowed eyes. A wreath of smoke drifted daintily from the old minister's cigar, and presently he turned from looking at his companion and followed it till it melted above his head. Then he nodded, very slowly, saying nothing, and the other man went on in simple earnestness:

"We have found out that when we come to the end of our day and sit in the twilight with our possessions about us, like a kiddie with his toys, we haven't got much if we haven't got love, eh?"

"You are right," said the older man, softly, "you are right."

"There is nothing, then, that a man covets for himself and for his friends as he covets love?"

"If he be wise, yes."

"Well, then, don't rob Gavin Lang-

staff of his chief possession,—the thing which makes all the rest worth while, as we have just agreed. Don't marry him to this girl to whom you are bidden to marry him. He does n't love her, and she loves him no better than he loves her. He loves my granddaughter, to tell you the truth of the matter. It may make my plea to you the more fervent, but in any case I should feel it my duty to tell you the truth about it."

"Let me understand the situation exactly, if you please," said Dr. Wheatley, in a troubled voice, and David Bessire went on quickly to explain it.

"But if I don't marry them someone else will," said the minister, when he had finished.

"Leave something to me," twinkled Davie's grandfather.

"What possible excuse can I make for turning back?"

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“You have plainly a heightened pulse and an increased heart action. Do you need other excuse than that?”

Timothy Wheatley sat without replying. He was grave and irresolute. At last he spoke: “I am very weary,” he said.

“Of course you are,” crowed Bessire. “If they could see you they would be sure you ought to go back. Come and refresh yourself beneath my friend Brindley’s roof, then let him jog you home in his comfortable phaeton. Burros weren’t built for men of your age and mine.”

Dr. Wheatley looked toward the animals. To mount one of them again seemed an actual physical impossibility. He never remembered to have been more fatigued in his life. He was fond of Gavin Langstaff and he had loved his father before him. He wanted the boy to be happy for his own sake and for his father’s. It would

be a great pity to marry him to the wrong girl. It was always a pity to marry the wrong man to the wrong woman, and he had done it so many times, knowingly and unknowingly, willingly and unwillingly, that he was constantly depressed by the thought. Why add to his sense of guilt when it could be avoided?

Furtively he regarded David Bessire, and read him to be an honest man whom you could trust to hold his tongue; a man, over-doting, perhaps, but reasonable withal, — a sort of sentimental sentry on the ramparts of happiness, a sentry who had been caught napping and who now tried valiantly to undo the mischief that seemed irreparable.

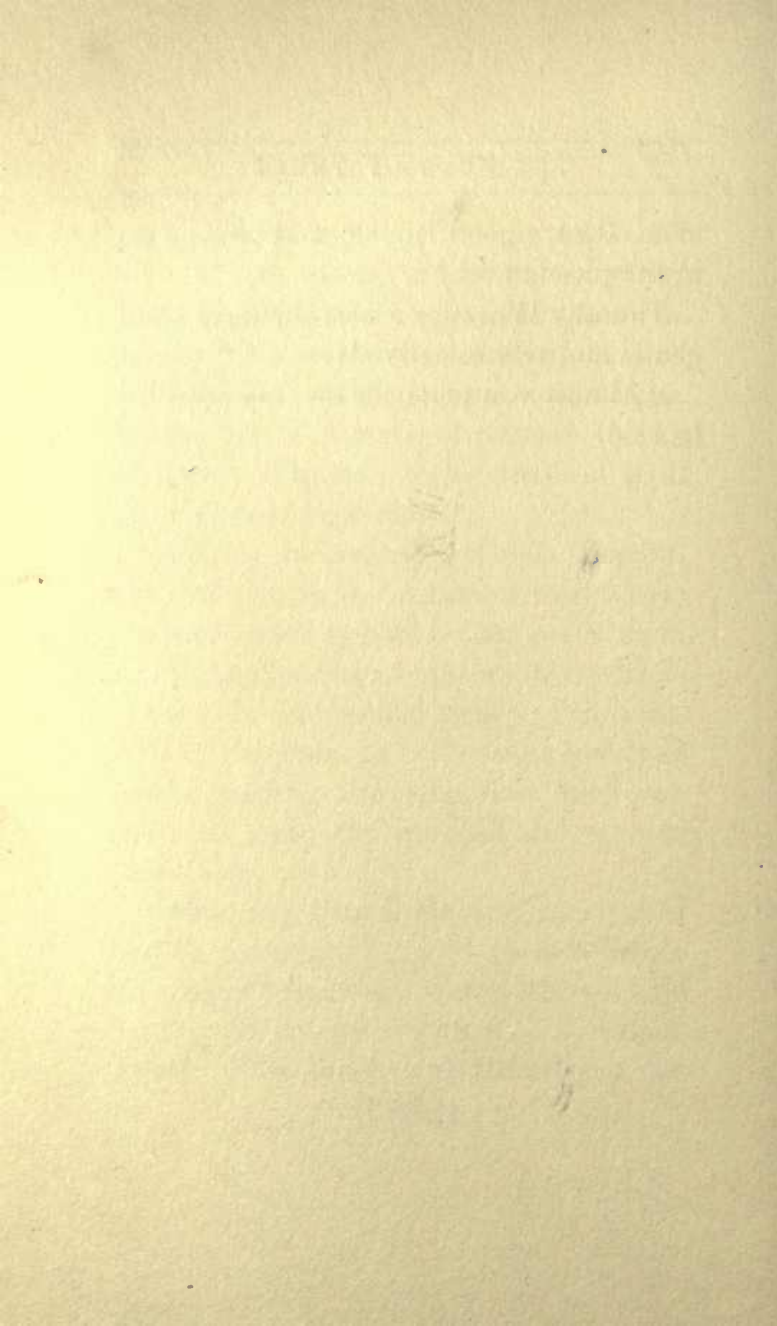
“Man, say you’ll do it!” exclaimed Bessire, movingly. “Give them a chance for youth’s happiness. Later, life will hold nothing to compare with it. . . . Come, come! Have lunch with Brindley, a nap

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after, then a good smoke, and off you go in the phaeton, eh?"

Timothy Wheatley arose; his eyes were gentle and whimsically sly.

"Almost you persuade me, my friend," he said.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*“He’s awa to the wedding house
To see what he could see.”*

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

PROMPTLY at twelve o'clock David Bessire in immaculate ducks went twinkling up the trail to the Skyland. As he came in sight of the bungalow Benjamin Cockran was just climbing the steps with the huge wedding cake which he had carried most carefully from Manitou, ascending with guarded steps to the door, the memory of the demolished box of groceries still with him.

“There are men whose stomachs never grow up,” muttered old Bessire to himself.

Mrs. Tellant moved graciously forward to meet him. She was exquisite; she was adorable. In her present mood he could himself have made obeisance to her, and he had, besides, a certain feeling of kinship for her, born of that hour in

the pines with the Reverend Timothy Wheatley.

“She was right, after all, she and Dryden. ‘To alter for the better is no shame,’” he chuckled to himself. Aloud he said: “On my word, madam, you put out the bride. Is it quite fair?”

“You are laughing at me,” she pouted, giving him her eyes with apparent frankness; “you know perfectly that the bride has put me out most shamefully.”

They stood chatting together in a sort of camaraderie which surprised them both. Each was somewhat excited and high of tension: her recklessness was born of despair, his of hope. She had done what she could, and had failed, while he had done what he could, and the result remained to be seen. Neither of them had any conscience in the matter. To her it was the natural thing to get what she wanted, while to

him a loveless marriage was a monstrous perversion.

“The cake has come, but not the minister,” said she. “However, from the fuss which has been made over the one, the other seems entirely unimportant. Have you noticed? The insinuating flavor of a salad is more to Benjamin Cockran than nature or friends or books. If anything should happen to his palate it would be tragic. . . . Do you know it would n’t surprise me a bit if Miss Marianna Langstaff walked down on us in the midst of the ceremony? Your granddaughter has been having an awful time of it to keep her in bed.”

“I believe I’ll go and speak with Davie a minute,” he said, and went upstairs and along the upper hall to the girl’s room.

“Dressing?” he asked, his lips against the panel, so that Marianna Langstaff should not hear.

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“Yes. I’ve just begun. I was delayed.”

“How long will it take you?”

“Fifteen minutes. Not longer.”

“All right. I’ll wait. Don’t hurry,” he said, and as he turned away he looked at his watch and saw that it was twenty-five minutes past twelve. He glanced toward Miss Langstaff’s room.

“It would be disastrous to have her walk down on them,” he muttered. “I wonder —” his nervous fingers tapped the upper newel post. “If I thought —” He continued to hesitate. Then he wheeled like a marionette on a pivot.

“I’ll do it!” he cried to himself. “It’s the last resort.”

Before the fifteen minutes were up Davie came out dressed for the wedding. She wore a simple white gown, not daring to risk a more elaborate toilette for

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fear of evoking Miss Langstaff's curious comments.

Someone says that when we go above a certain stratum in social geology we find people who do not exhibit their emotions but swallow them. Davie had swallowed hers, and they choked her, but she carried herself as any girl worth her salt would carry herself under such conditions: head high, chin steady, eyes gallant. She glanced along the hall and, not seeing her grandfather awaiting her, stepped out on the porch to find him. As she passed through the door a big Walapai basket just outside caught on her skirts and upset, and she stooped to put back the papers and magazines which it held. As she straightened from doing it her grandfather came into view.

“Why, how odd!” she exclaimed.
“You looked exactly as if you came from Miss Langstaff's room. Queer, wasn't

it? I'll just look in to see that she is sleeping and doesn't need anything, then we'll go right down."

She tiptoed softly toward the door and looked in,—Marianna Langstaff slept like a child. Nodding with relief she came back to her grandfather.

"It's all right. We'll go now, unless—was there something you wanted to say to me, that you came hunting me?"

"There's a lot I want to say, my dear," said he, linking his arm in hers and moving with his old buoyant alacrity toward the steps, "but I'll only say that 'all's well that—'" he checked himself at the look in her eyes, realizing at once how inadvertent the remark had been. But he had ached so poignantly to reassure her, to give some comfort to her poor little heart. "I'm a silly old fellow who is always putting his

foot in it," he exclaimed. "There, don't stare at me like that. . . . Ah, Cockran, is everything ready?"

"Will be," said Cockran, wiping a perspiring brow and passing on.

Genevra Tellant looked at them as they came down the stairs together. She had a queer, half malicious pleasure in feeling that Langstaff was suffering through this girl. She wondered if Davie cared anything for him. It was not unlikely. From the first there had been with her a fierce unreasoning jealousy of Davie, while she felt only an amused contempt for Bella. Her mind shrugged its disgust as the bride-elect came out onto the porch, at the moment suggesting a vellum-bound prayer-book in her severely plain ivory-colored gown.

"It's odd that Dr. Wheatley has n't arrived," Bella remarked to Davie. "Mr. Cockran says he should have been

here a half hour ago. Things will soon begin to spoil by the delay. Perhaps you bring some word of him, Mr. Bessire?"

"Mr. Cockran left him with me and we had a most pleasant chat by the trail. Then I took him to the Brindleys' to freshen himself up, and dressing hurriedly I came along. I thought perhaps my toilette had taken longer than theirs and that they had grown impatient waiting."

Langstaff joined them at the moment. "Talking of Dr. Wheatley?" he asked. "He is always just on time, but he invariably gives you a chill for fear he won't be."

"Not a very comfortable person," remarked Bella. "Yim is getting impatient."

"He'll have to make the best of it."

"And Mr. Cockran—"

"Oh, bother Cockran!" he exclaimed



“ He ’ll have to make the best of it ”

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in spite of himself. Ben's everlasting squeaking about the last few days, his bulging in and out of the pantry and kitchen had got on his nerves. Everything was on them, however, for the matter of that: Bella's tranquil poise, her over-high collar, the way her hair was done, and her complacent, pre-nuptial smile. Then there was Mrs. Tellant's half mocking glance, and Davie's eyes which reddened him with their evasiveness. Did ever a man stand in the shadow of an altar in quite such a state of mind? he asked himself. He was fussier and more nervous than any old woman, but except for that one outburst about Cockran he managed to keep himself fairly in hand.

“Wheatley not here yet?” cried Cockran, at the moment puffing in from the kitchen hallway. “What the deuce keeps him? Told him particu-

larly that we wanted luncheon by fifteen minutes after one without fail. Can't understand his not showing up. Where did you leave him?"

"At the door of Brindley's guest chamber," replied David Bessire, easily. "The trip had rather done him up, but he didn't complain greatly, and I thought —"

"It may be he is ill," said Bella. "It looks as if that might be what's the matter, doesn't it, since the Brindleys haven't come either?"

"They are two of a kind, Tom and the doctor," said Langstaff. "They'll be along any minute now."

Bella had gone back from the rail and was sitting very straight in a big chair, her square feet just escaping the floor. Glancing at her, Langstaff felt some sense of contrition, for after all she was not to blame because things had come out as

they had. As for that she loved him no better, yet how bravely she was carrying out her part of their compact. She was a good sort in her way, and plenty of men would have found it easy to love her. Cockran, for instance, seemed to think her marvelous. Only last night he had said that if they were not betrothed he should consider that heaven meant her for him, since their tastes were so similar, their appreciations identical.

Oh, yes, she was a dear, good girl, and he must try to make up to her in their married life—a shudder of the brain stopped him. He saw her as she sat there, uncompromising, from the coil of her hair to her heels, a satisfied, exemplary person, whom he could not love in ten thousand years, though every day of every year be devoted to his interest and his comfort!

And then he saw Davie, standing back a little way from the rail, her hand on her grandfather's arm, chatting gaily with Genevra Tellant, who watched him covertly, with that taunting, diabolical smile in her eyes, and he felt like a caged animal in a show window. It was an impossibly cruel situation. He had a wild desire for escape, and he actually glanced up the trail that ran over the crest of the hill back of the house, wondering how long it would take him to lose himself there among the rocks and trees. Then he pulled himself grimly together and replied to something someone was saying to him.

Cockran snapped open his watch at the moment.

"One-ten, and the fowl already done to a turn," said he, irritably.

"Wouldn't you like somebody to go down to Brindley's and see what is

wrong, Gavin?" sweetly suggested Genevra Tellant.

"There is still plenty of time, and they are certain to come or send word soon."

"Oh, to be sure," said David Bessire, comfortably.

Davie slipped her hand from his arm and went over to talk with the bride-elect, as she continued to sit in state, exasperation increasing in the lines about her firm mouth. If there was anything in the world she couldn't endure it was sitting with meekly folded hands and waiting on people. She said so now in a very crisp tone. A minister should know better than to delay things like this, and some consideration ought to be shown Mr. Cockran for all his interest and trouble in the matter of the lunch. Gavin seemed utterly unconscious of the fact that he had taken any pains whatever.

“Men are usually unconscious of most things on their wedding day, aren't they?” smiled Davie.

“Oh, I don't think Mr. Langstaff could be accused of being overcome with—” Bella checked herself, looking past the other girl's head with a pretty flame in her eyes. She was very angry, but she wasn't going to shake the poor rags of her romance in the face of a stranger.

At the instant Cockran's big voice rang out jubilantly: “It's all right! Here he comes!”

David Bessire had been standing with his back to the trail, and he wheeled about and put on his glasses, fixing his gaze on a solitary figure moving up the path beneath a huge umbrella. “Damn a coward!” he cried to himself.

“Go down to meet Dr. Wheatley, Gavin,” said Bella; and he dragged him-

self together, thinking as he moved forward that for the rest of his life he would have to obey that smooth, con-nubial tone.

“Thought we’d lost you, doctor,” cried Cockran from the rail, as the old man began to mount the steps.

Langstaff descended with leaden feet, while Mrs. Tellant stood beside Bella, and Davie linked her arm in her grandfather’s. As her fingers slipped into the bend of his arm, Bessire put his hand over them. “Poor little honeykin!” he was saying to himself, his eyes avoiding hers. “Poor little honeykin!”

“It was tremendously good of you to come, sir,” said Langstaff, his lips moving stiffly, and he put out his hand to the figure under the umbrella: the umbrella swung back, revealing Michael, the Brindleys’ man-of-all-work.

“Beggin’ your pardon, sor, it isn’t

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the riverind docthor," he said. "The docthor has some sort of heart trouble which prevints his coomin' up to ye. He has gone home, sor, bein' afraid to remain in this altitood, sor."

Michael's white head shone in the sun, and Michael's eyes were politely regretful.

"I wuz to say to ye, sor, that if he'd knowed he was goin' to be took he would have sint ye worrud to get somebody else, but it come very suddint. If there is annything I can do for ye—"

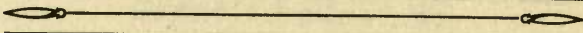
"Thank you, no," said Langstaff, mechanically.

"Misther Brindley has drove him over the mountain in the phaeton, sor, and the Missus told me to say that as it's too late for ye to git the preacher to-day, she won't coom up, as the baby is fretful. Good day, sor," and hoisting the umbrella Michael departed as leisurely as he had come.

On the porch there broke forth the noisy hum of excited voices. How Marianna Langstaff could have failed to hear, heaven only knew. David glanced in alarm toward the stairs expecting to see her appear at the head of them. But no such thing happened. Up there all was unbroken quiet and serenity. Down here all was confusion and consultation.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*“ I think it was spring — but not certain I am —
When my passion began first to work ;
But I know we were certainly looking for lamb,
And the season was over for pork.”*



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TWO hours later a rather forlorn procession moved up from the Skyland dining-room. The wedding feast had been eaten and the bride's health had been drunk.

“ Things won't keep — that's all there is about it,” Cochran had urged. “ They're done to a turn now, besides — ”

“ Oh, Lord, eat 'em ! ” groaned Langstaff.

They had therefore eaten and drunk. And now in the crispest and most fetching of aprons Bella was overseeing the putting away of the remains of the feast, moving about with a deftness which delighted Cochran, who watched her with unspeakable admiration. Ah, it was the domestic graces which were the magic ones, he told himself, and as he reclined in a chair by

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the open dining-room door his soul soared into poesy, or rather into parody. He smiled as the lines formulated, and after saying them over a few times to himself he quoted them lightly to Bella, who laughed and blushed and tripped into the pantry with a plate of conserves. His parody of the Rubaiyat seemed rather grand to him, and he said it over again to himself, a queer envious feeling of Langstaff at his heart.

“ A box of cookies underneath the bough,
A can of soup, a glass of shrub, and Thou
Still hungry, singing in the Wilderness,
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow ! ”

She was certainly the nicest girl he had ever seen and the most accomplished. And Langstaff was the luckiest fellow on earth, but he didn't know it. Would he ever have the sense to realize it? Confound him! . . . The lines went through his mind most pleasantly, and after a little he

THE RULE OF THREE

evolved another verse which suited him almost better than the first :

- “A gay alarm-clock ringing out at six,
A Bath, a Fire, a Breakfast then to fix,
A rush to get the Dishes washed and wiped,
The House to set in order, Bread to mix.”

Could there be a more simple and a better plan of living for a woman than that? He tried to recall the name of the man who had said that domestic happiness was the only bliss of paradise which had survived the fall. He was right, whoever he was, as right as the other writer-fellow who declared that the domestic man, loving the sound of his clock and the logs on his hearth, had solaces that other men knew nothing of. Was not the hearth-stone poultice, as it were, for the bruised spirit and the worn body?

Bella came in from the pantry, brushing her hands. She was warm, and a tendril

of her sleek hair touched her cheek. Also there was a smudge of flour on her nose. How fetching it made her! If women only knew how much more becoming the emblems of domesticity were than the "gauds and armlets" of society, they would turn to them, he was sure.

Bella's lips were compressed, her brows knit, and her black eyes glittering, and as she whisked her apron free from crumbs, she said tartly:

"Kam Yim is an old imbecile! The way this house is run is a disgrace. I don't believe Gavin Langstaff cares one bit that things are all at sixes and sevens. It's an unthinkable attitude, even in a man. I can't understand it."

She gave another flirt to the apron and marched ahead of him down the narrow passageway.

The goddess of domesticity herself could not have appeared more charming to him.

THE RULE OF THREE

And then, besides, she was the soul of honesty!

The combination was too much for poor Benjamin Cockran.

At five o'clock that afternoon David Bessire sat in a deep chair on the Brindley porch, opposite Mary Brindley, who rocked her baby. He had just that moment arrived, and there had been no talk between them. He looked dapper and ruddy and entirely complacent; she, anxious and greatly bewildered.

“But what now?” she propounded.

She and Tom were in his confidence so far as the Reverend Timothy Wheatley was concerned. More they guessed, but did not know.

“It's on the knees of the gods,” said he, lightly flecking something from his sleeve.

“Don't trust them, the gods. They muddle things frightfully.”

THE RULE OF THREE

“Not when they have a little discreet human assistance,” said he, slyly.

“Who is the aide-de-camp to the gods, then?” she queried.

He dangled his watch before her son’s eyes and smiled over the small downy head at her.

“I can’t tell you, my dear. But have faith in the ultimate outcome.”

“You can’t go on holding up ministers and sending them back home mellowed.”

He chuckled: “There’ll be but one more minister, and I won’t have him interfered with. I can tell you that.”

She shook an unconvinced head: “You’re too sanguine. The odds are much too strong against you.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*“ I have a good eye, uncle ;
I can see a church by daylight.”*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“IS that you, Bella?” called Miss Langstaff.

It was evening of the day which should have been the wedding day. The house was very quiet, and for some time Miss Marianna had been alone.

At the call Genevra Tellant, passing through the upper hall, paused just outside the sick-room door, irresolute. The moonlight was rather bright in there, hazardously bright, she feared, but Miss Langstaff called a second time, and with an air of daring Mrs. Tellant entered. Simulating Davie’s voice as best she could she suggested that it would be easier for the invalid to sleep if the blinds were more closely drawn.

“But I don’t want to sleep,” said Mari-

anna Langstaff, fretfully. "I can't sleep forever, can I? I want to talk."

Mrs. Tellant drew her chair up to the bedside.

"I have been thinking so persistently to-night of a man I know," said Miss Langstaff, lying with half-closed eyes. "Somehow I can't get him out of my mind. Perhaps talking of him may help me. Shall I tell you about him, dear?"

"Do," murmured Mrs. Tellant, stifling a yawn and looking about the room with some curiosity.

It was a long, impressive moment before the old woman spoke, then she said unsteadily: "I'm afraid it may bore you. There is n't anything extraordinary in the story, but he is so keen and so unspoiled and so likable,—or so it seems to me,—and so to be pitied that in spite of me I weep for him."

“ He is in trouble, then ? ” prompted Genevra Tellant, languidly.

“ He is face to face with adversity at a sharp turn in the road—a turn which he thought he had already safely passed.”

“ Ah! but he is n't a coward, is he ? ”

“ He! My—I mean the boy? Oh, no, he is n't that. He comes of stock that fights till it falls. But one is sorry there should be need of battle. So much time is lost that way, so much blood, so much spirit. It seems a great, great pity, does n't it ? ”

“ What is the thing he has to fight ? ” asked the other woman, indifferently.

“ Ruin,” answered Marianna Langstaff, briefly, and in a voice that made Mrs. Tellant regard her with sudden inquiry as she lay, her face in the shadows.

“ You mean financial ruin ? ”

“ Yes, Bella.”

There was a short silence, then :

“Humph! that is n’t easy to meet. But surely there is some one who can lend him a hand?”

“That’s the worst of it; the one whose joy it would have been to help him is worse off than he. She is wrecked, poverty-stricken, utterly ruined!”

The words flung themselves out stiffly, reverberating in the room, and for a moment Genevra Tellant did not speak. She sat leaning forward, her gaze intent upon the old face among the pillows, the toe of her slipper tapping nervously.

“The blow has just fallen,” said Miss Langstaff. “The girl has n’t heard of it yet. She is very sweet and dear and reasonable, but has he the right to hold her to him? She was pledged to him in his prosperity, not in his poverty. He was unencumbered then, and now — now he has this old woman on his hands. This one who would so gladly have helped

him had she not gone down in the financial crash which leveled him. Do you see? Is it fair to the girl to ask him to marry her now, or to wait for him until he can get upon his feet again?"

"The girl must answer that for herself," said Mrs. Tellant, coldly.

"But you are young, dear Bella. You know how youth would feel. Can you not put yourself in her place and tell me what you would do? I lie here trying to think it all out: what is right and just to them both?"

"I don't know the girl. How can I tell what she would do?" The clamoring forces of necessity had stirred her so long that she was irritable. What was clearly a recital of Langstaff's financial difficulties awoke in her anger against him and against fate and herself. All the wretched turmoil of the last few days might have been spared if she had known this, for Langstaff poor

and Langstaff rich were necessarily very different persons to her. She realized perfectly that his aunt was putting Bella Kaye to the test, but she had no mind whatever of playing up to the Bella rôle. She was exasperated to the limit of her endurance by her stay here. The candle had not been worth the game. There had been no candle!

“Happiness is often a luxury which we cannot afford,” she said dryly. “It has to be too dearly bought, it seems to me, when it is the *one* luxury. The question is, will the girl think she can afford it?”

“Would you think you could afford it?” asked the other woman, quietly.

Mrs. Tellant laughed a most un-Bella-like laugh.

“No. No, I would n’t consider it for a moment. One must have meat and drink, you know, as well as love.”

“And meat and drink mean different things to different women? Is that it?”

“Exactly. I hope you are not misjudging me. I know the smell of the flesh pots, but my nostrils can do without it. But I must have creature comforts. Take them away from a woman who is accustomed to them and she becomes impoverished and unbearable. Oh, I know that there are saints who keep their halos bright under the most difficult circumstances, and angels who sprout wings beneath vicissitude, but I’m talking about the ordinary woman.”

“Perhaps the girl is not the ordinary girl.”

“Maybe not. I don’t pretend to know, of course. She may sprout wings too. Who knows?” The tone was coldly amused. Bella in print gowns and patient smiles! Poor Gavin! . . . She arose with alacrity and decision.

She had seen as much of the pitiful farce as she wanted to see. It was quite time to ring down the curtain and let the audience go home.

“Don’t worry about the man,” she said. “He will find a way out of his difficulties. Men always do. . . . Can I bring you anything before I go? A drink? A—”

“No, nothing,” replied the low voice from the bed, and patting the pillows mechanically, Mrs. Tellant swept from the room, whereupon Marianna Langstaff sat straight up in bed, her eyes astonishingly wide and clear, the line of her lips as straight as a thread. Then the taut line eased and she laughed, with the chuckling gasps of age and weakness.

“Is it my fault that she put the personal application to it?” she demanded of the quiet room.

Just then there were other skirts in the

hall and other steps that moved toward her door, and ducking like a naughty child into the pillows she called again in a low, guileless voice:

“Is that you, Bella?”

Bella herself appeared hesitatingly at the door.

“I don’t want to go to sleep. I’m lonely, I think, and I want to talk,” said Marianna Langstaff, and Bella came into the room with much trepidation, and took the chair which Mrs. Tellant had just left.

Miss Langstaff allowed a little silence to prelude what she had to say.

“I’ve been thinking so persistently to-night of a man I know,” she began. “Somehow I can’t get him out of my mind. Perhaps talking of him may help me. Shall I tell you about him, dear?”

“Why to be sure, if you like,” said Bella, polishing her nails on the cushion of her knees and regarding them with interest.

“I am afraid it may bore you since there is nothing extraordinary about the man, but he is so keen and eager and likable — or so it seems to me — and so to be pitied that in spite of me I weep for him.”

“What’s the matter with him?” asked Bella.

“He is ruined!” cried the old voice, the words ringing with peculiar bitterness.

“How ruined?” questioned Bella’s matter-of-fact tones. “What has he done?”

“What many other good men have done before him,” murmured Marianna Langstaff, *pregnantly*.

“I haven’t a bit of patience with a man who can’t keep straight,” declared Bella Kaye, after a moment in which it all became clear to her. “If you expect me to condone —”

“My dear, I myself do not condone.

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I only pity him. And also—” the old eyes fixed themselves wishfully on the young face— “I pity the girl he loves.”

“If he really loves her he would n’t have done this thing—whatever it is,” said the girl, coldly.

Miss Langstaff’s tone had much crispness in it when she retorted :

“Love may be a universal solvent, my dear Bella, but it is n’t a universal savior.”

“Then what’s the good of it?” challenged the other.

“The good !” crackled the old woman, “the good ? I never thought the mission of love to be one wholly of redemption. On my word, I did n’t. I’ve missed it tremendously from my own life, — I don’t mind admitting that to you, — but I never wanted it to save me from my sins.”

“Just the same he would n’t have done it if he had loved her,” doggedly reiterated Bella.

“Perhaps I should say rather that he loved the thought of her,” mused Marianna Langstaff; “loved all that she stood for with him, for you see that although their engagement has been a long one they really know each other but slightly. However, he does adore the idea of her.”

“I’m afraid he has n’t shown it, has he? . . . I don’t ask you what he has done. I don’t want to know. But what would he do if she had failed him in any way? If she had n’t been absolutely scrupulous in her loyalty to him? He’d throw her over quicker than a wink. And do you suppose she loves him a bit more than he loves her?”

The old head moved sadly on the pillows, and the old voice did not reply.

“It’s absurd, this thing of having one standard of conduct for the woman and another for the man,” snapped Bella Kaye. “To have one set of rules for a

certain temperament and another set for another kind of temperament. We can't grade sinners as we do children in school. I may be primitive minded—I hope to goodness I am!—but it seems to me we're all in the same class. . . . I abhor excuses and slips and lapses, and I abominate wrongdoing."

"My dear child, he has n't committed either murder or felony," suggested Miss Langstaff, with a bitter smile.

"Oh, I understand perfectly! I beg you not to go into it. I know just about what he has done—some gentlemanly, dastardly thing, and you feel, and you want me to feel, that his other excellencies offset it." She was working herself into a fever heat. "But I've no patience with that sort of thing! I—"

"Nor with him?" put in Marianna Langstaff.

She hesitated an instant, then she said:

“I have rigid ideas of right and wrong. I was brought up that way, and I thank heaven for it. I believe in stern dealing.”

“But love—”

“We have decided that there is only a pretense of it—no, not even that between them. There is nothing but friendship. So—”

“Ah, but even friendship—”

“Even friendship may ‘smell the buzzard underneath the peacock plumes,’” interrupted the girl, sharply. “I don’t mean to set myself up as a judge, nor to be unjust with him, but I’m a simple-minded creature and I want simple honesty and candor and—decency.”

“I think I begin to see just how you feel about it,” said the old woman, with a long look at the stern young face. “You think the girl would wish to be released from her promise to marry him? You think she wouldn’t be willing—or

rather that she would n't *want*—to make shield and shelter of her affection? That her woman's heart might not become a very mother-heart of tenderness for him in his weakness and contrition? I'm afraid I had some such old-fashioned notion."

"I don't believe in marrying men to reform them," said Bella, with asperity. "I can't imagine anything more dreadful than having to keep after your husband as if he were a boy. How women make perpetual governesses of themselves I can't think."

"Then you are sure,—forgive me for seeming to press the point, but I must make perfectly certain,—you feel that she would n't wish to marry him? You see I lie here trying to think it all out: what he will do, what she will do, and what is right and just to them both."

An expression of some kindness

touched the austere countenance of the girl. She had been fond of Miss Langstaff, in her way.

“No, I am sure she would n't want to marry him, under the circumstances. But don't you worry about it. He won't! He will find a girl who is willing to treat him as if he were in moral pinafores.”

“Yes, he may find someone some day, poor boy,” softly murmured the wicked little old lady, and added, still softly: “And poor girl! Poor girl!”

“Oh, I don't think you need feel badly for her. She's had a lucky escape, that's all. She was mad to think of such a marriage, anyhow.” The color was high in Bella's face and she stood up, glancing down at Marianna Langstaff, who discreetly closed her eyes.

“Can I do anything for you before I go?” she asked. “A drink—”

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“Nothing, thank you, dear Bella.”

“Well, then, I think I must be off. I want — to — er — speak to Mr. Cockran to-night.”

And Bella was gone.

“The personal application again!” tragically breathed Marianna Langstaff in a chuckling, plaintive tone, and with her old eyes laughing and her old hand trembling she rang the bell on her table and ducked again to the pillows.

“Is that Bella?” she asked for the third time, when Davie appeared at the door.

“Yes, dear. I’m sorry you had to call. Can’t you go to sleep?”

“I don’t want to sleep. I want to talk. I’m lonely, I think.”

“Lonely! And you didn’t call me long ago! I was only talking with Gran—I mean Gavin.”

“How you two do adore each other,”

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murmured the old lady, fondly, and even in the moonlight she could see the rioting pink of the girl's cheeks and the look of distress in her eyes. Then Davie hid her face against her shoulder as she sat propped up among the pillows.

“Well, what are we going to talk about?” queried Davie, lightly.

“About a man I can't get out of my mind to-night. Shall I tell you about him, dear?”

“Oh, do! You know how I adore talking about nice, interesting people. What has he been doing?”

“Several things he ought not,” said Miss Langstaff, sternly.

“Go on,” laughed Davie. “I'm sure I'm going to like him.”

“He has been a good bit of—er a fool, to put it very plainly.”

“Thackeray says you have to be one in order to become a wise man.”

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“It’s a dangerous doctrine,” said Marianna Langstaff, severely.

“Don’t be too hard on him. You know you have n’t any patience with perfection. What *did* he do? I’m all curiosity.”

There was an impressive silence, then the condemning old voice: “He forgot his constancy to the girl he was going to marry!”

Davie went rather white.

“He told you!” she cried, in a weak little voice.

“No, no, but I know. . . . To be sure there was the excuse of the other woman’s great beauty and—”

“Oh,” breathed Davie, “oh!” and many emotions were in the tone.

“Will the girl ever forgive him?” questioned Marianna Langstaff.

“She ought,” said Davie, after a long minute. “Oh, yes, yes, of course she

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will. She *must*. It *is n't* his fault altogether. It never is a man's fault altogether, I think. And the thing that astonishes me *is n't* the number of inconstant men in the world, but the number of constant ones."

"My dear child!" reproved the old woman, chuckling inwardly.

"It's so. Do you suppose for a second that you or I would be faithful to a mental slouch any more than we'd be faithful to a domestic one? It's just as bad to have fluff in the corners of your brain as it is to have it in the corners of your room. Some men have to shut their eyes to one kind, and some to another, and some—oh, mercy!—have to shut them to both! And if they dare to open 'em even a wee slit on the beauty and orderliness and charm beyond their partition wall, why they're 'unfaithful' and odious and horrid. I tell you the

world isn't running over with bad men, it's running over with indifferent women who take too much for granted."

Miss Langstaff did not speak for a moment, and the girl looked down at her with a little anxious smile: "Do I shock you, dearest? When you go batting about the world as I've done you run into a lot of things that make you perfectly furious. But let's get back to the man and the girl. Then you think she ought to forgive him?"

There was pause, and taking a deep breath Davie said simply: "I'll tell you what I'd do if it had happened to me. I'd take an inventory of myself and see what was lacking, then I'd stock up wherever it was needed. I'd be perfectly sure I had everything he might want. *Then* if he went somewhere else I'd—I'd—" her lips twisted into a wry smile—"I would hate him, hate him, *hate* him!

Oh, there's such a lot of the savage in me!"

"But you would marry him if you were the girl? You'd give him his chance?"

"Would 'nt I try desperately for my happiness, don't you think?" she demanded in a queer, shaky little voice. "Of course I'd marry him!"

The room was silent for a moment, then Marianna Langstaff said painedly, "But something else has happened to him, something that with most women would seem as serious an obstacle to the marriage: he has lost all he has! He is desperately poor."

"M-m-m," murmured Davie. "That's bad, isn't it? But after all she was betrothed to him, not to his check book."

"I'm afraid you don't take it in," said the old woman. "He has absolutely nothing. Think what that means, my dear

Bella. It does n't mean a pretty sylvan retreat with bees and a rose bower. It means getting right down to work in the thick of things. It means bed-rock and beginning all over again."

"Well, what of it?" impatiently demanded the girl. "Her love surely knows another law than that of inertia."

"Suppose—suppose she does n't really love him? What then?"

"Don't ask *me!* I can't put myself in the place of a girl who would be about to marry a man she didn't really love. But don't worry, dear Miss Langstaff. It looks so black for them, but it will come out all right. He'll make it. And she—perhaps she'll—"

Marianna Langstaff sat suddenly straight and caught the girl to her with a clasp fierce and possessive.

"Davie, you *darling!*" she cried. "I knew you'd stand the test. I knew it!

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I'm a stupid old woman and pretty blind, but I'm neither so stupid nor so blind, thank God, that I can't find out what I want to find out. . . . Don't say a word, child, just yet. I'll tell you everything when I've talked with your grandfather. Go bring him to me this instant. Go, dear!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Love is the origin ; the end.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“WELL?” anxiously interrogated David Bessire, as he whisked through the window from the porch.

“It’s all right,” she crowed, leaning toward him out of the pillows, “it’s all right!”

“Bully! You are wonderful, madam.”

“Nonsense! Their love would have turned to Dead Sea apples if it had n’t been for you. I have n’t been half as blind as I’ve pretended to be, but how could I have sensed the gravity of the affair if you had n’t explained it to me?”

“If only I had dared to do it sooner! You were the last resort—but remember, I had n’t seen you,” he said, with a fine bow.

“At any rate between us we’ve saved

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their happiness, and it's worth saving, at any cost. I know, because I missed it—happiness," she murmured, a mist touching her eyes, to be burned up the next instant by the flame of humor.

"And I know it because I found it," he gravely returned.

She smiled at him, nodding.

"We seem to be a pair of silly old sentimentalists, but I offer no apology. Now do tell me what's doing in this house. Where is that Tellant woman?"

"Packing her bags. The curtains of her room are up, and I can see plainly."

"I knew it. She'll be off the first thing in the morning. It was the money she wanted, not Gavin. And Bella? Is she talking with Benjamin Cockran?"

"She is. They have just gone off down the trail in the moonlight."

"With their heads close together?"

"Very close," he assured her, smiling.

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“They’ll keep ’em so to the end of time,” she chuckled. “He was right to feel heaven meant them for each other. Won’t they fairly radiate in their separate and united halos? And what’s Gavin doing? But don’t stop to tell me. Send him to me, won’t you, while you explain to Davie. Don’t let her despise me for my methods. They did smack of the sweat box, I admit, but it was n’t a time to hesitate over systems, you know. Ah, there’s Gavin now! . . . Come in, Gavin,” she called through the open window, and as he entered David Bessire slipped away to find Davie.

“I know everything, dear,” Miss Langstaff said tremulously, holding up penitent hands to him. “That splendid Mr. Bessire slipped in and told me yesterday. You see he just had to do it, as he could n’t save the day alone. And oh, if he had n’t! If you had married the

awful little prig, Bella! How *can* girls turn out so disappointingly?"

She drew him down beside her, resting her head against his shoulder and patting his hands, and thus, rather wildly between her relief and her merriment over what had just happened, she told him all.

"Now go and find Davie," she commanded when she had finished, and gave him a little push, following him with her adoring old eyes.

They were in the corner of the deserted lower porch, Davie and her grandfather, and when they saw Langstaff coming to find them David Bessire would have slipped away, but she clung to him in enchanting confusion so that he had to free her fingers from his arm. Then he wheeled and went trotting briskly up the stairs, his eyes twinkling, but also they were a little dim.

Davie stood very straight against the porch column, the moonlight over her throat and face. She held her head high and her eyes were steady, but her cheeks were flooded with color and a corner of her sensitive little mouth twitched nervously. And indeed, as he came to her, all his heart in his eyes, the moment was honest enough to have suited the rare souls of Bella and Benjamin.

“ You know everything ? ” he cried.

“ I can't think there is anything more to tell, ” said she, with that scampering laugh of hers, in which a note of panic rang.

“ There is something to hear, Davie, ” said he, his voice falling to a caressing, appealing cadence. “ Do you — you don't love me. Do you, dear ? It seems too much to hope. You said you could n't marry tamely, you know, and — ”

“ And I could n't, ” said she, with emphasis.

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He nodded rather blindly, and turning stood beside her at the rail, his hands thrust into his pockets, staring dismally up at the moon-washed peaks. "I might have known," said he, miserably. "I can't blame you, but—"

"But," she took him up, and as he was not looking he did not see the little one-sided grin she gave, "I really don't think anybody could call a—a certain marriage exactly tame, do you?" She queried softly, in a thrilling, adorable little rush.

"Davie!" he all but shouted, his harried face breaking into light, and for just an infinitesimal fraction of a second they looked into each other's eyes. Then he caught her in his arms, or perhaps Davie threw herself there, for had n't she said when she met "response" she would marry it straight off?

THE END

